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Understanding Political Dog Whistles

Decoding Political Jargon to Understand What it Might Mean

It's a presidential election year, and ACS will be combining some of its greatest hits with new sounds to bring you a "mixed tape" that will guide you through this voting season. Whether new information or proven ideas, every track will offer useful tools to help you navigate what is sure to be an interesting 2024.



This information will help you filter out the noise as candidates amp up their campaigns, and you try to decipher what they're really communicating.

While ACS will delve into voting a little closer to Election Day, we'll ease you into spring with news you can use now—how to take what you're hearing from all sides (including the media) and understand what is being said, how that might affect you, and why decoding the onslaught of communication the next few months can help you be better prepared when you cast your ballot.



Happy Birthday ACS!

Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC, is celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2024! Throughout the year, we will be looking back at our journey to get to where we are today and looking forward to what the future has in store. For 20 years we've helped our clients in nonprofits, for profits, government agencies, and philanthropic organizations successfully share their messages about target issues with key audiences, advocate for policy change, and position themselves as leaders in their respective fields. Just imagine what the next 20 years will bring!

Political Dog Whistles 101

When you blow into a dog whistle, you don't hear the sound, but the "silent" noise immediately gets the attention of our four-legged friends. Why? Because the sound is outside what humans can hear. We notice nothing. We go on with our day.

The term "dog whistle" has evolved from a tool for training hunting dogs into a metaphor for selective communication. Dog whistles in a political context are words or phrases that seem innocuous or neutral to many people, but to others they carry a very particular meaning or subtle message. Would you notice?

Political dog whistles are used to perpetuate fear, division, and discrimination by subtly reinforcing stereotypes or prejudices—most often about race, but also to address issues of religion, immigration, or social class. People may use dog whistles to signal their support or opposition to certain policies or ideologies without having

to explicitly state them—thus catching the attention of certain interest groups while maintaining plausible deniability about their intentions.

Decoding a Dog Whistle and its Subtle Messaging

Dog whistles allow politicians (of any party) to use reasonable words as code for sentiment and opinions that would likely not be accepted if stated directly. By understanding the hidden meanings of dog whistles, you can better discern the speaker's true intention, and the potential impacts of their proposed policies.

Below is a list of common dog whistles that you may hear this year and how they might be used to signal support for or opposition to certain policies or to stigmatize and marginalize certain individuals and communities. You might remember some of these terms from some of [ACS' previous newsletters and eblasts](#).



“Just as an actual dog whistle is heard by canines but imperceptible to the human ear, political dog whistles are understood by one group of voters but missed by everyone else. Politicians use dog whistles to make promises to their supporters but hide their position from others.”

—[Washington Post](#)

Dog Whistles and Racism

The dog whistle has most notably been used in American politics to veil messages steeped in racism. Richard Nixon insisted he was the “law and order candidate,” which really meant protecting White America. Ronald Reagan used the “welfare queens” story in Chicago to imply that addressing racial misuse of the system would fix the welfare state. And Bill Clinton’s 1994 crime bill launched racially coded attacks against “super predators.”

The infamous “Willie Horton ad” in 1988 is the reference point for dog-whistle racism. As described in [this article from Vox](#), the ad was a presidential campaign TV spot to criticize Michael Dukakis for being lenient on crime. The ad featured Willie Horton, a Black man and convicted murderer who committed further crimes while on a weekend furlough program supported by Dukakis. It was widely condemned for its racial undertones, playing on fears about Black criminals to bolster support for George H.W. Bush’s “tough-on-crime” stance.

Dog Whistle Phrase	What You Hear	What it Might Mean
States' Rights	Advocate for states' autonomy and sovereignty	Opposition to federal civil rights legislation, support for limiting government, and resistance to equity initiatives
Law and Order	Maintain public safety and uphold the rules of law	Opposition to criminal justice system reforms
Voter Fraud	A small number of people are cheating the current voting system	Used to suggest widespread rumors of voter misconduct without any credible evidence
Welfare Reform	Policies to ensure government assistance is fairly distributed or concerns about long-term dependency on government assistance	A desire to reduce social support programs under the guise of promoting self-sufficiency and fiscal responsibility, or eliminating waste, fraud, and abuse
Family Values	Strong family units and moral principles	Opposition to LGBTQ+ rights and reproductive rights
Parental Rights	Parental involvement in educational decision-making regarding their children—many times to opt out of certain education experiences	Opposition to the inclusion of certain educational topics (or library books) in school settings
School Choice	Families should have the freedom to choose a school to meet their children's needs, regardless of where they live	Support for segregation and discrimination, as well as inequitable distribution of public school funding
Critical Race Theory (CRT)	An academic theory sometimes discussed in higher education settings as a way of thinking about American history through the lens of racism	Objection to racial concepts that some find objectionable, such as white privilege, systemic inequality, and inherent bias

Baseless conspiracy theories, sour grapes from losing candidates, and attention-grabbing headlines (with little to no grain of truth) have raised the voter fraud flag. Learn “what you’ve heard that is false” and “the truth you should respond with when you hear it” in ACS’ eBlast, [Election Integrity: Everyone is watching...but is the U.S. doing the right thing?](#)

Read ACS’ [What to Watch 2024](#) newsletter, where we examine both of these dog whistles; how “parental rights” advocates seeks to limit children’s exposure to traditional educational topics, rallying around detailed involvement in educational content and practices; and how the continued expansion of school vouchers for “school choice” are proving to have more negative than positive impacts.

