
An Integrated Curriculum For The Washington Post Newspaper In Education Program

Spin



- Word Study: A Word About Candidates, Nominees and Polls
- Post Editorial: “The presidency can't be bought”
- Post Reprint: “5 Myths About Spin”
- Discussion Questions: Take a Spin
- Student Resource: The Web of the Spin Doctor
- Think Like a Reporter: Be a Fact Checker

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Candidates, their press secretaries, campaign managers and behind-the-scene advisers form a team. Their goal: Get the candidate nominated and elected to office.

How the candidate presents him- or herself, authenticity and image, focusing on issues or questioning rivals, welcoming interaction with the public in homes and local events or staging larger venue events with speeches — enter into the strategies to win support and votes.

The Word Study introduces students to the etymologies of “candidate,” “nominee” and “poll.” Content within this resource guide focuses primarily on the roles of spin, spin doctors and counterspin. After explaining and giving current examples of spin, delve deeper with “5 Myths About Spin.” Questions for discussion and research are provided. Teachers may also introduce students to some of the approaches used by spin doctors as found in “The Web of the Spin Doctor.”

Using *The Washington Post*’s Fact Checker as a model, students are encouraged to Think Like a Reporter and “Be a Fact Checker.”



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A Word About Candidates, Nominees and Polls

Candidate

The individuals seeking office have reduced to five Republican candidates.

Three individuals sought to be the Democratic party candidate for president.

We considered many qualified candidates before rewarding the job.

You might say that some of the 2016 primary exchanges between office-seekers are similar to playground retorts or toga party sparring. The latter is not far from the original meaning of “candidate.” In Latin the *candidatus* is the “white-robed” one aspiring to office. This office-seeker in ancient Rome wore a white toga.

Polls

Who is leading in the polls?

Polls are open from 6:00 a.m. until 7:00 p.m.

Polling places are held in public buildings such as schools, libraries and community centers.

Polle, Middle Low German, was the early 14th century word for “hair of the head” or “fur from the head of an animal.” The Dutch also had the word *pol* to indicate “head” or “top.” By the 1620s, the terms also referred to “counting heads or a collection of votes. Today, elections are held at polls, places for voting.

The Harrisburg *Pennsylvanian* conducted the first recorded political poll in 1824. Although very random, it correctly predicted Andrew Jackson’s win over John Quincy Adams. Today’s polls are sophisticated measures. Polling firms use mathematical models, probability, psychological and socioeconomic dynamics, and exit polls to gather public opinion and actions. Media publish poll results. Pollsters and pundits comment on them. Candidates get center-stage attention based on polls. And the public may or may not pay attention to the indicators.

Nominee

Who will you nominate?

By August 1, we will know the nominee for each office.

Receiving the nomination will change someone’s life.

A number of English words are rooted in the Latin verb *nominare*, “to name,” and in *nomen*, meaning “name.” In the 1560s “nominate,” to name someone for a duty or to an office, and “nominee,” to call by name, were used. By the early 1600s, “nominate,” to name someone as a candidate for election, entered the vernacular.

Distinguish Words with the *Nominare* Root

Define each of these terms that share the same root word.

1. Denomination
2. Nominate
3. Nominative
4. Nominee
5. Reknown

BONUS: University students in Germany had a slang term, *renommist*, which conveyed the idea of being a “boaster” or “swaggerer.” In a paragraph relate this term to the 2016 primaries.

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The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

EDITORIALS

“The presidency can’t be bought”

*The 2016 race shows that ideas still can matter
in politics, sometimes more than money*

WE SHARE widespread concern over the influence of money in politics. This is a far cry, however, from believing that the system has been permanently rigged by the “billionaire class.” Ironically, this year’s presidential campaign, fueled so powerfully by such accusations of total corruption, has done much to disprove the claim.

