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Presentation Names: Their Distribution in Space and Time

EDWARD CALLARY
Northern Illinois University, USA

The name forms by which we present ourselves publicly are shown to be sociolinguistic variables. A 1996 study of the preferred name forms of state legislators in the US found that informal presentation names were common in much of the south and west of the country, and generally absent in the northeast. A 2007 replication of that study both confirmed the earlier findings and showed that the public use of informal name forms had increased. The practice of using informal presentation names originated in the south and northwest and spread to all parts of the country except the northeast. The increasing use of informal names is seen as part of a general societal shift toward greater informality.

Introduction

Given names in traditional (preindustrial) societies tend to be transparent; their meanings are generally obvious and known to both their bearers and to everyone who speaks the language and shares the culture of the bearers (see Akinnaso, 1981, for examples from Africa, Asia, North America, and Oceania). In contrast, in most Western nations given names (forenames) are generally opaque; their etymological meanings are not readily apparent and can be ascertained only by consulting a book or other reference where the historical sources of names are given. This being the case, the 'meaning' of a given name has become less etymological and more social, less linguistic and more sociolinguistic, to the point where forenames have become detached from their etymologies and have become dynamic sociolinguistic variables which relate to such parameters as age, space, and time. In this article I will expand on the notion of forenames as sociolinguistic variables and explore two aspects of the social contexts in which particular name forms occur — space and time — by looking at the forms of given names by which we present ourselves to increasingly anonymous publics: our 'presentation names'.[1]

In order to be socially significant a name must be capable of appearing in different forms, where each form derives a part of its social meaning from its relationship to other forms. Family names are of little value sociolinguistically since at any given time they are invariant and there are no competing choices among forms. Forenames,

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however, are potentially highly variable and we usually have a number of choices for the name form or forms by which we call ourselves and by which we present ourselves to our various publics. From these alternatives we select our presentation name(s).

As I use the term, a presentation name is any name or name form which is chosen by its bearer and which precedes its bearer's surname; it is, in other words, a self-selected forename. A presentation name may be a full forename (Frederick, Thomas), a shortening of a forename (Fred, Tom), a familiar form of a forename (Freddy, Tommy), or a nickname — a name which may have little or nothing to do with a forename (Red, Slim). I call these presentation names because they represent the choices available when we present ourselves publicly. These are the names we use when we introduce ourselves, when we give a public address, when we sign letters, or when we list our names on business or professional cards; in sum, whenever we participate in public activities. We may well use one name form with one public, another form with another public, a third form with a third public, etc. We may choose a formal variant on one occasion and a less formal variant on another. I have the choice of presenting myself formally as Edward (which I did at the head of this article), or less formally as Ed or Eddie, or even Ned. I can use a different forename entirely (although this would border on academic fraud unless I used the different name as an accompaniment to my 'real' name and enclosed it in quotation marks, such as Edward 'Craig' Callary); I can use a nickname; I can even use a non-name, as did William Sealy Gosset, whose non-name 'Student' is well known to statisticians, psychologists, and sociologists.[2] About the only thing I cannot do and still observe societal protocols is omit a forename entirely.

The forms of forenames which we encounter as presentation names on a daily basis are remarkable, both in their variety and in the fact that they apparently occur at random. While one William may always be 'Will' and another William may always be 'Butch', it is more likely that a given William will present himself as William on one occasion, Bill on another, and perhaps 'Bud' on still another, using presentation names which run the gamut from formal to informal. The question then arises: Are there rules for when we are expected to use one name form and when we are expected to use another, or are the name forms which we encounter essentially haphazard and do they differ idiosyncratically from one speaker to the next? Although we would be hard-pressed to point to the rules in books of etiquette or social behavior, simple reflection tells us that some social constraints are operating on presentation name choices; from experience we know, for instance, that we are more likely to find abbreviated or familiar forms more often in some social situations (such as among family members, intimates, or those in the same clubs or social organizations) than in others.

For my purposes, presentation names can be divided into formal names, consisting of full forenames, and informal names,[3] which include shortenings of forenames, familiar forms, or any names enclosed in quotation marks when written.[4] (Informal names could also be called 'alternative' names, since they provide alternatives to full, formal names.)[5] Nicknames may or may not be presentation names. Nicknames are often not necessarily what you would choose to call yourself but what others call you, perhaps only behind your back. The important point is that a presentation name is

something you choose yourself.[6] Not everyone, of course, has the power or freedom to choose their presentation names; doctors and professors do; patients and students usually do not.

