



# The Politics of Hope Newsletter

## *“Helping Ordinary Citizens Become Extraordinary Public Leaders”*



### The Political Placebo Effect

By Donna Zajonc  
October 2008

We are all familiar with the placebo effect that occurs when a patient is treated with a drug or therapy and the patient's condition improves even though the treatment was not real. Just the **belief** that the placebo treatment might work often results in an improvement.

New brain scan technology gives scientists the opportunity to research the placebo effect and document that there is more to the power of beliefs than we originally thought. (We'll get to how this affects our politics in a moment.)

Tor Wager, a professor of psychology at Columbia University, describes an experiment where he applied uncomfortable heating pads to patients' arms. Wager offered participants what he called Lidocaine salve to help block the pain of the heating pads. The salve was actually Vaseline and would have no effect on the pain.

The patients were loaded into a MRI scanner and told, "This is going to be really effective and will block your pain." Then he scanned their brains and watched the frontal cortex of their brains light up as they anticipated relief. Their brain activity gradually moved to the part of the brain that is responsible for releasing pain-killing opiates.

In every case the heating-pad pain was gone after the Vaseline was applied. Because the patients **believed** the salve would help, the brain kicked into action to make the neurological response happen.

Dr. Wager says, "All the drugs in the world are already in our brains and that is why we have receptors that are able to make sense of synthetic or artificially introduced versions (placebos). The real trick is figuring out how to prompt our brains to release the right stuff at the right time." (Listen to his NPR interview Aug. 3, 2007)

The power of our brains to impact our physical body is profoundly affected by our beliefs and what we tell ourselves---that is the basis of the placebo effect. Our strongly held beliefs evoke a physiological response that scientists can now prove with color-coded pictures of our brains.

I believe the Political Placebo Effect occurs in much the same way the Lidocaine salve worked. **A political proposal or favorite candidate may, in reality, have no impact**

**As I have watched the emotional reaction to Governor Sarah Palin's selection as Vice-President Nominee and running mate with Senator John McCain, I believe there is no better example of Political Placebo Effect in action.**



## The Politics of Hope Newsletter “*Helping Ordinary Citizens Become Extraordinary Public Leaders*”

---

**on our lives or community yet if we *believe* they will, our brains will prevent us from seeing otherwise.**

When the Political Placebo Effect kicks in gear our brains release a plethora of chemicals that drives our physiological response. Depending on the level of intensity of our beliefs, the chemical reaction from our brains could absolutely prevent us from even considering another point of view, a candidate from another party or from a different lifestyle.

**As I have watched the emotional reaction to Governor Sarah Palin’s selection as Vice-President Nominee and running mate with Senator John McCain, I believe there is no better example of Political Placebo Effect in action.** No matter what your position on her nomination, it is clear the many responses to her candidacy are based on strongly held beliefs that are driving deep physiological responses.

Senator McCain selected Gov. Palin to make the conservative base of his party “feel good.” His strategists knew there would be an emotional response by his party faithful irrespective of their knowledge of her assets or liabilities. I guess we could even call this phenomenon the Palin Political Placebo Effect. Only time will tell whether this Political Placebo Effect will have a lasting impact.

At the root of the Political Placebo Effect is the level of trust we project onto the political leader or proposal. The patients trusted Dr. Wager and believed him when he told them the Vaseline would relieve their pain. **The more willing we are to accept information from political people in authority and the more likely we are to give our power to them, the greater the possibility we will succumb to the Political Placebo Effect.**

Just as the Vaseline reduced the pain from the heating pads, holding on to our strongly held political views may relieve the pain we feel about the state of the world. The good news about recent research on the placebo effect is that the positive benefit of the placebo wears off over time and we are therefore more likely to see things as they really are.

So what coaching do I have during this amazingly wacky, chaotic time? It’s pretty simple and straightforward:

- Think for yourself. Be cautious about who and what you listen to.
- Be weary of proposals or leaders who say or do things just to make you feel good.
- Educate yourself and read and listen to a variety of different news outlets.
- Get plenty of rest and do things that make you laugh.

Reduce the alcohol or other intoxicants because we don’t need more mind-altering drugs right now.

**Above all, have hope that we are moving through this time even though the Political Placebo Effect is making it more and more difficult to determine what is real and not real.**



The Politics of Hope Newsletter  
*“Helping Ordinary Citizens Become  
Extraordinary Public Leaders”*

---

**Comments?  
Contact Donna at:**

321 High School Road, Suite 295  
Bainbridge Island, WA 98110  
Phone: 206.780.9300  
Fax: 206.842.0296  
Email: [Donna@PoliticsofHope.com](mailto:Donna@PoliticsofHope.com)



 Donna Zajonc, MA, CPC  
Political Leadership Coach