We understand the distortion of policymaking that the symbiotic relationship between candidates and donors engenders. Those pernicious consequences are often most pronounced not at the presidential level, but in corners of our democracy where the stakes for special interest groups are high and public scrutiny is relatively low: state and local elections, Capitol Hill conference committees, regulatory agency rulemakings. This is why we favor sensible limitations on donations, coupled with maximum disclosure of where the money comes from. That is to say, we favor more regulation than the Supreme Court permitted in its 2010 *Citizens United* decision. We also support reforms, such as that proposed by Rep. John Sarbanes (D-Md.), that might allow candidates to spend less time dialing for dollars and more with constituents.

But the failure of former Florida governor Jeb Bush’s campaign, and the well-oiled success of the campaign of Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), suggest that tycoons cannot simply buy themselves a president. As of Feb. 20, Mr. Bush, plus “independent” groups of supporters, had amassed \$157.6 million and spent nearly all of it in the Republican nominating battle — all for naught. Meanwhile, on the Democratic side, Mr. Sanders, a socialist, had raised more than \$90 million in mostly small donations, enabling him to mount a credible populist challenge to former secretary of state Hillary Clinton.

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The unpredicted success of the campaigns of Mr. Sanders and Donald Trump, the self-funding billionaire who drubbed Mr. Bush, casts doubt on their own claims on the stump, to the effect that American democracy has been permanently purchased by special interests. Region, race and candidate personality play a role. Insurgents can be heard, contrary to much rhetoric. Most of all, while we disagree with many of Mr. Sanders's ideas, not to mention Mr. Trump's, the success of their campaigns show that ideas and policies still do matter in politics, sometimes more than money.

The deep irony is that their exploitation of public cynicism about politics — in different ways and with different constituencies — may be breeding more of it. A more positive result of recent events would be to encourage more skepticism among future candidates and donors about the true power of money, and, therefore, more creativity about how they raise and spend it, beyond the current campaign model, dominated as it is by donors and consultants. When this ugly campaign is finally over, there may be a place for well-designed new rules on campaign finance — and also for more realism.

— *March 5, 2016*

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Myths About Spin

By David Greenberg

The left and the right don't agree on much today. But it's easy to find a consensus that an excess of spin is ruining politics. Spin — the deliberate crafting of words and images for political effect — is everywhere, from the scripted laugh lines that candidates trot out in debates, to the artful circumlocutions of press secretaries, to the slick ads and viral videos that flicker across our screens.

Don't get spun, even about spin. Some of the conventional wisdom about the practice is false or exaggerated. Unpacking these five common misperceptions might help us to see more clearly the role that spin plays in our politics, for good and for ill — and to think of it as something that should be neither feared nor lamented, but rather appreciated and understood.

1 Spin is new to our times.

It's common to suppose that in the recent past, politics was a more straightforward business. We imagine some idyllic, prelapsarian politics free of today's crafted talk and deceptive rhetoric. One of the fuller statements of this notion is the 2006 book "Politics Lost: How American Democracy Was Trivialized by People Who Think You're Stupid," by Joe Klein. It opens with a vignette of Robert Kennedy delivering his spontaneous, heartfelt paean

to Martin Luther King Jr. on the night of King's assassination; Klein describes this as "the last moments before American political life was overwhelmed by marketing professionals, consultants, and pollsters."

This is little more than nostalgia. We do encounter spin everywhere, because there are a lot more media outlets today, many featuring politicians and their supporters pleading their cases. But politics has always involved spin. Ancient Greek orators practiced rhetoric to craft arguments, sometimes

deceptively, that aroused emotions and persuaded the populace. European monarchs put great care into how their portraits were painted or what images would appear on coins or crests.

American politicians, too, have always availed themselves of what was once called publicity or propaganda. Theodore Roosevelt was the first modern master, devising all kinds of methods to get the news written the way he wanted (such as cultivating the Washington press corps and traveling around the country

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to push legislation). Woodrow Wilson created the first wartime propaganda agency, Calvin Coolidge staged photo-ops, Herbert Hoover produced an elaborate campaign film, Dwight Eisenhower employed a White House TV coach — every president for the past century has used sophisticated forms of spin.

