

THE LIVING ROOM CANDIDATE

PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN COMMERCIALS 1952–2008 ★★☆☆

Lesson Four CASE STUDY OF A CAMPAIGN

Objective

Students will examine a single campaign to gain an understanding of how television ads reflect and address the concerns of the voting public. Furthermore, students will assess the extent to which the U.S. presidential campaign has become an event that influences our culture and history as well as being influenced by them.

Overview

Presidential ads are a product of the culture of the time when they were made, and are inspired by domestic and world events. But these commercials do not merely reflect the general culture. They can also influence culture. Often, political ads will become as newsworthy as the actual campaign. This lesson will assess the degree to which campaign ads constitute media events that contribute to culture as much as they draw upon it.

Students will use the election year of 1988 as a case study. They will examine commercials made by each presidential campaign that year, in a particularly bitter and hard-fought race. In early 1988, the highest concerns of the campaigns and voters were domestic and international issues that included the October 1987 stock market collapse, the Iran-contra scandal (in which it was discovered that profits from arms sales to Iran were being illegally routed to Nicaraguan contras), and the apparent thawing of the Cold War as the Soviet Union announced plans to withdraw from Afghanistan. It was in this climate that Vice President George Bush sought to succeed Ronald Reagan, the first president since Eisenhower to serve two full terms. Bush was not very popular with his own party and was running against a Democratic opponent, Governor Michael Dukakis, who in national polls was showing a strong lead over Bush, and who had performed an economic turnaround in his home state of Massachusetts, lowering taxes in what had been a high-tax state.

Bush, however, profited from the disarray and confusion of the Dukakis campaign. In a media strategy supervised by veteran consultant Roger Ailes, Bush portrayed Dukakis as an ineffective liberal, soft on defense and soft on crime. The infamous “Willie Horton” ad, made by an independent political action committee but capitalizing on a story Bush frequently brought up in his campaign, emerged as a classic example of attack campaigning, and one for which Bush suffered very little condemnation. The effect of the attack was compounded by Dukakis’s refusal to counterattack, in the hope that voters would find the ads unfair.

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Preliminary Discussion

In this presidential election, what issue do you think was the most important to voters? Why did you choose this issue?

Procedures

Allow students time to share and discuss their responses. Explain that political commercials are designed to respond to voters' concerns. Share with them some of the information in the Overview section before showing them the commercials.

Have students watch the following ads (in this order), selected from the menu of commercials for both Bush's and Dukakis's campaigns: "Harbor" (Bush) and "Bay" (Dukakis); "Tank Ride" (Bush) and "Counterpunch" (Dukakis); "Revolving Door" & "Willie Horton" (Bush) and "Furlough" (Dukakis).

Questions for writing and discussion:

1. From watching the ads, what do you think were Americans' main domestic and international concerns at the time? How do the ads address these concerns?
2. Describe the specific criticisms of Michael Dukakis made by George Bush. Does Bush give evidence to back up his claims? If so, what is it? How does Dukakis respond?

Assessment

Students should understand the role of these presidential campaign commercials and how they relate to society as a whole. They should begin to realize the effect that commercials can have on voters' perception of the candidates and issues.

Extension Activities/Homework

1. Look at the Results section for 1988. What connections can you make between the ads you have seen and the results of the election? What evidence does this provide of the power of political advertising? Explain your answer.
2. Choose one of the following campaign years: 1964, 1968, or 1980. Watch all of the commercials from the two major parties. Analyze the issues and concerns and the ways they are presented in the same way that you did for 1988.
3. In 1988, George Bush's strategy concentrated largely on attack ads. Do you think that such ads help a candidate in an election? Or are voters repelled by such negative tactics? Explain your answer.

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Curriculum Standards Addressed

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

New York State Social Studies: 1, 5

To View

[“McGovern Defense” \(1972, Republican\)](#)

[“Weapons Florida” \(2004, Republican\)](#)

Compare these to the 1988 ad “Tank Ride.”