Areal aspects of presentation names

A decade ago I published a brief article, 'The Geography of Personal Name Forms', in *The Professional Geographer* (Callary, 1997), in which I explored some geographic dimensions of informal versus formal name usage among the nation's state legislators. A summary of the findings of that study will show that presentation names are indeed sociolinguistic variables and will also provide reference points for the temporal study which follows.

One reason I undertook this earlier investigation was to confirm or disprove the impression that more and more public figures were choosing to present themselves by informal names. Politicians in particular seemed to have become especially sensitive to the image conveyed (or thought to be conveyed) by their presentation names, and increasingly they were choosing informal name forms which they presumably saw as promoting an ideal image, one which they felt was perceived by the general public as familiar and unpretentious, even folksy, but at the same time one which exuded trustworthiness, steadfastness, and common sense. Although certainly not unknown in earlier political campaigns (think Teddy Roosevelt and Jack Kennedy), the first presidential candidate to present himself almost exclusively through an informal name was James Earl Carter. The results of this strategy were mixed; candidate Jimmy Carter was a remarkable success in 1976 and an even more remarkable failure in 1980. In 1992 Bill Clinton and Al Gore were the first presidential and vice-presidential nominees who chose to be known by informal rather than formal forenames. One might think that these informal name forms were in keeping with Clinton's and Gore's relative youth or with their southern heritage, but it was not long before it became apparent that this was not the case. In the presidential campaign of 1996 Bill Clinton's Republican challenger, a Kansas septuagenarian, joined the rush to informal names and Senator Robert Dole (as he had been known publicly for decades) became Bob Dole, a name reinforced by Dole's persistent references to himself in the third person. And the apparent trend toward informal names was not confined to presidential races. The names of Governors Christie Whitman of New Jersey, Jim Edgar of Illinois, and Pete Wilson of California suggested that the adoption of informal names by politicians in the 1990s might be a national phenomenon.

In order to see whether the use of informal names among politicians was generally uniform across the country or if there were systematic regional differences I sought a population of sufficient size whose demographics were generally comparable from one part of the country to another, whose members were representative of their areas, and who, most importantly, had the power and the freedom to select the name form by which they wished to be known. The legislators of the forty-eight contiguous states met these requirements: they were sufficiently numerous; they were representative of their areas because of residency requirements; and they had the freedom to choose their own presentation names. We might also assume that the name forms

they selected were the result of conscious acts and deliberately chosen in order to present these individuals in the best possible light and to convey the traits which they considered most favorable — that is, those leading to a successful campaign.

Using the *Election Results Directory* (National Conference of State Legislatures, 1995), I classified the name of each male state legislator[7] as formal or informal, according to the criteria mentioned above. The results are shown in Table 1. Nationwide, slightly over twenty-nine per cent of state legislators (state senates and houses combined) chose informal presentation names. Fifty-five per cent of Colorado's lawmakers identified themselves informally, followed by those in Arkansas (fifty-three per cent) and Tennessee (fifty-two per cent). At the other extreme only three of Maine's 138 legislators (two per cent) and none of Massachusetts' 157 chose to do so. The distribution defined three primary naming regions, two with a high incidence of informal names (at least forty per cent) and a third where informal names ranged from rare to non-existent (below fifteen per cent). High values were characteristic of a southern region which reached from Florida to Colorado, and a western region which formed a horseshoe pattern along the Pacific coast and included Montana to the north and Arizona to the south. The extremely low incidences of informal names lay in a belt along the Atlantic seaboard stretching from Maine to Virginia. These regions are shown on Figure 1. Several anomalies should be noted: Minnesota is isolated with an unexpected high value (forty-four per cent); Wisconsin and Indiana, with low values (fourteen and ten per cent, respectively), seemed at the time to be oriented more toward the northeast than the Midwest.

This geographic distribution, whereby informal presentation names were at a minimum in the northeast and at maximums in the south and west, should come as no surprise. The south and west have long been linked in our linguistic folklore, which contrasts the relaxed, familiar, and unpretentious language of the southern planter and the western rancher with that of the reserved, detached, and austere New Englander. The south and west have provided much of the distinctively American vocabulary, especially its colloquial and more picturesque speech, so it is to be expected that they would be centers of informal names.[8]

Temporal aspects of presentation names

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the use of informal names among politicians has been increasing, especially during the past few years. An overwhelming majority of the announced male candidates in the 2008 presidential campaign chose to present themselves informally: Joe Biden, Sam Brownback, Chris Dodd, Jim Gilmore, Rudy Giuliani, Mike Gravel, Mike Huckabee, Ron Paul, Bill Richardson, Mitt Romney, Tom Tancredo, and Fred Thompson. To determine whether the apparent increase in the use of informal names was more than anecdotal, I replicated the original study using the membership rosters of state legislatures as they stood in December 2007.

