

THE LIVING ROOM CANDIDATE

PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN COMMERCIALS 1952–2008

Lesson Three

CHILDREN IN POLITICAL ADS

Objective

Students will understand how certain elements—in this case, children—are used in campaign commercials to manipulate the feelings of the voting public.

Overview

The presidential campaign commercials in *The Living Room Candidate* are grouped thematically within the section “Types of Commercial.” Studying how presidential commercials have returned to the same themes throughout the past fifty-six years helps us to understand the reasons for the repetition of certain types of imagery.

The exhibition identifies seven “types of commercial”: Backfire, Biographical, Children, Commander in Chief, Fear, Documentary, and Real People. One of these categories, Children, will be the focus of this lesson. Images of a candidate with his children or grandchildren help to establish him as a “family man.” But the portrayal of anonymous or “real” but unrelated children can also play on a number of 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, whether it be nuclear war (Lyndon Johnson, “Daisy,” 1964), drugs (Bob Dole, “The Threat,” 1996), or affordable health care (Al Gore, “Ian,” 2000). Their inclusion in ads is now standard in campaigns; what candidate would not want to be seen as concerned about the needs of America’s youth? However, many candidates oversimplify issues by arousing emotions with drastic predictions about the future of our children that are based on little or misleading information. A candidate will often imply that children will not be safe in a nation controlled by his opponent.

Preliminary Discussion

List two reasons why a candidate for president might use, or refer to, children in a campaign commercial.

Procedures

Watch the following commercials:

From 1964: Lyndon B. Johnson, “Daisy” and “Ice Cream Cone,” and Barry Goldwater, “We Will Bury You”

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From 1976: Gerald Ford, “Children/Achievements”

From 1996: Bob Dole, “The Threat”

From 2004: George W. Bush, “Changing World”

Questions for writing and discussion:

1. All six commercials feature children. Describe the age, gender, and appearance of the children. What are they doing?
2. What setting, costumes, and props are used? What effect do they have?
3. What message is being communicated by each commercial? Is it the same message or is each one different? Why are children included in these commercials?
4. Is the presidential candidate shown interacting with the children? If so, how do you interpret this?

Assessment

By viewing and discussing the commercials, students should gain an understanding of the emotional (as opposed to factual) impact of the ad on the viewer.

Extension Activities/Homework

1. Do you think that a candidate’s use of children in campaign commercials is effective in convincing viewers to vote for her? Explain why or why not, giving details and examples. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using children in these ads?
2. What might be the difference between the way young people and older people perceive these ads? As a young person, do you find them effective? Why or why not?

Curriculum Standards Addressed

New York City English Language Arts: E1c, E3d, E5a, E6a

To View

[“Dangerous World” \(2000 ad for George W. Bush\)](#)