



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

Vote for goo-goo ga-ga Baby clothes make a political statement

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By Kate M. Jackson, Globe Correspondent | December 12, 2007

As the 2008 presidential election approaches, the inevitable crop of political swag has arrived offering something for everyone - including those too young to vote.

Obama onesies, Mitt Romney bibs, Hillary baby-doll tees, and Rudy rompers are for sale at many candidates' online stores as well as independent retail sites. So these days, even a 6-month-old can support a candidate by wearing a political T-shirt - or show contempt for one by spitting up on it.

But why the push to swaddle tots in candidate garb, to turn them, in essence, into cooing, burping, and pooping political placards? Think of it as just another example of the baby-as-accessory culture that's burgeoned in recent years.

"These days, more and more people want their children to express the same sense of humor and beliefs that they have," said Barry Goldberg, whose online store, Barrysworld.biz, sells Romney gear for babies and kids, including a bib with "Mitt Happens" emblazoned on it.

In some cases, parents get a twofer. Not only do they ensure their wee one echoes their views, but they donate a little something to their candidate in the process.

For instance, Babiesforobama.com, which says it offers "premium apparel for progressive toddlers," sells "Babies for Obama" T-shirts and donates a portion of the proceeds to the Barack Obama campaign. The site also invites parents to submit photos of their babies wearing the tees.

Like everything else in politics, the question of whether to dress your child in political garb is a divisive one. Some parents say that using your child to proclaim your political views turns them into pawns. Others claim it's no different than dressing them in a Patriots or Red Sox jersey.

A post on the blog for Parents magazine raised the question, "Political clothing for children: Yay or Nay?" and drew strong responses from both sides.

"The comments were very divided," said Judy Goldberg, a senior editor at the magazine. "Some people were saying it's wrong to indoctrinate your children and turn them into walking billboards. Others said it's simply treating your children as an extension of your own values. We raise them under our religions and our sports teams, and educate them on issues that are important to us."

But seriously, how much political education is an 18-month-old getting? The truth, say some observers, is that it's all about message sending by the parents. Not just about politics, but about how they're bringing up baby.

"The parents are saying 'Look at me. I'm talking politics with my toddler,' " said Sondra Grace, head of fashion design at Massachusetts College of Art and Design. " 'My baby is in the movement.' "

Goldberg said she doesn't think there's anything wrong with political attire on kids as long as you explain the meaning of the clothing - as best you can.

"You don't want to turn your child into an unwitting target," she said. "He might get harassed, and he wouldn't understand why. Kids don't understand politics. They get religion on some level and they understand sports, but politics is a different concept altogether."

BabyPolitico, which sells political baby clothing online and through retailers, doesn't focus so much on specific candidates as it does on issues like healthcare, the environment, and the importance of voting. For the wee advocate, there's a tee that says "Please ensure I'm insured/ support universal healthcare." Another reads: "Every child needs a place to call home/ promote affordable housing."

Jennifer Weiss and Lauren Brown said they started the company to raise awareness about issues that will affect their own children and the next generation.

"It can be controversial. Of course, kids are too young to make up their minds on these issues," Weiss said. "Ultimately, we try to give our children our good values. We do that all the time, that's our role."

Weiss believes dressing a child in attire about healthcare or the environment is still a better statement than dressing them in corporate logos or in sweatshirts from retailers that are known to use sweatshops.

"What kind of a statement is that?" she asked. "Our stuff is very tongue-in-cheek, and appropriate. It's like the kid is the one with the wisdom."

For instance, one of BabyPolitico's most popular items is a T-shirt that has the Democrat donkey, the Republican elephant, and a teddy bear beneath the slogan: "I'm too young to vote . . . what's your excuse?"

Siobhan Dooling, an English teacher from Brighton, purchased a onesie that said "Baby Politico: Activism Starts Early" for her best friend who's having a baby next year.

"My friend and her husband are both political scientists and are politically active, so they absolutely loved the gift," she said. "I don't think it's ever too early to begin instilling values in children. People should vote. I will begin telling my own children that while they are in the womb." ■