

# The Changing Role of Nicknames: A Study of Politicians

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Recent decades have witnessed a remarkable expansion in the usage of informal forms of people's names (*Marty* for *Martin*, *Viki* for *Victoria*). After analyzing the likely social causes for this change, we evaluate our theory by studying the naming practices of politicians over the past 100 years.

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During the last century or so, there has been a broad and sweeping change from formality to informality in much of the Western world. And—to the degree that Western practices are copied elsewhere—in varying degrees it occurs in other nations as well. This shift affects manners, clothing, style, tastes, the overt use of class distinctions, recreational activities, social interaction, and behavior at work. In the United States, for example, compare what we now wear at home while relaxing with old photos from a time when families spent an evening listening to the radio (men wearing a jacket, white shirt, and tie; women with dresses and heels) or compare proper attire for the beach now with the past, or old pictures of spectators at a sporting event, or college students in class or the dining hall. Or compare the background photographers choose for posing a newly married couple with those used for our parents or grandparents (Lieberman, 2000).

Given the social basis of naming behavior, it is not surprising to find a similar decline in the use of formal names. Newspaper reporters are far more likely to use a nickname in their byline now than they did before World War Two. And it is striking how often television anchors and reporters use their nicknames in identifying themselves. As for the sports

reporters and commentators, it is rare to find someone who uses a formal name. Consider the names of physicians and attorneys in the *Dallas Yellow Pages* from the mid-1920s to the early 1990s. At the beginning of this period about half did not even provide their formal name, listing only their initials. This practice has now disappeared; by the end of the period nicknames are given for 16% of the attorneys and 12% of physicians (it is still far less common among these professionals practicing in New York, Boston, or even Los Angeles).

The name an individual chooses to use for oneself is by no means the same as the parent's initial choice. Rather, the name used in everyday interaction is often a shortened variant of the birth certificate one. *James* and *Robert* are replaced, for example, by *Jim* and *Bob*, respectively. Likewise, *Liz* substitutes for *Elizabeth* and *Peggy* for *Margaret*. As a general rule such shortened forms have long been used in conversations between people who know each other, or where the speaker refers to someone they know, or where status deference is not an issue. Some shortened forms are described as particularly affectionate forms (see Lawson 1973; Lawson and Roeder 1986), but for our purposes we will make no such distinction here. Rather we simply focus on any informal shortened form of a given name that is clearly related to a specific formal name (as contrasted with diminutive nicknames unrelated to the given name, as in *Red* or *Swifty*). The usage of an informal form of a given name (typically shorter than the original one) is by no means a recent development. Mencken (1963) had observed the growth of nicknames as first names, particularly in the South. But there is even a longer history of switches and oscillations between the formal and informal. After noting that by Shakespeare's time, *Harry* and *Hal* had evolved from *Henry*, Stewart (1979, 137) observes that Shakespeare in his historical plays "made use of all three forms, thus being able to indicate different degrees of intimacy between pairs of characters." And many "standard" contemporary names were once informal forms that gained usage as a "birth certificate name" on their own right. *Elizabeth* is an exceptional example of a name that generated a series of shortened forms that, in turn, evolved into standard given names. The noted English specialist on first names, E. G. Withycombe, notes that *Eliza*

was popular in the 18th and early 19th centuries, *Betty* also first became fashionable in the 18th century, *Bess* and *Bessie* in the 16th and then again in the 19th century. *Betsey*, *Lizzy*, *Tetty*, *Tetsy*, *Beth*, *Espeth*, *Elspie*, *Elsie*, *Libby*, *Elise*, *Lisette*, *Babette*, and *Isabel* (see Dunkling and Gosling 1983; Stewart 1979, 109-111; Withycombe 1977, 99-100) are just some of the variant forms of *Elizabeth*.

