

Blog #6

Using a CBA to Evaluate Political Candidates

We are coming to the close of a particularly vehement presidential political campaign that will culminate with election on November 8, 2016. The politically-charged atmosphere is polarizing and people's responses are often more visceral than reasoned. Blog #6 explores in what ways our Construct-Based Approach (CBA) to school counseling can be used to evaluate political candidates and party platforms.

One of the results students are expected to achieve through participation in a CBA school counseling program is that they will develop as contributing members to society and the well-being of our world. Helping students develop as responsible citizens today helps prepare them as responsible leaders of tomorrow. In Blog #3 (Role of Values in a CBA), we proposed that the CBA's four foundational constructs (motivation, self-direction, self-knowledge, relationships) and their associated sub-constructs can be viewed as a set of values which characterize the type of student we want to emerge from the PreK-12 learning continuum. These values can also be used to articulate the attributes of individuals who are most capable of effective leadership in a democratic society.

Relevance of Constructs and Sub-Constructs to Elections

It is the premise of this Blog that since a CBA helps students develop as responsible citizens and leaders, that the values on which a CBA is based can also be used to evaluate the essential character and leadership potential of candidates running for office. Democratic values that inform a CBA are relevant in evaluating candidates because they identify the attributes we should expect our elected officials to embody. We hold these values sacred because they are necessary for student development, an informed citizenry and political leaders who are both accountable. When these values are not evident in our political discourse, our potential for electing officials capable of leading us to greatness is severely diminished.

In Blog #3 we proposed that the CBA constructs and sub-constructs can be viewed as values and beliefs that are critical to both student development and success, and the health and well-being of a flourishing democratic society. Accepting this premise means that a CBA can inform how we prepare students for responsible citizenship while they are in PreK-12 schools, and inform the choices they make when they become registered voters regarding which candidates are most aligned with and are most likely to support these CBA and democratic values.

This section of the Blog identifies several CBA sub-constructs that are particularly relevant to political elections. Specific questions related to these sub-constructs are offered for your consideration. The answers to these questions can help determine whether candidates and/or political platforms embrace and embody the attributes we feel are necessary for student development and maturity, and their future involvement in participatory democracy as voters.

Motivation

Motivation is defined as the forces that compel action and direct the behavior of individuals. It is important, therefore, to ask questions regarding what motivates (compels) candidates and/or political parties to behave the way they do, and what are the potential consequences of giving these individuals/parties power to influence the direction of our personal lives and society through elected positions? Here are some specific questions related to motivation sub-constructs.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

- What are the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that compel individual candidates (e.g., ideology, power, money, self-interest, public service, common good, personal satisfaction)?
- Will these motivators have a positive or negative impact on you personally and on society?
- What types of motivators are most important in your life and to what extent are the candidates' motivators aligned with your own?

Possible Selves

- Do you feel a candidate and/or political party encourages you to envision who and what you want to be in the future and will support your efforts to achieve your dreams?
- Do you feel a candidate and/or political party encourages members of our society to envision a better future and supports efforts to make their dreams a reality?
- Do the candidate and/or political party support the development of an inclusive society by advocating for equal opportunities?
- What are your personal goals for the future and which candidates and parties are more likely to help you achieve them?

Self-Direction

Self-direction for individual students means being able to identify one's own life directions, making academic choices consistent with these directions, and connecting classroom learning to their life goals. When evaluating political candidates, this construct allows us to ask questions about the types of directions a candidate would take us as an elected official and what the consequences of those directions would be for us as individuals and also as a society.

Self-Regulation of Emotions

- How do you rate the candidates in terms of self-regulation of their emotions?
- How do you rate the ability of political parties to monitor and correct abuses in their own ranks?

- How much do you trust candidates who do not demonstrate self-regulation of their emotions?
- Do you think that an inability or unwillingness to self-control one's emotions is a helpful or harmful characteristic in political leaders?

Goal-Setting/Action Planning

- Should candidates provide detailed plans to back up the promises they make?
- Can candidates who consistently refuse to provide action steps they would take to achieve their goals be trusted to act in your own best interest?
- Are the goals candidates and political parties say they want to achieve actually achievable?
- Do the plans articulated by candidates or their parties include steps to collaborate with other parties?
- Do the plans provide information on how the candidate and/or party will hold themselves accountable?

Self-Knowledge

Self-knowledge is the understanding people have about their own abilities, values, preferences, and skills and is a necessary precondition for effective self-regulation. How candidates view themselves is important to deciding whether or not they can be trusted. Here are some specific questions related to self-knowledge sub-constructs that can be asked:

Executive Functions

- What have the candidates demonstrated in terms of self-reflection: a willingness and ability to observe one's internal processes, recognize areas in need of improvement, and a desire to improve?
- To what extent have the candidates demonstrated a desire to improve themselves as they progress through the campaign process?
- Do you feel the candidates demonstrate a well-developed capacity for monitoring and improving their performance?

Causal Attributions

- How do the candidates explain what is going on?
- To what do they attribute as causes for good or bad things happening?
- Who do the candidates blame for our problems?
- Do the candidates ever accept responsibility for things gone badly or are they always assigning blame to others (e.g., other individuals, other groups, other nations)?
- Is it fair to cast blame on whole groups as if every member of the group can be blamed for the actions of a few?

