

What's in a name? Barack Obama good for Israel; Barack Hussein Obama less so

September 19 2012

President Obama's middle name, Hussein, makes Israelis – both Jewish and Arab – perceive him as less pro-Israeli, reveals a new study conducted by the University of Haifa and the University of Texas. The study has just been published in the journal *Political Behavior*. "Even though the Israeli public has extensive information about the American President and his positions, their opinions can still be swayed by cultural cues, such as a name that in this case is perceived as Arabic," says Dr. Israel Waismel-Manor of the University of Haifa who co-authored the study.

Similar cases in the past have shown that public figures' names, particularly those carrying cultural significance, can affect how the public perceives their public role. The current study, conducted by Dr. Waismel-Manor and Dr. Natalie Jomini Stroud of the University of Texas, set out to examine if and how Obama's middle name affects Jewish Israeli, Arab Israeli, and American perceptions, and whether there are differences in how the name affects them due to cultural associations. Participating in the study were Israeli Jewish students; Israeli Arab students; American students who sympathize with Israel; and American students who sympathize with Palestinians.

Each group was asked to watch a 3:40-min. news clip of Obama speaking at an official meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President of the Palestinian Authority Abu Mazen about the peace talks between the sides. A random half of each group was shown the clip with a reference caption that read "President [Barack](#)

[Obama](#)" and the other half saw the clip with the caption "President Barack Hussein Obama". The caption appeared four times during the clip for a total of 20 seconds. Following the clip, the participants were asked whether Obama favors Israelis or Palestinians, what their opinions are of the American President's proposals for the Middle East, and their overall opinion of Obama (in terms of trustworthiness, competence, honesty, warmth, intelligence, and fairness).

The results reveal that the group of Israeli Jews who saw the "Barack Hussein Obama" reference perceived him as less pro-Israeli; they considered his approaches to the peace process less fair or feasible; and felt that he is a less positive person overall – in comparison to the other half of this group who saw the "Barack Obama" reference.

For the Israeli Arabs "Barack Hussein Obama" also favored Israelis less, compared to those who saw "Barack Obama". (Nevertheless, and in contrast to the study's predictions, the study found that for Israeli Arabs "Barack Hussein Obama" is a less positive individual than "Barack Obama".)

An interesting finding unrelated to the President's middle name is that overall Israeli Jews perceived the American President as more pro-Palestinian and less pro-Israeli than the Israeli Arabs perceived him; but he also was perceived by this Jewish group as a more positive person and as one whose positions are more fair and feasible than the Israeli Arabs did.

According to the researchers, the President's middle name makes Israelis – Jews and Arabs – perceive him as less pro-Israel, ultimately effecting an opinion amongst the Jews that he is less fair and amongst the Arabs that he is more fair.

It appeared that amongst the American participants of the study, their

President's middle name had no effect, and no major differences were noted between the groups that saw "Barack Hussein Obama" and "Barack Obama". However, the study observed overall differences between the Israeli sympathizers and the Palestinian sympathizers in that the former perceived Obama as more pro-Palestinian and less pro-Israeli than the others.

In an attempt to understand the cultural impact of the name "Hussein", the researchers took another sample group of Israeli Jews, Israeli Arabs, and Americans and asked them to rank associations with the names "Mike", "Diego", "Hussein", and "Jean-Pierre". The name "Hussein" was the only name that aroused negative associations among the Jewish Israelis and Americans, while the name aroused positive associations among the Arabs.

"In a world of global media, a seemingly irrelevant detail such as a middle name can affect particular audiences to develop an affinity or aversion to a person," concludes Dr. Natalie Jomini Stroud. "It seems that a politician's decision to use a middle name or omit it – as Obama did in his Cairo speech – can have an impact on certain members of the public."

Provided by University of Haifa

Citation: What's in a name? Barack Obama good for Israel; Barack Hussein Obama less so (2012, September 19) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-09-barack-obama-good-israel-hussein.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.