

Analyzing Political TV Spot Ads

A Teaching Unit from the [Media and American Democracy Program](#)

Source Session

Political Campaigning: Persuasion, the Management of Public Opinion, Polling, and the Press, Gary Orren

Description of School and Students

This instructional unit is designed for 12th graders in a suburban high school. The school is in a middle class to upper middle class area of the city. Class size will probably be 35-40. The lesson will be an integral part of instructional unit VI: "Campaigns and Elections."

Generative Topic

Propaganda, Persuasion, and Politics

Generative Object

Political ads from a current campaign

Understanding Goals

Essential or Guiding Question

How are media used in political campaigns?

What is persuasion in the use of media?

Critical Engagement Questions

Are media driven campaigns effective? Why?

How has television affected political campaign tactics?

How can we analyze propaganda techniques in 30 second television "spot ads?"

Performances of Understanding, Rationale, and Time Line

In our unit on political campaigns, students will read and assess writings by political scientists and political journalists and media critics in order to gain an

understanding of the use and effectiveness of television as a campaign tool. In addition students will learn common propaganda techniques and apply this knowledge to selected TV ads. Lastly, the "Media Literacy" analytical tool "Tapper" will be introduced and utilized in the study of further ads.

Activity 1

Show video examples of 30 second spot ads from a recent political campaign. Brainstorm with the students on how effective they think the ads were. Since there will be a degree of familiarity with the issue addressed in the ad, (most probably since the ad will be of relatively current vintage), have students evaluate the fairness of the ad. Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the ad. Do they think it was effective? Do they think it was fair? Do a quick write answering the question: "Did the ad persuade you with its message? Write why or why not?" Do you think ads like this are effective? Do you think intelligent voters could be misled by such advertising? Would YOU be misled?

Activity 2

Ask students: "Why do you think campaigns are conducted in this fashion? " "Do you think intelligent voters could be misled by such advertising?" Ask students to read McGinnis excerpt. Preface reading by stating: "Here's what a couple of Richard Nixon's advisors thought (during the 1968 campaign) about voters – including YOU if you are over 18!"

Questions

Evaluate what Ray Price says about prejudice. Do you agree? Disagree? Discuss.

What is the difference between reason and emotion? How does Price differentiate between the two?

"Voters are basically lazy..." Do you agree or disagree with this assessment of voter behavior? (This would have two students who have different ideas on this question to perform a quick debate on this quote based on the material covered so far).

What are the implications for American democracy if everything cynical (or “realistic”) Price writes is valid and true about the American voter?

Activity 3

Short lecture on the impact of television on American politics. Following are some resources which would be particularly helpful:

America in Search of Itself: the Making of the President 1956-1980, by Theodore H. White, chapter six, “The Reign of Television”

American Politics in the Media Age, by Thomas R. Dye and Harmon Zeigler, 3rd ed., Brooks/Cole Publishing Co. 1989, chapter six., “Politics, Parties, and the Media”

The Interplay of Influence: News, Advertising, Politics and Mass Media, by Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karilyn Kohrs Campbell, Co., 1992

Going Negative: How Attack Ads Shrink and Polarize the Electorate, by Stephen Ansolabehere and Shantao Iyengare, chapter 1, “The New Political Fault Line”

Activity 4

Show short film clip from the feature film “POWER”, with Richard Gere. Prior to showing, suggest to students that the character played by Gere, Peter St. John, is intended as a prototype of the “average” political campaign consultant in modern politics. After showing the film clip, discuss the person and the role of Roger Ailes, in George Bush’s 1988 campaign, and also the role of Tony Schwartz in the 1964 campaign of Lyndon Johnson. Hand out the following excerpts from the film clip:

Peter St. John – The professional political campaign consultant and media expert.

Wallace Furman – The apparently honest but dull novice politician; hired St. John to run his campaign for governor of New Mexico.