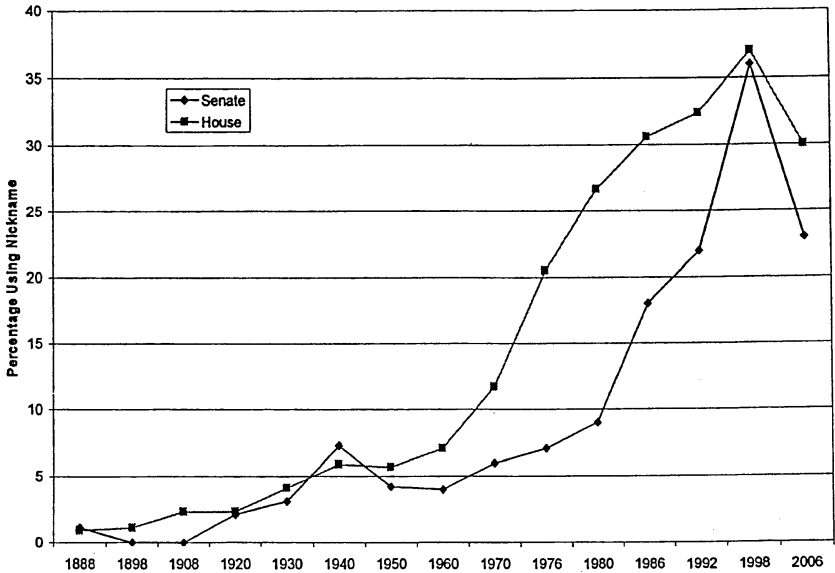
Of interest to us here is a broad and remarkable historical shift in the use of nicknames; indeed, by now it is so widespread that many of us are probably no longer conscious of the change. One way or another, nicknames have changed from an informal usage between people who personally know each other and are on more-or-less equal footing, or as an asymmetrical form of address such that the higher status person is free to use the nickname of the lower status person, but not vice versa. As we shall see, their usage has become part of a general social change in which the overt presentation and emphasis on status distinctions are minimized. Currently, nicknames are increasingly used by people who do not personally know each other. Persons of higher status often refer to themselves by using their nickname instead of their proper name, despite the status gap and the fact that they do not know the people they are addressing.

Here we extend and elaborate on earlier examinations (Callary 1997; Lieberman 2000) of a striking shift among politicians in their use of informal names. Figure 1 summarizes this shift in usage from the late nineteenth century to the present. (Basic data sources are the *World Almanac* and the *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress 1774-Present*. For further details about the procedure, contact the authors.) At the outset, virtually no members of Congress used their nicknames. In 1888, one Senator and three Representatives used an abbreviated form of their first name. This barely changed (indeed declined in some years) until the 1920's when there were two Senators and ten Representatives in the enlarged House. Before our entry into World War Two, seven Senators and 6% of Representatives listed themselves with a nickname. Beginning in the 1970s the pace accelerated with a peak reached in 1998, where more than one third of the Congress used their nickname rather than their actual name. At the present time there appears to be a

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drop-off. (We will need additional years before we can determine if this reflects a mere oscillation in a long-term trend or a true change.) Note that these data do not indicate who uses a nickname in face-to-face interaction with friends.

Figure 1. Percentage of Nicknames in Congress, 1888-2006



Normally we would expect changes of this nature to emanate from either New York or Los Angeles, the media and fashion centers of the nation, but in fact these political developments stem from developments in the South and Southwest, which then spread to other parts of the nation. In the House of Representatives in 1940, for instance, 14% of Southerners used a nickname, compared with 5% of Midwesterners and an even smaller number of Westerners at 2% (table 1). The Northeast lagged with less than 1%, and is still the most resistant to this change, but the gap is declining. Currently, 40% of Southerners use a nickname, with the Midwest and West at 30% and 29% respectively. The Northeast continues to resist the trend with only 11% using a nickname. This development is not linked to the political outlook of the candidates; nor is it an issue of conservative vs. liberal. At present, Republicans are more apt to use nicknames; earlier it was Democrats. This probably reflects the enormous shift in the South and Southwest from a solid tie

with Democrats to a substantial Republican tilt in recent decades. (In the South, Republicans make up 57% of the total delegation.) What does seem to affect this process is the region. Table 1 displays the strong regional difference in the propensity of politicians to use their nickname in listing themselves.