2 Political consultants are geniuses with immense power over our elections.

Advisers who rise to prominence with a successful presidential candidate invariably earn the “genius” moniker and are assumed to harbor esoteric secrets about winning elections. The Economist called David Axelrod “the rumpled campaign genius who steered Barack Obama’s rise from state senator to president”; CBS News called James Carville “the fiery political genius who knew where President George H.W. Bush was vulnerable”; Karl Rove’s biography was titled “Boy Genius.” In Hollywood, from “The Candidate” to “House of Cards,” the shadowy consultant predictably plays a key role.

From the start, the public relations experts who counseled politicians claimed unique insight into the human mind. In the 1920s, Edward Bernays, dubbed the father of spin — partly because of his p.r. on his own behalf — extolled the knowledge and skills shared by “invisible governors” who secretly shaped public preferences, which

magazine profiles called “The Science of Ballyhoo.” Later, the first full-time political consultants, Californians Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter, were deemed to have perfected a fool-proof “push-button technique.”

But Bernays gave lots of pedestrian advice; Whitaker and Baxter mostly took on clients who were already shoo-ins; and Rove, Axelrod and Carville have all run losing campaigns. Consultants help with technical aspects such as meeting filing deadlines and budgeting ad buys. When honing a message, though, they’re relying on art, not science (losing campaigns have top-drawer advisers, too). In a 1986 debunking of consultants’ prowess, the New Republic quoted one guru’s secret: “You get on the back of a good horse and hold on.” This election cycle, Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio spent millions on experienced pros, to little apparent effect. The sharpest Hollywood depiction of the business may be not the ruthless operators of “House of Cards” but the bumbling hacks of “Veep.”

3 Polls routinely tell politicians what positions to adopt.

We always hear that politicians are unprincipled weather vanes, slavishly following polls. Harry Truman put it best: “I wonder how far Moses would have gone if he’d taken a poll in Egypt? What would Jesus Christ have preached if he’d taken a poll in Israel? ... It

isn’t polls or public opinion of the moment that counts. It is right and wrong and leadership.” Truman’s complaint is as common today as 50 years ago. “No one tells me what to say,” Donald Trump boasted last August, implying that he alone shunned pollsters.

It’s true that candidates might play down or change positions if polling suggests it would help their prospects. But mostly, politicians use information from polls to figure out how to explain positions they already hold. In “Politicians Don’t Pander,” a recent classic of political science, Robert Shapiro and Lawrence Jacobs show how the Clinton administration polled on health-care reform only after the plan was finished to determine how to pitch it to the public. George W. Bush pursued privatizing Social Security even though it was unpopular because he believed in it. His White House polled to find the most attractive phrases (such as “retirement security,” “choice” and “savings”) with which to sell it.

4 Political spin dupes the public.

We sometimes assume — or fear — that slick rhetoric and clever image-making will fool us into backing candidates or policies that we wouldn’t otherwise support. This idea, too, is age-old. In 1957, Vance Packard wrote in “The Hidden Persuaders,” his advertising industry exposé, that a new breed of men was entering politics “to engineer our consent

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to their projects or to engineer our enthusiasm for their candidates.” A decade later, in “The Selling of the President,” Joe McGinniss used Richard Nixon’s 1968 campaign to portray modern media politics as a big con, in which shrewd managers regularly mislead the public. That critique has never gone away. Whether it was George W. Bush on invading Iraq or Barack Obama on his health-care plan, critics have alleged that presidents and other politicians have hoodwinked a pliable public.

Politicians, of course, sometimes stretch the truth. But that doesn’t mean we all credulously buy their claims. In an open society like ours, counterspin comes from other quarters. However we judged Bush’s arguments for the war, prominent voices in Congress argued against them. If Obama used the bully pulpit to press for the Affordable Care Act, Republicans had plenty of outlets, from Fox News to talk radio, to lobby against it.