It is much easier to collect this kind of information today than it was a decade ago, since all state houses and all state senates now have their own official homepages. For the present study (again confining my investigation to the contiguous forty-eight states) I consulted the homepages of the forty-seven state houses and forty-seven state senates and of the Nebraska legislature, which is unicameral (Nebraska's legislators

TABLE 1
INFORMAL PRESENTATION NAMES AMONG STATE LEGISLATORS, 1995

State	*n* of male legislators	*n* with informal names	% with informal names (rounded)
Colorado	69	38	55
Arkansas	118	62	53
Tennessee	114	59	52
Missouri	159	79	50
Montana	115	57	50
Oregon	64	32	50
Mississippi	152	71	47
Oklahoma	134	61	46
Georgia	193	87	45
Minnesota	148	65	44
Washington	87	38	44
Arizona	63	27	43
Alabama	135	57	42
California	91	38	42
Kansas	119	50	42
Florida	129	53	41
Louisiana	126	49	39
Texas	148	58	39
Kentucky	129	49	38
Nebraska	48	18	38
Wyoming	71	27	38
N. Carolina	143	51	36
N. Dakota	123	44	36
Idaho	74	26	35
Iowa	123	40	33
Illinois	135	43	32
W. Virginia	113	34	30
Nevada	41	12	29
N. Mexico	88	25	28
Ohio	100	24	24
S. Dakota	85	20	24
Utah	90	20	22
Michigan	114	25	22
S. Carolina	145	23	16
Pennsylvania	223	32	14
Wisconsin	100	14	14
Virginia	123	17	14
N. Jersey	104	12	12
Vermont	127	15	12
Indiana	119	12	10

TABLE 1 (*Continued*)

State	*n* of male legislators	*n* with informal names	% with informal names (rounded)
Connecticut	38	11	8
N. York	170	8	5
Delaware	49	2	4
Rhode Island	113	4	4
Maryland	118	3	3
N. Hampshire	293	9	3
Maine	138	3	2
Massachusetts	157	0	0

Mean = 29.3, SD = 16.7, $\chi^2 < .001$

Adapted from *The Professional Geographer*, 49 (1997), 497. Used with permission.

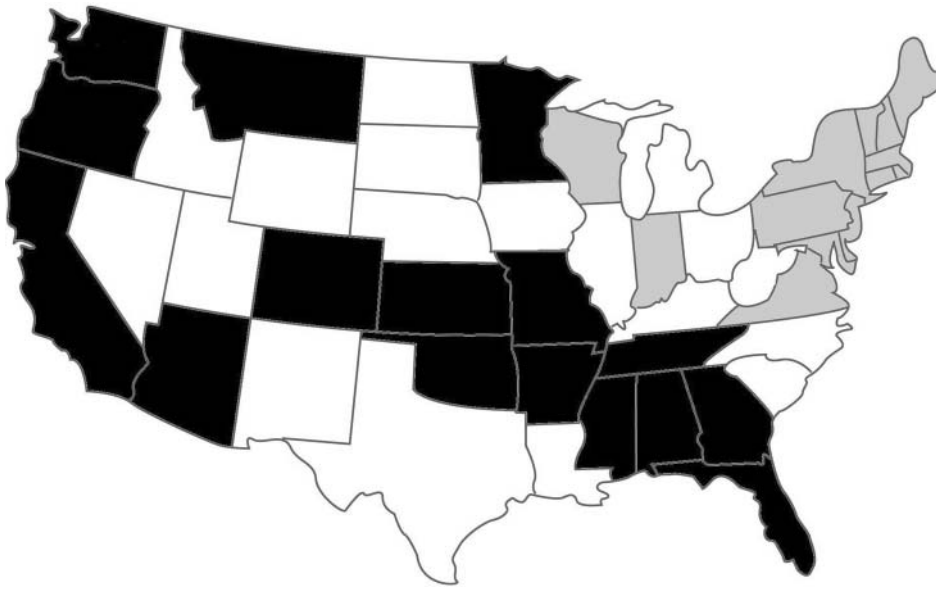

FIGURE 1 Presentation Names (1995). States where 40 per cent or more legislators used informal names in black; states where 15 per cent or less used informal names in gray

