

PLAYING ON EMOTIONS: FOCUS ON POLITICAL ADS FEATURING CHILDREN

OBJECTIVE

Students will understand how emotional appeals in campaign commercials—in this case, the use of images of children—manipulate viewers and distract them from more substantive issues.

Negative or attack ads are another way of eliciting emotional responses. Recommendations for adapting the lesson to focus on this kind of commercial are included at the end of the Procedures section.

OVERVIEW

Studying how presidential commercials have returned to the same themes throughout the past half-century helps us to understand the reasons for the repetition of certain types of imagery. Political ads featuring children have been common since the 1950s. Some ads use images of a candidate with his own children or grandchildren to help establish him as a “family man.” Others portray anonymous or “real” children who are not related to the candidate in order to elicit powerful emotions, including fear, anxiety, and hope for the future.

Children in presidential ads serve as a lens through which to view the wider concerns of the nation, such as nuclear war (Lyndon Johnson, “Peace Little Girl (Daisy),” 1964), drugs (Bob Dole, “The Threat,” 1996), or affordable health care (Al Gore, “Ian,” 2000). However, many candidates oversimplify issues, arousing emotions with drastic predictions about the future of our children that are based on little or misleading information.

PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION

Ask students to brainstorm about the reasons why a candidate for president might refer to or use children in a campaign commercial.

PROCEDURE

Play “Family/Children” (George H. W. Bush, 1988) and “Dangerous World” (George W. Bush, 2000). Ask students to compare the use of children in these two ads.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Describe the children in these ads. Is there one child, or are there many?
- What are the children doing?
- How do these ads make you feel? Why?
- What is each ad about?
- Are children used effectively in these ads? Why or why not?
- Do you think the impact of using children in these ads would have been different for older viewers and younger ones?

Now that the class has analyzed two ads that use children in very different ways, revisit the preliminary discussion. Ask students if they can think of any additional reasons, besides the ones they have already mentioned, why a candidate might refer to or use children in a campaign ad.

Divide the class into six small groups. Ask each group to analyze one of the following ads. If you do not have computers for each of the groups, you may analyze the ads as a class:

- “Ice Cream Cone” (Johnson, 1964)
- “We Will Bury You” (Goldwater, 1964)
- “Children/Achievements” (Ford, 1976)
- “The Threat” (Dole, 1996)
- “Ian” (Gore, 2000)
- “Changing World” (Bush, 2004)

QUESTIONS FOR WRITING AND DISCUSSION:

- Describe the age, gender, and appearance of the children in the ad. What are they doing?
- What settings, costumes, and props are used? What effect do they have?
- Is the presidential candidate shown interacting with the children? If so, what impression do you get of the candidate from these interactions?
- What message does the commercial communicate?
- Do you think the use of children in this commercial is effective? Why or why not?
- Do you think the ad’s use of children is fair, or do you think it is unfairly manipulative or inappropriate? Why?

VARIATION: NEGATIVE ADS

The above exercise can be completed with a focus on negative ads instead of commercials featuring children. Like commercials that feature children, negative ads are designed to generate an emotional reaction in their viewers, and they also reflect the wider concerns of the nation, such as national security (Richard Nixon, “McGovern Defense,” 1972), the economy (Walter Mondale, “Rollercoaster,” 1984), or crime (George H. W. Bush, “Revolving Door,” 1988). By playing to voters’ emotions, negative ads can sometimes raise the issue of fairness.

For the group discussion, screen “Really, MD” (Bush, 2000) and “Federal Taxes” (Bush, 1992). When the students break up into small groups, assign the following six ads:

- “Streetgov” (Carter, 1980)
- “Revolving Door” (Bush, 1988)
- “Guess” (Bush, 1992)
- “Pants on Fire” (Dole, 1996)
- “Windsurfing” (Bush, 2004)
- “Fundamentals” (Obama, 2008)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Does the ad attack the opponent’s policy positions, his leadership qualities, or his record? What is its argument?
- What is the tone of the ad?
- How does the ad make you feel about the candidate being criticized? How does it make you feel about the candidate whose campaign made the ad?

ASSESSMENT

By viewing and discussing the commercials, students should gain an understanding of the emotional—as opposed to intellectual—impact of an ad on the viewer, and should be able to offer a number of different reasons why campaign commercials might feature children (or negative content).

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES/HOMEWORK

1. Ask students whether or not they think the use of children in campaign commercials (or the use of negative ads) is effective in convincing viewers to vote for a political candidate. In an essay, students should respond to this question, giving details and examples. Students may be asked to consider this quote from the book *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation*, by psychologist Drew Westen: “In politics, when reason and emotion collide, emotion invariably wins.” Can ads focused on arousing strong emotions distract voters from more substantive issues? Can a political ad be effective even if it is unfair (for example, even when we know it contains misleading or false information)?
2. Students write an essay about the different ways in which younger and older audiences might respond to the use of children in political ads.
3. Ask students to analyze one of the other “types of commercial” featured on *The Living Room Candidate*. Students should watch all of the ads in the relevant playlist and write an essay describing recurring elements and their impacts in these ads.

CURRICULUM STANDARDS ADDRESSED

Common Core English Language Arts: 7

New York State Social Studies: 7

NOTES
