

Research the Resonates
Villanova CLAS Podcast
Episode 1 Transcription
Civic Engagement: Family Still Matters

HOST: Marissa Wasserleben

Guest 1 (CBH): Camille Burge-Hicks, PhD

Guest 2 (MH): Melissa Hodges, PhD

Guest 3 (MP): Mariel Persico '25 CLAS

Guest 4 (SM): Siobhan Meenan '25 CLAS

HOST: Family dynamics become a narrative in nearly every political campaign, but what you might not realize is just how differently those stories are told in the media. From the “middle class suburban kid” to the “Midwestern dad,” these sound bites shape the way candidates are portrayed—and often reinforce deeper social and cultural themes.

You're listening to research that resonates, a podcast from Villanova University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences that takes you inside the labs and classrooms to learn from our distinguished faculty and students. I'm your host, Marissa Wasserleben. In this episode, I sat down with Dr. Burge-Hicks, Dr. Hodges, and their undergraduate student research assistants Mariel Persico and Siobhan Meenan to discuss their research on family narratives in politics.

CBH: Camille Burge-Hicks, associate professor in the Department of Political Science.

MH: Melissa Hodges, associate professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminology.

MP: I'm Mariel Persico, I'm a senior here at Villanova and I'm studying Political Science with a minor in French.

And I'm Siobhan Meenan, I'm also a senior here at Villanova studying Political Science and Economics with a minor in Spanish.

HOST: Dr. Burge-Hicks and Dr. Hodges' research journey together began back in 2016, during the US presidential election, when they noticed a difference in the language around each candidate's family roles. For example, Hillary Clinton was often referred to as a “grandmother-in-chief.” However, Mitt Romney, who vied for the Republican nomination, has numerous grandchildren, but wasn't regularly referenced as a grandfather. This sparked a deeper conversation about different family narratives in politics, especially along gender lines.

- CBH: So that's when we got busy looking for research to understand what have people done in terms of a literature review, research questions, and projects surrounding family. And came across research that talked about parental status in politics. And so, we were like, well, we think there's a lot more that might go into this beyond just parent dynamics. So that's how we started building the project—things that we observed in real world politics.
- HOST: Realizing there was more research to be done, Dr. Burge-Hicks and Dr. Hodges began exploring the role family dynamics play in shaping political perceptions.
- MH: So, we really wanted to bring in this kind of theoretical orientation as well to studying politicized family. We coined the term politicized family as really this deployment of candidate family narratives to signal to voters that candidates speak for particular groups of the electorate. And this, because of candidate presentation, but also how the media kind of takes that information and filters it can lead to the reproduction or possibly the undoing of racialized and gender discourses in the political sphere.
- HOST: Initially, Dr. Burge-Hicks and Dr. Hodges focused on analyzing the Democratic primaries from 2004 and 2008. They have since expanded their research to collect thousands of articles through 2024 for both major parties to get a full picture of family narratives in politics.
- MP: We started by gathering data. We pulled from three sources, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, and the New York Times. And then we had to go to sites like Nexis Uni, Factiva, ProQuest and download these articles.
- SM: We were downloading the articles based on if they mentioned certain code words having to do with the candidate's families, whether it was their mother and father, or if it was the children, if it mentioned the candidate's affluence or wealth, their health, their policy stances as well.
- HOST: Their next step was coding the data, looking at each article for keywords or mentions of family or familial status, age, wealth, health, gender and race. The team streamlined their process by using a Google form with preloaded responses for variables such as gender or family mentions. This allowed the coders to quickly indicate whether a spouse was mentioned, for example, by selecting “one” for yes and “zero” for no.
- SM: Yeah so in addition to looking at whether the article mentioned the candidate's family members, we did have to look at if they were

mentioned in a positive light or a negative light, or if it was more neutral, contributing to the research, if it was racialized and gendered among their presidential candidates. For example, with Obama, we found a lot, they would mention his absent Kenyan father, and so that was the negative stereotype for Black families.