are, however, called senators). This procedure generated ninety-five rosters. From each of these I deleted the names of all female legislators, all clearly non-Western forenames, and names for which I could not determine the gender of the bearer. I then classified each name as formal or informal, as in the 1996 study. The results are shown in Table 2. Nationwide, of the 5503 eligible male legislators, 1906 or just below thirty-six per cent chose to present themselves through informal names — an increase of more than six per cent over 1995. Of the state of Washington's ninety-four eligible male legislators (house and senate combined), fifty-six (sixty per cent) choose to present themselves by informal names while in Rhode Island only two of the ninety-one eligible males chose to do so. (These two, incidentally, are state Senator

TABLE 2
INFORMAL PRESENTATION NAMES AMONG STATE LEGISLATORS, 2007

State	*n* of male legislators	*n* with informal names	% with informal names (rounded)
Washington	94	56	60
Nebraska	40	23	58
Oregon	62	36	58
Mississippi	150	69	57
Louisiana	117	65	56
Arkansas	107	59	55
Minnesota	134	73	54
Florida	121	64	53
Georgia	187	96	51
Idaho	77	39	51
Wyoming	69	35	51
Iowa	117	54	49
Oklahoma	124	61	49
Tennessee	111	54	49
Arizona	60	29	48
Colorado	66	32	48
Kansas	116	56	48
Kentucky	124	60	48
Missouri	155	74	48
Alabama	121	57	47
Montana	121	57	46
Texas	146	64	44
California	86	34	40
Ohio	111	44	40
S. Dakota	89	36	40
N. Carolina	131	50	38
Indiana	121	44	36
N. Dakota	117	42	36
Wisconsin	102	36	35
Michigan	120	39	33
S. Carolina	150	50	33
Illinois	128	39	30
Nevada	43	13	30
W. Virginia	115	35	30
N. Mexico	078	23	29
Pennsylvania	216	56	26
Utah	85	19	22
Connecticut	135	24	18
Vermont	96	14	15

TABLE 2 (*Continued*)

State	*n* of male legislators	*n* with informal names	% with informal names (rounded)
N. York	173	24	14
N. Jersey	95	10	11
Maryland	124	14	11
Virginia	116	9	8
N. Hampshire	248	20	8
Delaware	42	3	7
Maine	124	5	4
Massachusetts	149	5	3
Rhode Island	91	2	2

Mean = 35.9, SD = 17.3, $\chi^2 < .001$

Frank A. Ciccone III and Representative Al Gemma, both of apparent Italian ancestry. I did not control for ethnicity so this may or may not be significant.)

Figure 2 shows the general increase in informal presentation names that has taken place in the last decade and a half. At least forty per cent of the legislators of twenty-five states now choose to present themselves by informal names, as opposed to those of sixteen states in 1995. Since 1995 thirty-six states have increased their percentage of informal names and the number with fifteen per cent or below shrank from fourteen to ten. The two states showing the largest increases were the formerly anomalous Indiana and Wisconsin, which increased by twenty-six and twenty-one per cent, respectively. The states along the Atlantic coast in the Maine to Virginia belt failed to keep pace with the rest of the country. While Connecticut increased by ten per cent, other states in the region increased only modestly, if at all; indeed, Rhode