Social science research shows that the public has a great capacity to resist spin. Scholars now recognize the phenomena of “selective exposure,” the tendency to seek out agreeable news; “selective perception,” placing trust in agreeable information while blocking out disagreeable information; and “motivated reasoning,” using logic to reach desired conclusions. We may worry that politicians will convince us of

falsehoods, but the reality today is closer to the opposite: We’re so cocooned in our own ideological bubbles that it’s hard to convince anyone of anything.

5 What we really want is a candidate who doesn’t spin.

The pervasiveness of spin makes it easy to crave a politician who doesn’t hurry to huddle with an army of pollsters, speechwriters and image-makers before appearing in public. Many pundits this year use this theory to explain Trump and Bernie Sanders.

“Each in his own way, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders are proving that authenticity can win the day,” David Atkins writes in the *Washington Monthly*. Columnist Michael Medved agrees: “Whatever their faults in ideology or substance, both Sanders and Trump seem genuine and sincere.” The disavowal of spin was also deemed responsible for the popularity of Obama and John McCain, among others.

We may think we want a candidate who throws caution to the wind and speaks the plain truth. Whether we really want that is another matter.

Candidates who flout the conventions and rituals of politics may seem refreshing, but when they go too far, they strike us as foolish and alienate supporters. In 2006, McCain had to walk back his condemnation of Jerry Falwell

and other leaders of the Christian right as “agents of intolerance” in order to regain favor on the right, compromising his reputation for straight talk. Obama was hailed for refusing to throw his minister Jeremiah Wright under the bus after Wright’s sermons proved inflammatory — but soon after, when Wright kept making provocative remarks, Obama disowned him.

When we look closely, we see that completely “authentic” politicians don’t really exist. Displays of candor and spontaneity are frequently the product of planning and practice. In 1948, Truman drew raves for his speech at the Democratic convention, which he delivered in an extemporaneous style instead of from a script. Truman had been rehearsing in a studio with the Democrats’ broadcast coach, Leonard Reinsch. Four years later, Eisenhower won plaudits for a speech in which he declared that his “prepared remarks are thrown out the window.” That stunt was a gimmick, and his busy hive of speechwriters continued to furnish him remarks thereafter.

Despite the appearance of untutored directness, Trump and Sanders also put thought and calculation into their public images, each employing consultants and talking points. Candidates carefully craft their words and images. It’s simply the nature of politics.

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Take a Spin

It is very pleasant to take a spin around the block — especially if the car is an eye-catcher. Or it is fun to hear family stories told by an older relative who can spin a yarn. But hearing the political spin doctors, and candidates themselves, crafting statements to appeal to certain audiences, mislead viewers or to disparage their opponents with innuendo can be tedious and disheartening.

David Greenberg, a professor of history and author of *Republic of Spin*, warns readers not to be “spun by spin, even about spin.” After reading “5 Myths about Spin,” answer the following questions.

1. Define “spin” as used in the political arena.
2. What is the difference between “spin” and “personal perspective”?
3. In what ways has a leader’s self-image influenced the way he or she is viewed while alive and remembered by future generations?
4. Greenberg likens spin to propaganda. Give an example of propaganda, either historic or current, that purports a country’s action to be honorable or for the public good.
5. Greenberg debunks the idea that political consultants are geniuses or masters of public relations. What is his main argument?
6. When Franklin D. Roosevelt died during his fourth term, Vice President Harry S. Truman became president. When he ran for president, few pollsters thought he would win election. What does his quotation (in #3) indicate about his view of polls?
7. Put Greenberg’s point about the main use of polls (in #4) in your own words. Then give an example from the 2016 campaigns.
8. Greenberg argues that people are not as susceptible to spin as most think. People are more likely to listen to the news network, for example, that leans toward presenting news with a focus closest to their personal points of view (“selective exposure”) than be influenced an artful spin doctor or public official who uses persuasive devices (patriotism, family benefit). With examples, agree or disagree with this argument.
9. When, if ever, do you think spin can be a useful tool of a politician?
10. On a number of occasions during the 2016 primary campaigns, one office-seeker would accuse another of being a liar. Determining whether this was true or not, was the job of fact checkers, not the candidate’s. Do you think this is a form of spin? Do you think the media should cover this kind of exchange?

