



‘SPIN’ – The Psychology of Politics!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The ongoing United States election has captured my attention and the interest of Canadians. Over the past few months, as I have watched the news updates, however, I have been surprised to learn that US politics use a number of words that are not generally used in everyday conversations.

We hear words like “pundit”, “spin”, “superdelegates”, “caucus” and “misspeak” in the news but the more I pay attention to the debates, the more I realize that there is confusion about the meanings of these terms.

A pundit seems to be someone who has enough knowledge and experience with politics to be able to not only analyze but also predict and advise. The part I haven’t figured out is what qualifications are required in order to be given this title and who, besides the media reporters, have the power to award the title to someone. It almost seems to be an honorary role. In fact, when someone is introduced on a panel that person often responds with humble protests that s/he is not deserving of being called a “pundit”.

“Spin” is the way that a candidate and their supporters perceive and market a situation. I have been surprised to hear candidates make comments that they lost an election because they were “outspent” or didn’t campaign in a state because they knew they weren’t favoured there. They might explain a “loss” by stating that they were “unknown” in the area or harmed by the media coverage. Spin is a “story” that is presented to justify poor performance or motivate voters to support a candidate financially, through volunteer work or with their ballot.

Superdelegates are party members who have been elected or appointed to the Democratic Party. They are not only allowed a vote in their home district but also are given an additional vote at the party’s convention. (The Republicans do not have this designation). Superdelegates have “power” to help decide who will be the next nominee for President but, interestingly, they do not seem to want that power. In fact, they are supposedly encouraged to use their “conscience” when voting but, because of their elected status, also want to please their constituents.

A “caucus” is a unique way of voting which involves designated groups of individuals who are allowed to vote by standing in front of a picture of the candidate. There is no secrecy in this process! I was shocked to watch one of the Nevada caucuses where the only ones allowed to vote were those in the food industry, working in a business within two miles of the caucus site and on shift that day. The chefs, dishwashers and other personnel arrived at the meeting room dressed in uniform. There were no secret ballots, and they were therefore publicly begged and cajoled into moving from one side of the room to the other as a sign of commitment to one of the candidates.

The term “mis-speak” apparently means to lie about a situation. After video proved that Hillary Clinton’s described landing in Bosnia while under sniper fire hadn’t happened, she apologized stating that she “mis-spoke”. Her husband, former President Clinton, indicated that she had been overly tired as it was at eleven o’clock at night when she made the statement. Further research revealed four occasions that she had repeated the same story on four separate occasions, none of which were at night. More “mis-speaking”.

Yes, there are times that I am confused about the words and their meanings. In fact, I'm not even sure what "Republican" and "Democrat" means. Some describe "Republican" as conservative and just when I think that I understand, someone else describes the "Democratic" candidate as "conservative". Apparently, it depends on whether you spell "conservative" with a capital letter.

Even the word "win" is confusing. I hear comments like "A win is a win" and then am baffled by hearing "If he only loses by ten points – it will be a win".

And finally, the word "best". Everyone who is running for office declares that s/he is the "best" person to lead the country. They don't usually explain why this might be true. In fact, they seem to believe that just saying it would be enough to motivate voters to run to the polls to cast a ballot appropriately.

Now that I have some understanding of the vocabulary, I have begun to wonder what would happen if we applied these words to our everyday life. How would you feel if your child came home from school, stating that s/he was the "best" despite a failing report card? Are you annoyed when your business partner acts like a "pundit" (know it all)? What are your feelings when the employer "spins" information into a story that appears to benefit management and hurt the workers? Are you forgiving of a spouse who "mis-speaks"?

Words are important but their meanings are even more important. Communication requires that you develop a foundation of common understanding.

If you are having difficulties in a relationship or group because of communication problems, perhaps you would benefit from speaking with a psychologist about it. It will likely result in the "best" "win" for you!