

# Comparing Children's Views of the '04 and '08 Presidential Elections

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The immediate goal of our research is to compare late grade school children's understanding of the issues that influenced voters in the '08 presidential election with their age cohort's understanding of the '04 presidential elections (Pufall, Bean & Goshe, 2005). Three general findings emerged from the '04 election.

One, they demonstrated an asymmetric understanding of the reasons adult voters supported or opposed a candidate. This asymmetry appears to be anchored in their opinions about the candidates. They were more likely to find issues justifying adults voting for the candidate the children supported than justification for supporting the candidate they opposed. Conversely, children were more likely to find issues to justify not voting for the candidate the children opposed than for voting against the one they supported.

Two, children were more likely to justify voters' choices in terms of characteristics or political positions than in terms of the disposition of the voters. For example, they described their understanding of each candidate's position on marriage between homosexuals more frequently than described the voter's personal and religious opposition to homosexuals marrying or being biased against homosexual.

Three, although character issues did not dominate their reasoning about the candidates, the children focused on issues of trust and competence when the candidate's character was mentioned.

## Guiding questions

✓ Is the asymmetry observed in the children's reasoning in the '04 Presidential elections replicated in their reasoning about the '08 Presidential elections?

✓ Do children justify voter's choice based on the a candidates character and positions than their own concerns?

✓ Did a specific aspect of character dominate the '08 Presidential elections as trust did in the '04 elections?

## Methods

**Participants:** Parents permitted us to give a questionnaire to 20 fourth and 20 sixth grade children. There were more girls (13 and 15) than boys at each grade level. We tested 4th- rather than 3rd-grade children, as we had in '04 because almost half of the children in the 3rd grade did not appear to understand the questions.

The children in the '08 study attended the same private day school as the children from the '04 study. Their parents generally are college educated and employed professionally. The school is located in a "Blue State". In '04 all but two of the children said they would have voted for Kerry. This year, all of the children said they would have voted for Obama.

**Procedure:** Children were group tested. Approximately ten children filled out the questionnaire at a time. Experimenters were present to answer the questions about the questionnaire. Few questions were asked.

**Questionnaire:** Basically, we used the same 14 item questionnaire answered by the children following the '04 election. Our analysis focuses on the seven questions that ask children to identify justifications voters' used to support or oppose a candidate.

Children correctly filled in the blanks for the first four questions and all of them indicated they would have voted for Obama. Hence the questions are identified as either pro or anti the candidate.

**Pro Obama:** Why do you think \_\_\_\_\_ was elected, that is, why do you think the majority of the people voted for him?

**Anti Obama:** Some did not vote for \_\_\_\_\_, why do you think they did not vote for him?

**Anti McCain:** Why do you think the other candidate \_\_\_\_\_ was not elected; that is, why do you think so many people did not vote for him?

**Pro McCain:** Of course, some people voted for \_\_\_\_\_, why do you think they voted for him?

**Question 9:** If you could have voted, for whom would you have voted? \_\_\_\_\_

**Pro Obama Child:** Please tell me why you would have voted for him.

**Anti McCain Child:** Please tell me why you would not vote for the other candidate? (This question was not included in the '04 study.)

## Coding Systems

### Candidate based justifications

**Presidential:** "He would make a good president." "He is inspiring." "He has experience."

**Personal Characteristics:** "He is smart," "He cannot be trusted." "He is African American."

**Direction:** "We need change and he would change America." "He would continue to do what Bush is doing."

**Political issues:** "He would continue the war in Iraq." "He would bring our troops home." "He would lower the taxes of the rich."

**Candidates' Political Affiliation:** "He is a Republican."

### Voter based justifications

**Identification with the Candidate:** "They like him." "I think he is inspiring."

**Personal issues:** "They are racist." "They want to be taxed less."

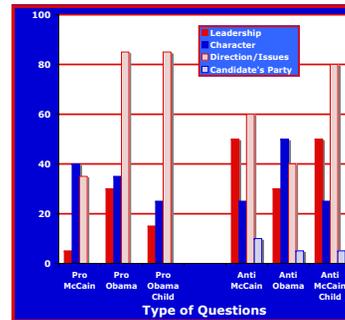
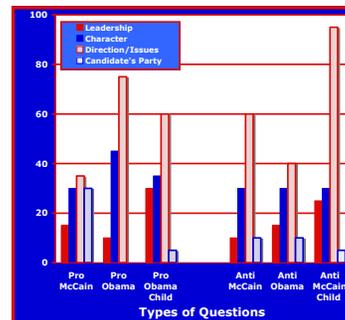
**Voters' Political Affiliation:** "They are Republican."