- Can candidates who do this ever be expected to govern fairly and justly?

Relationships

Relationships for students are the ability to establish and maintain productive, collaborative, social relationships with teachers and peers. From a societal perspective, collaborative relationships are the basis for community, social cohesiveness and a sense of belonging. From a political perspective, relationships are what bind various communities, and various nations, together as a whole. How the candidates view relationships among various groups and nations is critical to their ability to govern and to work toward peace in the world. Here are some specific questions related to self-knowledge sub-constructs that can be asked:

Social Skills

- Do the candidates exhibit respect for people who are different from them?
- Do the candidates make an effort to understand the values and beliefs of others?
- Do candidates show a willingness to engage in dialog to solve problems?
- Do the candidates promote the value of and need for community?
- Can the candidates be trusted to resolve critical conflicts when relating to other nations?

Critical Consciousness

- Do the candidates demonstrate an awareness of oppression in our society and the world?
- What types of actions do they promote to ensure a more democratic society and world?
- Do the candidates help the citizenry understand where oppression exists and the need for societies that promote and ensure a democratic way of life?

Social Justice

- Do the candidates support or reject these social justice problems (e.g., racism, sexism, misogyny, xenophobia) in their words and actions?
- Do the candidates provide plans with actual action steps for correcting these injustices?
- Is there a difference between what the candidates say about social injustices and what they have actually demonstrated through action (e.g., voting record, policy endorsements)?
- Is it ever acceptable to overlook candidates' views and patterns of behavior when voting?
- Does supporting candidates who exemplify these problems in their words and actions mean that those who vote for them are also guilty of these injustices?
- If you are a member of the middle class or are living in poverty, how will the policies and practices of the candidates and their political parties impact your life, your aspirations and your opportunities for a better life?

We Deserve Truth, Honesty and Integrity

A CBA is informed by a set of democratic values that are critical to the stability and growth of our nation. Participating in a CBA school counseling program enables students to learn about and exemplify these values in their lives and interactions. As school counselors, we expect students to achieve these results and then continue to embody them in their adult lives, serving as examples of what life in a democratic society should involve. This is particularly true for those who seek to be leaders in our society (e.g., political, business, community). Our leaders should exemplify these values and serve as an example of our youth. This is why it is so important to ask the questions above about the candidates.

Answers to the questions above provide insights into the world views, values, and belief systems of political candidates and their political parties. The answers also provide insights into the personal character of the candidates. This is important in determining whether a candidate is knowledgeable about critical issues faced by our society (e.g., national security, economic stability, income inequality), can be trusted to make wise decisions, will be a capable leader, and will exemplify for our nation and the world the promise of a democratic way of life.

It is important to observe the behavior of the candidates and what they are saying. Character is important. What we expect of leaders is that they embrace and embody the types of values inherent in a CBA and democratic society. We have a right and a responsibility to ask essential questions to learn what candidates and political parties are really saying and doing in terms of issues such as truth-telling versus lying, common good versus self-interest, altruism versus narcissism, inclusive versus exclusive, economic inequality versus a fair share of economic growth for everyone.

For example, take the presidential candidates. How would you rate them on each of these? As a school counselor, how would you rate the candidates based on the work you do? Do they support your work? Do they model the types of thinking and behavior you want your students to emulate? What would you say if your students spoke and acted in school in the same way as they are doing in the campaign? How would you assess their behavior in terms of acceptable versus unacceptable? What interventions would you propose to address behaviors you find unacceptable? How would you rate their level of social-emotional maturity?

As school counselors, it is important to stay informed. Know what the issues are. Know where the candidates stand on the issues. Know what they think about education and what they are saying needs to be done to improve it. Are they or their parties committed to allocating the resources necessary to improve educational opportunities for all students? Be aware of the policies and practices they have supported to understand the patterns which emerge. Words and promises can be cheap. Actions do speak louder than words.

Following every political debate, the media makes a big deal about who won and who lost. The answer is given in terms of one candidate or the other. We should always consider a third answer: that the American people lost because important questions for which we need honest answers were avoided or answered with misinformation. At minimum, we need to decide which candidate comes closest to providing honest answers and providing accurate information.

Conclusion

Our plea to politicians is this: Don't treat us like we are stupid and can be duped into believing you are on our side without honestly answering where you stand on issues that are important to us and our future. Is truth and clarity in your responses too much to ask? We live in perilous times and the issues we face are serious. We deserve better than what you are giving us. Tell us the truth and we will make our decisions regarding whether we feel you are qualified to represent and govern us. The other side of this is that we as citizens should not give up our right to stay informed and by default act as if we are incapable of making good decisions.

All elections are important. This election seems especially critical. Our students today are going to grow up to become our leaders tomorrow. What kind of leaders do we want them to be? Which of the candidates do we want them to emulate? Which of the candidates do we want as our model for the world to see?

Voting is a right. Casting your vote is important. Every election has consequences. Every non-vote potentially is the same as a vote for policies and practices with which you do not agree. To believe that it will make no difference if you decide to stay away from the polls is simply not true. Perhaps one vote will not make a significant difference, but multiply that by the number of people who do not vote and the difference can determine the future and fate of our nation.