

The Campaign Button



In early June, after the US presidential contest had essentially been narrowed down to just 2 candidates, my wife presented me with a bunch of identical (anti-)campaign buttons. Each button was adorned with the name of a presidential candidate and a red slash through it. The next day, I brought one of the buttons to work, affixed it to my lab coat, and headed off to clinic.

My first patient of the day, a delightful old farmer, took one look at my coat and exclaimed to his wife, “Can you *believe* who he’s voting for?” His wife responded, “Walter, get your glasses . . . there’s a line through it!” A broad grin appeared on my patient’s face, and he congratulated me on my good taste.

I have continued to wear the button ever since, and nearly every patient has made some comment about it. The button has stimulated conversations between even my most reticent patients and me. My clinic visits have been running a bit longer, but the provocative discussions have been worth it. Patients have been able to vent their concerns about our election process and the choices before us. Not a single patient has appeared to be offended; all—well, almost all—have smiled about it. Indeed, many have asked where they can get the same button (my answer is Etsy.com).

One distinguished elderly gentleman, who is also a prominent author, noted that he had a collection of campaign buttons dating back to Roosevelt (that’s Franklin D., not Teddy) and said that mine would make a great addition. So I removed my button and presented it to him, which I was happy to do in light of the fact that he had given me an autographed copy of one of his books. I felt sort of naked to be without it the rest of the afternoon, but the next day I came in with a replacement (always prepared!).

A very nice young woman came in with her husband for a consult regarding her Hodgkin lymphoma. I noticed her glancing at my button several times out of the corner of her eye. Finally she admitted that although both she and her husband were lobbyists with deep ties to the political party of the candidate I was protesting, they actually agreed with me!

At one point, our junior division administrator hesitatingly approached me in clinic to inform me that we were not allowed to wear anything in our hospital in support of a political candidate. My response was that I was not showing support for a candidate. When the administrator’s boss later told me the same thing, I merely smiled and nodded.

I feel that wearing the button has strengthened my relationship with my patients. Not only does it confirm my sense of humor and bring to light shared political views, it allows my patients and me to have a nonmedical conversation about a subject of great concern to us all.

Another topic that I often discuss with patients in clinic is the latest book I am reading with my book club. Recently, I have started recommending *The Plot Against America* by Philip Roth. This 2004 novel recounts an alternate story of the election of 1940, in which the charismatic, larger-than-life aviator Charles A. Lindbergh of the America First party becomes the Republican nominee and beats out Franklin D. Roosevelt to become president of the United States. (In real life, Lindbergh was a well-known anti-Semite and Nazi sympathizer.)

One of the first acts of Lindbergh’s fictional presidency is to sign an agreement with Hitler declaring that the United States will stay out of the war. He then sets out to break up Jewish families by relocating children to the Midwest. He is criticized by luminaries such as Fiorello La Guardia, the mayor of New York City, for being a fascist and for his penchant for inciting riots.

I won’t spoil the ending, such as the part about the search for the emergency replacement president, but the story has an eerie ring of truth to it.

Until next month . . .

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Bruce D. Cheson". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bruce D. Cheson, MD