

# Research suggests that being called 'liberal' matters on Election Day

October 12 2016, by Bert Gambini

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Republicans embrace the conservative label more enthusiastically than Democrats are willing to self-identify as liberals, according to a new study by Jacob Neiheisel, an assistant professor in the University at Buffalo's Department of Political Science.

But if liberal is a dirty word, eschewed by Democrats and sometimes assigned to them by Republicans, how liberal branding plays out at the polls has remained a bit of mystery. Until now.

Neiheisel's research, published in the journal *Political Resource Quarterly*, suggests that political symbolism does have an impact on the electorate.

"How we describe the candidates matters in the sense that we have an idea that name-calling has some effect on the campaign," he said. "These aren't game-changers, but symbolism has an effect at the margins."

The results also show much stronger influence on down-ballot races. Higher-level offices present many points for discussion, including foreign policy, the economy, health care and the environment. The effects are realized more for those races where little is known about the candidates, according to Neiheisel.

Symbolic politics is the idea that much of what the electorate thinks about politically is manifest in symbols, anything from the meaning of the American flag to an ideological label like "good liberal."

It can be anything that imparts meaning outside of the item or act itself. It can even extend to food, said Neiheisel.

In 1976, television cameras captured President Gerald Ford infamously eating a wrapped tamale, a Southwestern food staple, during a visit to San Antonio, Texas. Onlookers were aghast when Ford bit into the corn husk wrapper.

"That incident became a symbol for how out of touch Ford was with that segment of the population," he said.

Neiheisel says there's plenty of speculation on the effect of being called the "L-word" and how that might hurt a particular candidate, but no one to his knowledge has empirically investigated that claim, particularly in the observational approach he used for his study.

He analyzed campaign ads from 2004 and survey data from the same election year.

"I wanted to look at advertising data on the instances of anti-liberal rhetoric and people's attitudes toward the parties and the candidates," he said.

The effect of name-calling is not a campaign determinant, but Neiheisel says there's still evidence that it has a role.

"It's one piece of information people have when thinking about the candidates," he says. "In areas where there is little involvement with the campaign, we start to see an effect."

In a way, this new research affirms what President Ford learned 40 years ago: Always shuck the tamale.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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