How You Can Help Silence Political Dog Whistles

Political dog whistles are subtle tools used to perpetuate division and discrimination. By understanding and pointing out the truth behind the words or phrases, you can play a role in stopping dog whistles use by those in power, while enabling those who hear them to grasp the significance of what they mean. Here are some actions you can take to silence dog whistles:

Raise awareness about the existence and impact of political dog whistles.

Question how some phrases are used in sometimes disingenuous ways.

Foster open and inclusive dialogue.

Emphasize the importance of respectful communication in political conversation. We can agree to disagree.

Encourage a critical eye towards *all* media.

Dog whistles come from all sides. Encourage people to question news sources, evaluate evidence, and think critically about the information they're getting.

Consider the language used by political candidates when making voting decisions.

Encourage your family and friends to support candidates who communicate clearly about their meaning and intentions.



20 QUESTIONS: Celebrating 20 Years

This year, ACS turns 20! We're celebrating with a game of "20 Questions," featuring some of the people who've inspired us the most during our two decades in the field. Each month, we'll highlight a few answers from each of our featured guests. You can [view their full answers on our website](#).

Featured Guest: May 2024

Marcia Egbert, Program Director, Thriving Families and Social Justice, George Gund Foundation

Why we love Marcia: Marcia is a thought partner and a mentor with a passion for social justice and fairness that never ceases to inspire. She understands the commitment and patience necessary to create deep and meaningful policy change that creates lasting positive impacts for families and children in Ohio and continues to strategically influence the policy sphere with optimism, creativity, and unflagging determination.

Marcia's featured answers:

What's one public policy you'd change? Fully reinstate and make permanent the Covid pandemic's enhanced federal Child Tax Credit that instantly lifted more than half of poor children in America out of poverty.

Rock, rap, or country? Gonna go straight to rock of the 3; if you'd thrown in jazz and opera you'd have my top 3.

See Marcia's answers to all our 20th Anniversary "20 Questions" [here!](#)

WANT MORE?

Want to learn how communication, strategy development, advocacy, or capacity building can move your organization forward? Need an expert for training sessions or conference presentations?

Contact one of our team members, call toll free at 1-877-372-0166, or visit our website at advocacyandcommunication.org.

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IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

Winter 2024 Newsletter: Part 2



What to Watch 2024—Part 2
Democracy at a Crossroads:
Navigating Threats and
Charting the Course for the Future

Our nation's Founding Fathers maintained that the success of the fragile American democracy would require an educated population with the skills to navigate and tussle with political and social issues to participate in civic life; be informed voters to protect their rights and freedoms, and to resist tyrants and demagogues. This education, formal and informal, must include exposure to a variety of viewpoints and an unfiltered understanding of historical influences on present-day policies and realities.

Winter 2024 Newsletter: Part 1



What to Watch 2024—Part 1
Democracy at a Crossroads:
Navigating Threats and
Charting the Course for the Future

In *What to Watch 2023*, Advocacy & Communication Solutions (ACS) walked you through what a healthy democracy looks like—one that builds open, responsive, and accountable institutions and processes that serve the needs and preferences of the public. And, you read about how you can do your part to ensure a healthy democracy.

In 2024, ACS will examine some of those policy trends—in our workforce, health care systems, and schools—through two installments of our *What to Watch* Newsletter, through which we provide strategic insight into how we can navigate those threats in the coming year while working towards preserving democracy.

Fall 2023 Newsletter



The Great Reshuffle—Is a better deal in the cards for America's workforce?

Since the COVID pandemic, we've read countless stories of how America's employers are struggling to attract and retain employees—especially in industries such as hospitality, health care, and retail goods and services. There have been many theories for the seeming reluctance of people to rejoin the workforce, ranging from lack of childcare to a desire for more flexibility to manage the demands of home and work.

According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, nearly 100 million people (97.8 million to be exact) quit their jobs in 2021 and 2022 in what was dubbed "The Great Resignation." The Chamber notes that many of these workers who quit their post-pandemic jobs have since been hired elsewhere, making the "Great Resignation" more of a "Great Reshuffle." In September 2023, however, there were 6.8 million job openings across the country, but only 6.3 million unemployed workers—even as news outlets reported strong employment growth.¹

¹www.uschamber.com/health/understanding-employment-labor-shortage