

THE LIVING ROOM CANDIDATE

PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN COMMERCIALS 1952–2008 ★★☆☆

Lesson Five

EVALUATING INFORMATION: FOCUS ON ELECTION 2008

Objective

By studying the 2008 presidential race, students will learn how to evaluate the claims and information presented in political ads, and to become critical consumers of modern political advertising.

Overview

The 2008 election can be described as a “change” election. For the first time since 1952, there are no incumbents among the presidential or vice-presidential candidates on either ticket. Polls indicate that more than 75 percent of the electorate feels that the country is currently on the “wrong track” or moving in the “wrong direction.” Among the problems facing the new president will be: the ongoing war in Iraq, a stagnant economy, rising energy prices, and global warming.

While these issues are important, there is also a strong emphasis on personality and character traits. The Democratic candidate Barack Obama, the first African American nominee of a major party, has run under the slogan “Change You Can Believe In.” Republican nominee John McCain’s slogan “Country First” implies that he is an independent thinker willing to place his own beliefs ahead of those of his party.

How can a voter make an informed choice between the candidates? Television commercials of any sort depend on the fact that viewers won’t think too carefully about the information presented. While this may not be as much of a concern for shampoo or soda, it has greater implications for politics. The current commercials are the most visually sophisticated in the history of television advertising, combining text, statistics, and multiple themes. They present a challenge of absorption, yet one that may distract viewers from questioning the veracity of the information they are receiving. For this reason, it is important for young people to be able to make sense of the often-conflicting information that is presented in campaign ads as they approach the age of participation in the American political process.

Preliminary Discussion

Is everything that you see in a television advertisement always true? How can you tell?

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Procedures

Discuss the responses to the question above. Encourage students to think of ways of verifying information. How do we check sources? How do we know what the “authority” on something is? How do we tell if information has been taken out of context? And why does this matter?

Show four ads from the current campaign: “New Energy” and “Out of Touch” for Barack Obama and “Troops” and “Housing Problem” for John McCain. These ads all use a combination of on-screen text, quotations from newspapers and government documents, statistics, and various other claims. The words and images on-screen move quickly and allow little time for careful consideration. Before showing the clips, give students the task of identifying at least two claims made by each candidate that either attack his opponent or support his own record.

After viewing the clips, discuss with students the ways that they might verify the information presented. Introduce them to the website www.factcheck.org, a nonpartisan organization set up by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania to monitor the accuracy of public political discourse. Also discuss how newspaper websites, such as that of *The New York Times*, can be used to do research about specific issues and about ads. Many newspapers have their own “fact check” features, checking the accuracy of claims made in ads. Students can work together to determine the truth of the ads, and brainstorm about other ways to find information they need that may not be on this website.

Questions for writing and discussion:

1. Describe your findings from the ads and the FactCheck website. What were you able to find? Did factcheck.org’s information differ from what the candidates presented? If so, how?
2. There are many forms of media providing information, propaganda, commentary, and coverage of the 2008 election, including candidate websites, comedy shows, newspapers, other websites, blogs, TV commercials, and more. How can voters make informed choices? Does the glut of all these forms of media make TV commercials more or less influential?

Assessment

Students should have gained an understanding of some of the ways to evaluate information presented in political ads, with the underlying implication that sometimes this information is taken out of context, manipulated to serve a candidate’s interests, or simply incorrect. They should understand that it is important not to assume that anything said in a campaign commercial is true.

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Extension Activities/Homework

1. There has been a great deal of media attention focused on this presidential race, much of it devoted to personality and character issues as well as specific issues such as war, the economy, and energy policy. To what extent, if at all, do you think this will affect the way people vote in November?

2. According to the Federal Election Commission, in the 2000 election, only 51.3 percent of registered voters cast a ballot. What role do you think campaign advertising plays in determining whether or not someone votes? Do presidential commercials really influence a voter's choice, or are other factors more important? Explain your answer.

Curriculum Standards Addressed

New York City English Language Arts: E1c, E3b, E3d, E5a, E6a

New York State Social Studies: 5

To View

["Obama Love" \(2008, Republican\)](#)

["Maverick No More \(2008, Democratic\)](#)