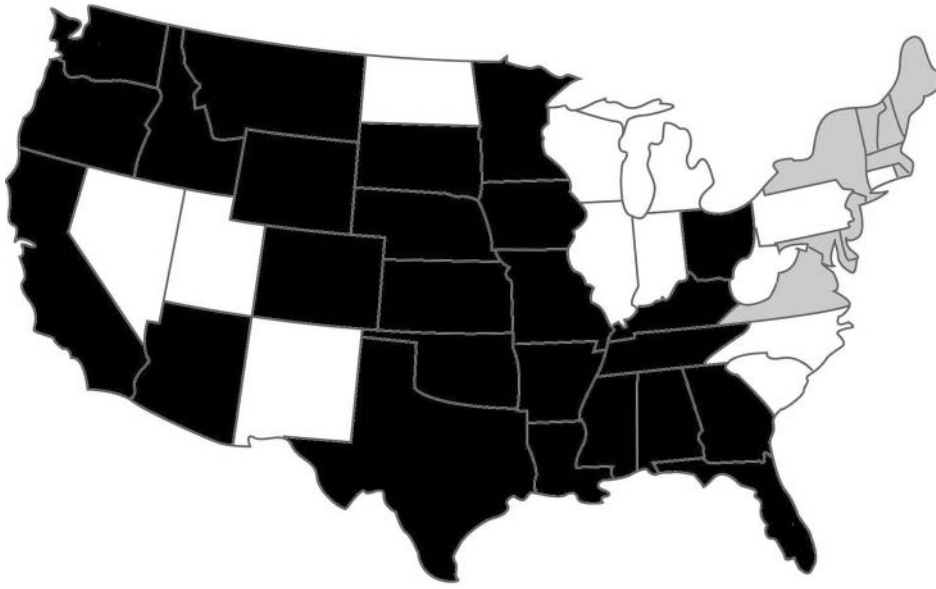

FIGURE 2 Presentation Names (2007). States where 40 per cent or more legislators used informal names in black; states where 15 per cent or less used informal names in gray

Island, Virginia, and New Jersey actually lost ground over 1995. Overall, informal names in the northeast increased by less than two per cent, suggesting that legislators in these states have not yet begun to participate actively in the process leading to informal presentation names.

Homelands of informal names

The locations where the current wave of informal names apparently originated and from which they spread are unexpected. Normally we would expect social changes of this kind to originate on either the east coast or the west coast, particularly in New York or Los Angeles, the culture, fashion, and media centers of the nation, and to spread from there to other parts of the country (Lieberson and Kenny, 2007). However, what we find are different and indeed surprising sources. One way to determine the sources of informal names is to look at those areas which were substantially above the national average in the earlier study. Figure 3 shows those states which exceeded the national average by at least one standard deviation in 1995. Two areas can be identified: a southern core consisting of Arkansas, Missouri, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Oklahoma, and a northwest near-core of Montana and Oregon.[9] These two areas apparently provided the hearths for the diffusion of informal names. Thus we find origins for the spread of informal names in parts of the Pacific northwest and south; neither area is generally regarded as a trendsetter for fashion and culture.

Conclusion

The spread of informal names has been so extensive that the entire country has been affected, with the exception of the mid-Atlantic states and New England, and

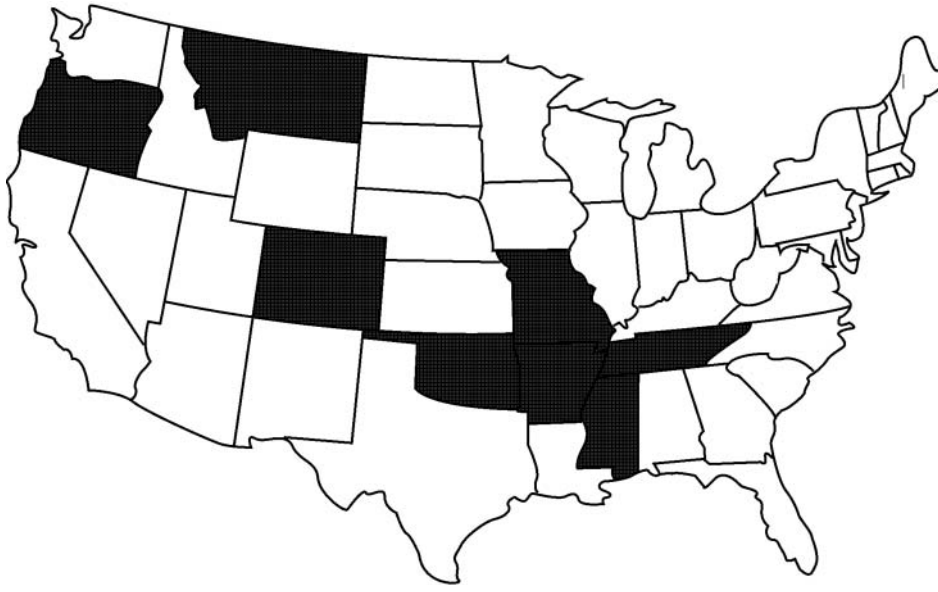

FIGURE 3 Homelands of informal name. States where legislators' informal names exceeded the national average by at least one standard deviation in 1995

even here we can see some movement; Pennsylvania and Connecticut especially are showing signs that they are beginning to participate in the process leading to informal names. Levels in Pennsylvania increased by twelve per cent between 1995 and 2007 and in Connecticut they increased by ten per cent.