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The Web of the Spin Doctor

“Spin” is about manipulating how the public thinks and what they do. In politics, spin attempts to create or provide an interpretation of actions or events to put one’s position or candidate in a favorable light. In its extreme manifestation, spin is a disingenuous, deceptive and dangerous tactic.

Fact checkers work to expose spin and find the truth of the situation. Below are some of the techniques used in spin.

Fact checkers look for these tactics.

Appeal to Authority

We have said that media wants reliable sources or authorities. An appeal to an authority becomes spin when:

- The authority cited is either not an expert (or is an expert but in an unrelated area), or
- The person is an expert but has a bias or conflict of interest, or
- The authority may be an expert, but the views he holds may not be representative of the majority in the field of expertise.

Burying Bad News

Announcement of one popular thing at the same time as several unpopular things, hoping that the media will focus on the popular one.

Denial

The spinner states “It never happened” or “Who told you such a

thing?” This is an attempt to avoid answering the question whether posed by the public or media. Some denials cover all statements from the source: “This disgusting story is complete fabrication and it casts doubt on the credibility of all their attempts to discredit me.” This underscores the importance of being informed.

Half-truth

Focus on selected facts and quotations so the most important facts are not mentioned.

Lying with Numbers

This may be a direct lie, knowing that most people do not challenge statements that include numbers. Spin doctors may quote statistics out of context so that they mislead or distort statistics. This can be done by using percentages without indicating the scope of the whole.

Misdirection and Diversion

Changing the subject may be as simple as ignoring the relevant question and changing the subject or the spin may involve creating and publicizing distractions (good or bad) to divert attention from the matters the spinner wants to cover up. Phrases that are used in this technique include “just rumors,” that’s old news,” or the “issues are too complex to discuss here.”

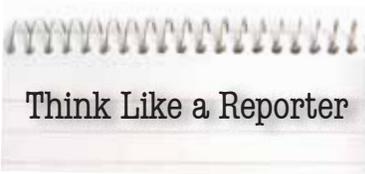
Misleading Comparisons

By calling attention to some irrelevant similarities, people think the two compare more than they contrast, resulting in a false conclusion.

Non-apology Apology

Acknowledgement that mistakes were made but tries to evade direct responsibility by any specific person or group, especially one’s self.

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Be a Fact Checker

A media company's reputation is based on its reporters' accuracy and balance in coverage. Reporters go to locations to be eyewitness to events. They interview multiple reliable sources. They confirm quoted material against their notes and recordings. They do research.

Editors add another layer of attention to details, confirmation of accuracy and impartiality as well as reading for clarity. They ask reporters questions to clarify news articles and feature stories. They discuss sources and focus.

Many newspapers and other media companies have staff librarians to help with the research. They are often checking the facts for reporters and editors. In addition, some companies have a special position called the fact checker. This person or group of reporters plays a high profile role during political elections and times of decision-making by elected officials.

Find *The Washington Post's* Fact Checker in Sunday's print edition and online. Read about its rating system. The Fact Checker states its purpose is to "'truth squad' the statements of political figures regarding issues of great importance, be they national, international or local." Also, they will "seek to explain difficult issues, provide missing context and provide analysis and explanation of various 'code words' used by politicians, diplomats and others to obscure or shade the truth."



Select a statement made by a candidate or other official that you find questionable.

- Write the statement verbatim for reference. Include who made the statement, when, where and in what context the statement was made.
- What was the purpose of the statement? Intended audience?
- Consider the best sources to use for background information, factual data or historic perspective.

Do you know someone with expertise on this topic who could be interviewed? What are some of the sources used by *The Post's* Fact Checker?

- Do the research.
- Make an evaluation of the truthfulness of the statement. Is it a true statement? An untrue statement? Partially true? Misleading? Only true in a certain context? Give it your rating.
- Write a statement to relate your findings. Be sure to relate the original statement in your Fact Checker article.