

Why Seamus Matters

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The now famous story of how Mitt Romney strapped his family dog, Seamus, to the roof of the car, albeit in a carrier, for a drive from Boston to Canada continues to, excuse the pun, dog Romney even now after he has secured the Republican Party's nomination. It is probably true that Romney's treatment of Seamus would not make him a bad president -- his economic views and fear of his own party's right wing would do that. Despite this, Romney's treatment of Seamus may prove damaging in the election.

Romney's treatment of Seamus is potentially damaging to his candidacy because it reinforces much of what many Americans, particularly swing voters, already feel about Romney -- that he is a smart enough man, but simply unable to connect or relate to the problems and challenges facing ordinary Americans. The Seamus story is consistent with this because it shows Romney to be goal-driven, singularly focused and insensitive -- it should be remembered that after the dog got sick, Romney pulled over, hosed him off and kept going -- even when taking his family on vacation.

Both Mitt and Ann Romney have consistently argued that their treatment of Seamus was not cruel, that the dog had previously enjoyed riding on the roof and that they would not have treated a family pet who was loved by them and their five children that way. This argument is difficult to believe because Romney put Seamus back up on the roof even after the dog had demonstrated that he was unhappy there. However, even if this were true, and the dog had previously enjoyed riding up there, the story would still be damaging because it confirms what so many people are already primed to believe about Romney.

For many voters, treating a dog this way is unimaginable and could only be done by somebody who has a problem empathizing with others. For these voters it is not hard to make the leap that the kind of man who could hose off the sick, family dog and keep driving is also the kind of man who could build a career around making companies more efficient by suggesting massive layoffs. This is, of course, the major negative that was used against Romney in the Republican primaries and will be used against him again by the Democrats and President Obama in the general election.

Another candidate could more easily shake this story because it might contradict the essential nature of that candidate. If, for example, Bill Clinton had done a similar thing, it would have been quickly forgotten because for most voters. Clinton, despite all his faults, was viewed, by all but his most committed opponents, as empathetic and capable of caring about others. Romney, however, will not be forgiven so easily by the voters, because even before learning of his strange treatment of the Romney family dog, most voters are open to seeing Romney as cold and uncaring.

This incident makes it very difficult for Romney to present the personal side of his biography to voters in a positive light. This is an unfortunate development for Romney because, by most accounts, the Republican candidate is a good and dedicated father and grandfather, but this incident will make it harder for Romney to show that side of himself to voters. Every family picture from when Romney's children were young will be a reminder not of Romney's attractive family, but of how he mistreated their dog.

President Obama also has had trouble connecting with important segments of the electorate and has been seen sometimes as insufficiently empathetic, but a contrast on this score between Romney and Obama will likely favor Obama. Like Romney, the president also has an appealing family and appears to be a good and dedicated father. Unlike Romney, Obama has, as far as we know, never mistreated any beloved family pets. The Obama family dog Bo is perhaps most well known because one of the first sentences out of president-elect Obama's mouth during his victory speech was to tell his two daughters, Sasha and Malia, that as promised, they would be getting a puppy to take with them to the White House. Thus Obama's dog story reinforces the most positive side of President Obama, while Romney's dog story reinforces the most negative side of the Republican candidate.

At this point, continuing to try to explain his bizarre treatment of Seamus will not help Romney. The story is already too well known for voters to change the way they see the story so trying to do that would be a waste of Romney's time and resources. Rather than try to change perceptions about this story, Romney needs to find another way to show he is indeed capable of empathy. This may be difficult because there may be little in his life to suggest that, but until he does, his decision to put Seamus on the roof several decades ago will continue to play an outsize role in the way many voters view Romney.