HOST: The coding process also helped them monitor intercoder reliability, meaning each researcher was coding things similarly. By comparing responses for each article, they could identify any discrepancies to ensure consistency and accuracy in their analysis.

MP: We had to figure out what was the author actually trying to get at here? Were they trying to make this more like a negative light or was it just simply a neutral mention putting in that fact? So that was the biggest challenge aside from the gathering data that I encountered, which was really helpful being on a team because you could look to our other members like, well, what should we do on this? What do you think? Which just makes it more accurate as we're representing our data.

HOST: The researchers explain that family narratives are used strategically in political campaigns to connect with voters, as voters typically want to support candidates who they feel share a common ground.

MH: So right now, we have for instance with the Harris campaign, Mamala, everywhere. Coach Walz as the Midwestern dad, right? Who will help you fix your car.

CBH: We think that all of those things are used to create some kind of connection with voters, with the hopes that it will say, "That candidate's like me. I really want to turn out to support that particular candidate."

HOST: The team found that while candidates may present their own family stories, they often have limited control over how those narratives are conveyed to voters in the media.

MH: We can look at, for instance, the website of the candidates and what they say about their family, how they portray their family life. But then that gets filtered through the media and that's where the content analysis comes in because we want to see what, what is the actual messaging that is going out to the electorate versus what the candidate says, and then we want to do the causal testing of does that actually impact voter behavior?

- HOST: In the future, the team plans to test these theories in a simulated election survey to see if these narratives really influence voters' behavior and attitude.
- CBH: One of the things that we really want to do is take all the things that we learned from the media content analysis to create our own fictitious election where we assign candidates with particular characteristics or traits, and we see if people will actually vote for them, or how they feel about them, how they react to them, so we can understand the differences in how these narratives are being deployed, and if they actually really do have an effect in politics. So we'll even be able to look across, you know, these different demographic indicators of people in our survey experiment to see who this is resonating among, and with what effect.
- HOST: As the team continues to analyze media coverage of more recent elections, they look forward to understanding the differences in how candidates have been portrayed over the years.
- CBH: I think it's interesting to see what happens over time, especially as both of the parties and the electorate are diversifying increasingly. We want to go back and see what's happening in terms of how the media is interpreting Republican versus Democratic candidates and the candidates and primaries have gotten so much more diverse on the Republican side of things since 2008. And so, there's so many new candidates to look at on both sides. And so our hope is that we can, we can get all, you know all of the folks so we can actually start to understand what those differences are.
- HOST: As political candidates and their narratives become more diverse, recognizing how the media shapes these stories is key to civic engagement. The researchers share how their work has made them more aware of the media they consume and the subtle ways it shapes our perceptions of political candidates.
- MP: Whether or not we realize it, little words and different things that are mentioned are definitely influencing us. So, I think voters need to be just more aware of that, especially when watching the news or reading different articles.
- SM: The candidates themselves may put out certain narratives, but it's really what the media perceives that as, what the media takes that narrative as, how it showcases that to voters that's what will really influence everybody's perceptions of the candidates.
- MP: I think the best thing to say to people is just read as many different articles as you can, and not even just the articles about the candidate you're interested in, but all the candidates. Be active, engage with the

reading. Don't just look for the positive and the negative, but what are some words they mentioned? Or how did they just introduce this candidate? Did they mention their age? Did they mention what they're wearing? And things like that.

HOST: This research experience leaves a lasting impact on everyone involved, from deepening their understanding of political narratives to fostering close collaboration between faculty and students.

CBH: I'd just like to say how awesome these ladies are and how grateful we are for the Villanova Social Science Apprenticeship. We're so grateful that Villanova has programs that are like this to allow students, undergraduate students, to work with faculty.

MP: Thank you for the opportunity, this was awesome for us. We learned so much.

SM: I also feel so grateful that Villanova even offered an opportunity like this just as an undergraduate. The opportunity to research and meet professors and really see the behind-the-scenes aspects. I'm very grateful for that.

HOST: Thanks for listening to Research that Resonates. If you haven't already, be sure to check out our other miniseries, including our most recent one on language and literature. Research that Resonates is available on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts and Spotify.