Table 1. Percentage of Representatives Using Nicknames, by Region

Region	1940	1970	1992	1998	2006
Northeast	8	3	19	23	11
South	14	21	41	41	40
Midwest	5	6	29	38	30
West	2	18	36	43	29

A comparison among three major states, Texas, California, and New York, illustrates this regional effect. In Texas, where 47% use a nickname, *Al, Chet, Eddie, Gene, Jeb, Joe, Kay, Kenny, Mike, Nick, Pete, Randy, Ron, Sam, and Ted* altogether amount to nearly half of their delegation. Nearly a quarter of the current California delegation in the House use short forms of their name. Among the Representatives, are *Bob, Brad, Dan, Dave, two Jerrys, Jim, Joe, two Mikes, Pete, Sam, Tom, and Wally*. On this dimension, at least, the Northeast is still strikingly conservative. Of the 29 members of the House from New York State, there are only two: *John (Randy) Kuhl* and *Steve J. Israel*. One is a Democrat, the other a Republican. Prior to this there were four Representatives, and all were Republicans. The ten-man Massachusetts delegation to the House includes *Stephen, Richard, James, Martin, Edward, Michael, and William*—all commonly abbreviated elsewhere—as well as two *Johns*, the only exception being Barney Frank.

This movement has expanded into other offices, again generally spearheaded by Southerners. Champ Clark (actually James Beauchamp Clark), from the border state of Missouri, was the first Speaker of the House with a shortened form. Since then there were Sam Rayburn from Texas and Newt Gingrich of Georgia. There have been two nicknamed Justices in the Supreme Court, Tom Clark and Fred Vinson (Thomas and Frederick from Texas and Kentucky, respectively). Abe Fortas, the disgraced Justice from Tennessee, is not an example of this shift since

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Abe was the name given to him at birth by his immigrant parents. The first nicknamed candidate to be nominated for the Presidency was Jimmy Carter of Georgia, and later there was Bill Clinton of Arkansas (along with his running mate, Al Gore, from Tennessee). Dan Quayle of Indiana was the first exception to the Southern connection for a Presidential or Vice Presidential candidate. In the 2000 election year and in the 1992 and 1996 contests, three of the four candidates from the two major parties used their nicknames. In 1992, Democrats Bill and Al defeated the elder George Bush and Dan Quayle. In 1996, the Republican ticket was headed by Bob Dole. In 2000 we had Gore and Joe Lieberman for the Democrats and Dick Cheney for the Republicans. There are two striking facts here: Jack Kemp, the 1996 Republican nominee for Vice President was given that name at birth and there is very little that either Bush can do with George. It is a monosyllabic first name and Georgie, the only nickname, could hardly serve a Presidential candidate very well; indeed it would hardly do well for most any George long before adulthood. Secondly, Gore, Dole, Cheney, and Lieberman had started their political careers as *Albert*, *Robert*, *Richard*, and *Joseph*. Their shift occurred during a mounting period of name shortening. In 1980, Albert Gore and Richard Cheney were members of the House of Representatives and Robert Dole was a Senator from Kansas; and Joseph I. Lieberman was defeated in his campaign for the House of Representatives. In a strange twist, in 2007, Lieberman is back to identifying himself as Joseph (at least in the *World Almanac*.) We observe some vacillation in recent years besides Joe/Joseph Lieberman. There is, for example Charles/Chuck Schumer and Charles/Chuck Grassley. As we write this paper, more than half of the contenders for 2008 use their nicknames. Democrats include Bill Richardson, Chris Dodd, Joe Biden, and Mike Gravel. Republican competitors include Mitt Romney, Rudy Giuliani, Fred Thompson, Tom Tancredo, and Mike Huckabee.