ST. JOHN – “What we’re aiming for here, the ideal, is that you personify the themes of the campaign. Our themes are – new ideas, new direction, change, vigor. No offense, but you look too soft to change a tire, much less a state...what I’m saying is, we’ve got to align the PERCEPTION with the REALITY...got to work on punching up this delivery of yours, energize it, make it track with the message...got to get you a couple dozen shirts once we get set on the shades. I don’t like you in blue or gray – too cold for you. you are running in New Mexico.”

FURMAN – “Wait! I’m paying YOU! You work for ME! You are trying to run my life...”

ST. JOHN – Wallace, Wallace, Wallace...You are paying me to make you a new life. Politics. And in order for me to do that must be in charge of all the elements that go with it”

FURMAN – “...but aside from the campaign things I want to address some of my long -term plans”

ST. JOHN – “Yes, I’m sure they are great, but they are not important. See, my job is to put you in. Once you are there, do whatever your conscience tells you to do”

Questions

What does the exchange between St. John and Furman suggest about the nature of modern political campaigning?

Does this dialogue speak to the excerpt from McGinniss’ book?

Discuss the similarities and differences.

Activity 5

Show video documentary “The Living Room Campaign”, from Arts &

Entertainment channel's "Investigative Reports" series. This is a documentary which deals with the use of TV in political campaigns covering the last 40 years. Use a handout of the 5 question analysis discussed in the documentary. Have students make notes on the video in light of these 5 questions:

Describe some spot ads that you consider manipulative.

Which ads do you think "sell" rather than "inform"?

Which ads do you think do not tell the truth?

If you believe they are not telling the truth, how can you tell?

Are these ads designed to help us make a decision, or just to make the news?

Time Line

The five activities above will take three full class sessions (activities one and two in one class period, activities three and four in another period, and activity five in a period alone) The assessment activities following will require two full periods.

Assessment

(Tools to be used by the teacher in addition to traditional pencil and paper tests.)

The information presented thus far should lead to the conclusion that we have to be cautious observers of political advertisements. All campaign ads are deceptive, says John Splaine. "They are carefully framed to persuade us to vote for the 'right' candidate. At worst, they use audio and video techniques to manipulate our emotions and they get us to make unconscious causal connections that may be unfounded. They rarely give us any evidence to support their assertions. At best they provide some information on candidate's views on some issues. Even here, however, the information is carefully arranged to make the most favorable impression and avoid the disadvantages of candidates' positions. This is all done in a very short time."

"TAPPER" model of analysis. Distribute handout "Political

Advertisements” from John Splaine’s booklet, Critical Viewing. This is an explanation of his 6-step “TAPPER” instrument for analysis.

1. Show several more TV ads collected from past campaigns. Have students use the “TAPPER” analysis. Distribute “Political Advertisements” handout from Splaine’s book. Analyze the following spot ad by writing the answers to the “Tapper” questions for each ad.

A. 3 ads from the 1998 California gubernatorial primary (Al Checchi, Jane Harmon and Gray Davis, the candidates in the Democratic primary)

B. Republican Gubernatorial candidate Dan Lundgren ad. This ad was repeated on the September 13, 1998 edition of “60 Minutes”. The sole subject of the show was the recently released “Kenneth Starr report on the Clinton – Lewinsky issue.” Following is a transcript of this ad:

Lundgren:

“Compromise is not the best principle with me, because if that occurs you are nothing but a hollow figure.”

“You can’t tell people to do one thing, while you do another”

“From the White House to the school house, from parent to principal, that’s what we ought to be

“Character is doing what’s right when nobody else is looking”

2. Design a TV campaign ad: Have students create their own TV ads. Use a current issue in their school as a subject issue for their TV ads. Extra credit if students produce a videotape, using storyboard and “people” for their 30 second spot ad to be shown at the end of the unit. Require the students write a rationale for their decisions in each step of the advertisement presentation. Individual and group credit can be given.

Resources

The Selling Of The President: 1968, By Joe McGinniss
"Power", a 1986 film directed by Sidney Lumet and starring
Richard Gere.

Critical Viewing: Stimulant To Critical Thinking By Kevin
O'Reilly And John Splaine.

"The Living Room Campaign" Arts & Entertainment Channel video
documentary of recent campaign TV spot ads

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