As has been noted (Lieberson, 2000, especially Chapter 3; Lieberson and Kenny, 2007), during the last hundred years (and especially during the past half-century) Western society has become less formal. We see less formality in the way we dress, the way we interact with one another, and the way we behave at work or on vacation. I notice this increasing informality when I consider the way students dress for class, when a telemarketer calls and asks for me by my given name, and every time I attend a professional meeting and see fewer coats and ties than I did the year before. The dramatic growth of informal presentation names is not only another aspect of the increasing informality of society in general, but a means of measuring its progress as well.

Notes

[1] Anonymity is of course a relative term and the publics to which we present ourselves range from the entirely known, such as when we greet someone we know, to the completely unknown, such as when we write a letter to the editor and have no idea who (if indeed anyone) will read it. With the advance of technology the publics we address have become more and more anonymous. The world wide web is (to date at least) the most anonymous form of communication, and the name we use on our home page is open to a world-wide audience; we have little idea of its composition.

[2] Gosset, an employee of the Guinness Brewery in Dublin, Ireland, first described the *t* test, now a standard measure in social science research for the comparison of means, in 1908. Because several of its trade secrets had been previously reported, Guinness prohibited its employees from publishing papers on any topic. Gosset published his work under the name 'Student' and the test became known as 'Student's *t*', the name found in many current books on statistics.

[3] I am quite aware that some of the names which I categorize as informal may be considered formal in some parts of the country or in some social groups. This is true in particular of shortenings and double names such 'Joe Tom' or 'Betty Sue', which may appear on formal documents such as birth certificates and college diplomas. The fact remains, however, that these are informal name forms. That they have become characteristic of particular regional or social groups only adds support to the notion that names are sociolinguistic variables.

[4] Quotation marks suggest that a name is unusual or unexpected in some respect. This is a most intriguing category since it includes names found in all the other categories of informal names. There are derivative names such as that of Florida Representative Donald D. 'Don' Brown, unrelated names such as that of former Virginia Delegate Raymond R. 'Andy' Guest, and non-names such as that of former Georgia Senator Arthur B. 'Skin' Edge. A current member of the Georgia legislature is Earnest Williams, who chooses to be identified only as 'Coach' Williams on the official Georgia house roster.

[5] The other possible alternative to a full name, and one I do not consider here, is the use of initials. Initials as presentation names are artifacts of American history. Once bountiful, in the past fifty years their use has shriveled to insignificance. The 1953–1957 Illinois state legislatures boasted eight senators or representatives whose presentation names consisted only of initials plus surname. In the intervening half century there have been a total of only seven.

[6] What we choose to call ourselves is one thing; what others choose to call us is another matter entirely. Others may or may not honor our presentation names. At the meeting at which a preliminary version of this paper was presented, one member of the audience remarked: 'It rankles when I introduce myself as "Michael" and the response is, "How are you, Mike?"' Such exchanges underscore the fact that the use of particular names and name forms manifests personal and group relationships,

especially those built on power, solidarity, and deference. The form of the name you use when you present yourself to me and the form of the name I ask (or allow) you to call me sets the tone for our relationship. Changes in this relationship are signalled by corresponding changes in name forms. See Brown and Ford (1961) and Murray (2002).

7. I restricted this study to the presentation names of male legislators for two main reasons. First, at the time (1995) females made up a small proportion of all legislators, and an insignificant number in some states. Second, there is a body of evidence which shows that female names are perceived quite differently from male names; in particular, shortened and diminutive forms of female names are regarded less positively than shortened or diminutive forms of male names (see, e.g., Lawson and Roeder, 1986).

8. Investigations into the characteristic language of the west and of the south are so numerous that they have generated their own dictionaries and bibliographies (see, e.g., Adams, 1968; McMillan and Montgomery, 1989).

9. The status of Colorado is unclear and its particularly high percentage of informal names may be an anomaly, especially when we consider that between 1995 and 2007 the state actually lost seven per cent of its informal presentation names, bringing it more into line with neighboring states.

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Notes on contributor

Edward Callary is a linguist specializing in onomastics in the English Department at Northern Illinois University. He was editor of *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* from 1993 to 2002. He is editor of the collection *Surnames, Nicknames, Placenames and Epithets in America*, published by Edwin Mellen in 2006, and author of *Place Names of Illinois*, published by the University of Illinois Press in 2008.

Correspondence to: Edward Callary, English Department, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115, USA. Email: ecallary@niu.edu