## Reliability

Three judges independently coded the answers. The criteria for agreement was two out of three or all three judges coding the answers in the same way. Agreement varied with the grade level of the children; there was 80 and 70 percent agreement for the older and younger children respectively.

## Results

The results are cast as the percentage of children who included at least one example of a justification in their answer. In some cases children offered several examples, e.g., children often identified several issues when explaining adults' or their own votes, however, the percentages do not reflect that effect. Figures 1 through 4 report more conservative findings in representing the percentage of the 20 fourth and 20 sixth grade children who at least mention a justification.



Figures 1 & 2. Percentage of 4th (top) and 6th (bottom) grade children who Focus on Candidates to justify why voters' supported or opposed candidates in the '08 Presidential election.

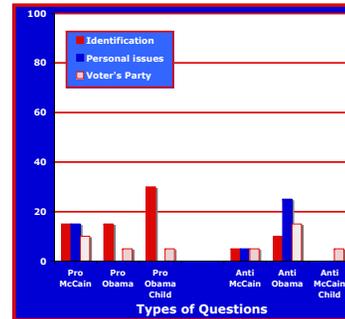
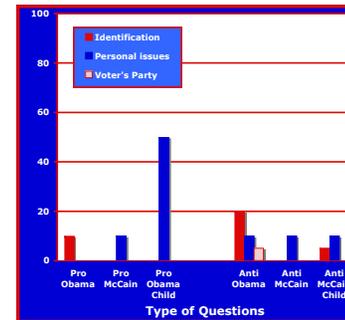


Figure 3 & 4: Percentage of 4th (top) 6th (bottom) grade children Focusing on Voter's Concerns to justify why they supported or opposed the candidates in the '08 Presidential election.

As in the 2004 study, children reasoned asymmetrically about support or opposition for *their* candidate Obama vs. McCain, the candidate they did not support. This is especially evident for **Direction/Issues**.

Looking at **Pro Obama vs. Pro McCain**, more children gave reasons voters supported Obama than gave reasons for supporting McCain (Figure 1 & 2).

Likewise, looking at **Anti Obama vs. Anti McCain**, more children reasons for voters' opposition to McCain than Obama. Children at both grade levels demonstrate this form of reasoning.

The asymmetry is stronger when they are justifying their own preferences than those of the hypothetical adult voters.

**Pro Obama:** "I think people voted for Barack Obama because he understood that we, as a country, are in a financial crisis, Global Warming is becoming a big threat and that there are two wars going on that need to be stopped!"

**Anti McCain:** "Because he voted with Bush 90% of the times and I hate Bush!"

The children were more likely to justify their own and voters' choices by focusing on the candidates' character or political positions than in terms of voter's personal concerns.

For example, children focused the candidate's position on marriage between homosexuals more often than on the voter's personal and religious support or opposition of homosexual marriage.

Although issues of character did not dominate children's reasoning about the candidates race was mentioned as an issue of character. Those voting for Obama saw race as giving him a new perspective and to vote for him would be to mark a historic break with the past. Race was also seen as a reason to oppose Obama. Those opposing Obama were seen as inclined to vote for white men and would find change difficult and at the extreme, they were viewed as racists.

**Pro Obama:** "I would have voted for him because I thought he would change things."

**Anti McCain:** "Because they thought that he would do the same thing as the problematic president before him, and he abandoned his principles."

## Conclusions

Children's understanding of political campaigns and voters' justification of their political choices reflects ways of thinking about in- and out-groups. In Western society, we tend to think asymmetrically about in- and out-groups, recognizing only good in the in-group and only bad in the out-group. Our findings suggest that this form of social cognition appears as early as fourth grade.

For these children from a politically Blue family and community heritage, politics is a serious aspect of society, and, as gender, race, religion an important aspect of identity.

Next we will be analyzing the specific issues. For example, we will more precisely document children's thoughts about race as well as political and social issues that children thought were critical to this election. As well, we will compare children with their parents both to determine whether parents and children participate in asymmetrical reasoning as well as to determine whether the issues central to the children's understanding about the political life of the country are shared by their parents.