

MORE OPINIONS

The personal is now political; let's decide if it's presidential

"The Personal is Political" was a slogan that emerged from the cultural changes of the 1960s. It summarized the demand to take the realms of private life seriously as matters of political concern. In place of the traditional separation of public and private, the blurring of these spheres of life was at the root of many of the liberal and liberating movements of that era. The phrase first emerged from women's liberation. While the old school maintained that the private sphere of women's lives — including choices about work, marriage and children — was not even grist for public talk, the new consciousness found political consequences shot through all these decisions. The phrase can also help explain the movement for African-American liberation, especially in its early phase as a defiance of segregation: The social institution that regulated race relations in every private interaction was shown to be an inherent assertion of political power. Environmentalism has its roots in a growing awareness that private acts of consumption and waste have large public consequences. Even the resistance to the Vietnam War can be understood in these terms: Instead of suppressing their private qualms about the expressed purpose of the war, many young people followed their consciences rather than the voices of public authorities.

As these movements played out, "the personal is political" brought some unintended consequences. With increased media attention to private-life issues, there has been a growing expectation that personal factors are important material for political discussion. In the 1930s and 1940s, most Americans did not know that Franklin Roosevelt was disabled, but by the 1990s we even heard what kind of underwear Bill Clinton wears, along with sordid stories of his sex life. Private immoralities happened offstage in earlier generations; in the last decade or more, there has been a full gaze upon the personal lives of public officials.

These changes have also influenced the style of political talk. Discourse on policies is not

Paul Jerome Croce

enough, but likability has become key. Jimmy Carter was the first modern president to appeal based on folksiness. By presenting himself as just a regular peanut farmer, he could ask citizens for their votes, ironically, because of his limited experience, not despite it. Ronald Reagan was even more adept in the arts of the personable leader. A vote for Reagan was, for many, a vote for a cluster of patriotic and moral images that he represented personally.

These examples, from both political parties, worked well in their day because the personable symbols closely matched the policies. In the current election, the more personable candidate has a gap between his symbols and his substance. The compassionate side of George W. Bush's conservatism is mostly in his personable promise that he is a nice person. For example, in response to Al Gore's charges that his policies contributed to Texas ranking nearly last among states in insurance coverage for women and children, Bush answered, "If he's trying to allege that I'm a hardhearted person and I don't care about children, he's absolutely wrong." These would be important points for a popularity contest, but it is difficult to see the connections to policies — or even to his own conservatism.

The electoral choice is clear. For many, it will come down to ideological differences. But for those who are still assessing the measure of the men, it is a contrast between Gore with minimal flair, but vast experience and knowledge, and Bush, who often presents his personality in place of policy statements. As even Richard Lowry and Ramesh Ponnuru of the *National Review* argue, a vote for Bush is more of a vote for conservatism than for compassion.

The personable is certainly appealing. On Nov. 7, we will need to decide if the personable is sufficient.

— Croce, an associate professor of American studies at Stetson University, is teaching a course this fall called *Campaign Watching 2000*.