The naming practices of both black and female members of the Congress provide an indirect confirmation of the informality interpretation. Both blacks and women are far less likely to use a nickname (18 and 15%, respectively) than are white males (roughly one-third). Casualness probably does not work for people who still face a possible obstacle in being taken seriously or in being viewed as up to the job. We have the

impression that—for the same reason—this still operates in academia, where white males can get away with dressing more casually.

The results reported above in turn raise additional questions. Is the use of nicknames by members of Congress simply a device to increase the candidates appeal to voters or does it reflect the general increase in the public use of nicknames and unrelated to the need to get elected? Of course, the two are not entirely separable. But we are able to hazard a guess about this by analyzing other political situations. When we consider governors, they are more likely than even members of Congress to use their nicknames (at present, roughly 50% do so). But this is not surprising since, one way or the other, there would be the same reason(s) for this choice. However, it is a different matter when we consider other political positions. We observed that Supreme Court Justices rarely use nicknames. Here we have two possible explanations: since they do not run for office—at least in the sense of getting elected by a large population of voters who will rarely have first-hand contact with them—there is no special advantage in publicly using a nickname. A second possibility, equally plausible, is that use of nicknames would be seen as less appropriate for someone who is a judge; to wit, nicknames may clash with the staid image of an impartial judge reaching legal decisions without consideration of contacts or other interferences with being a judge. In this case, thanks to a suggestion by Peter V. Marsden, we are able to throw light on this matter. We examined the first names of Supreme Court Justices in 2007 for three states—Texas, Florida, and California. All three states have high rates of nicknaming among their Congressional delegations. In the first two states, the justices are elected; in California they are appointed. In California none of the seven Supreme Court Justices use a nickname. This would be consistent with either interpretation: they are not elected and they hold an office that does not lend itself to public access to their nickname. In the other two states, where the judges must run for office, there are some who use a nickname, but hardly as frequently as do members of their congressional delegations. In Texas, where 47% of the congressional delegation presently use a nickname, only two of nine judges use nicknames; in Florida, at most only one of seven does so (*Peggy* is somewhat ambiguous, but by conservative standards, we consider it a nickname generated

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from *Margaret*). This result suggests that the office may have something to do with political strategies such that popularly elected candidates for Supreme Court are less likely to use their nickname than are candidates for Congress in the very same state.

Another result is somewhat suggestive along the same lines. We considered members of the presidential cabinets from 1960 to the present. In many cases, the appointees use no nickname and, indeed, further the distance by using a middle name or middle initial. This is particularly the case for the most prominent cabinet positions: no Secretary of State, Treasury, or Attorney General has used a nickname. This is true for all but one Secretary of Defense, Interior, Transportation, Labor, Energy and Veteran' Affairs. On the other hand, four Secretaries of Agriculture and three Secretaries of Commerce use nicknames. It is clear that those holding these prominent political positions are far less likely to use a nickname than are members of the Congress or even the Presidents who have appointed them. Obviously they do not run for office and hence can ignore any vote-getting pressure on this score.

What does this all mean for the future? This increased casualness is not necessarily a bad development. Obviously, the President has a symbolic role to play. If, in some respect, informality appeals to the electorate, then candidates who respond to this are not inherently less desirable. Moreover, the simple truth is that voters cannot exactly tell what a candidate will do after being elected and this is particularly the case for a challenger. So there is a certain guessing game involved. Despite all of the manipulation, voters may still be making their decision based on subliminal clues that provide, if anything, the best basis for a guess. On the other hand, were high ranking officials to be elected with less regard for their policies and political skills and more because of their ability as entertainers and simple likeability, the nation may not be well-served. Moreover, it may lead to an even greater dumbing down of politics. In contests between a candidate using a nickname and one using a full name, there is evidence that the one with a shortened name is somewhat more likely to succeed. This holds for the 1998 gubernatorial elections, and the tendency occurs in the 1998 House races (albeit not in the Senate). The information is incomplete, and there are a variety of other explanations possible, but it is a question that we should consider in the years ahead.



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