

# THE LIVING ROOM CANDIDATE

## PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN COMMERCIALS 1952–2008 ★★☆☆

### Lesson Eight

## TELEVISION ADVERTISING AS A CAMPAIGN TOOL

### Objective

Students will understand how the introduction of television commercials for presidential candidates differed from previous forms of political communication and how the first campaign commercials in 1952 changed public exposure to and perception of candidates and issues in the campaign.

### Overview

This lesson provides a starting point from which to understand the role of television in transforming the nature of political campaigning. The first presidential campaign commercials appeared in 1952. Although candidates have continued to use traditional methods of reaching the public (making speeches, traveling around the country, advertising in print and on radio), television has become an essential addition to these activities, and probably the medium that reaches the most voters.

The focus in this lesson is on the 1952 contest between Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson. At the time, there was no precedent in presidential elections for “spot” TV advertising (20- to 60-second commercials), and Adlai Stevenson favored the purchase of 30-minute blocks of time for broadcasting speeches. Madison Avenue advertising executive Rosser Reeves convinced Eisenhower that spot ads placed before and after popular TV programs would reach more viewers at lower cost. The spots that followed (all of which feature either Ike himself or his cartoon likeness) were intended to portray him as a plainspeaking man of the people. Stevenson, however, who disdained the use of television for campaigning, proved less skillful at handling the new medium, and even declined to appear in his own ads.

### Preliminary Discussion

What do you know about the main presidential candidates for the 2008 election, their records, positions on the issues, and life stories? How did you get your information?

### Procedures

Most of the responses to the questions above will likely make reference to television and the Internet. This can be guided into a brief discussion of the ways in which presidential candidates brought their views to the public before they used television. A list may be created comparing the advantages and disadvantages of television, Web ads, and more traditional campaigning techniques. To provide historical context, explain to students that they will be viewing the first presidential commercials ever aired, at a time when Americans were not used to seeing candidates on television.

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First, show students the series of Eisenhower commercials. As they watch, have them jot down any details that stand out in the spots (style, performance, message, etc.). Then do the same with the Stevenson commercials.

Questions for writing and discussion:

1. Television was a new medium for presidential candidates in 1952. In your opinion, who used this medium to better advantage—Eisenhower or Stevenson? Explain your answer, using details from the spots.
2. What concerns does a candidate face when presenting himself in a television ad that might not exist in other campaign situations?

## Assessment

In their writing and discussion, students should come to understand that in 1952 television was a novel (but soon indispensable) form of communicating a political message. A candidate's ability to present himself effectively on television became just as important as his views on the issues.

## Extension Activities/Homework

1. Think about the following quotations:

*“The idea that you can merchandise candidates for high office like breakfast cereal is the ultimate indignity to the democratic process.”*

– Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson, 1956

*“Television is no gimmick, and nobody will ever be elected to major office again without presenting themselves well on it.”*

– Television producer and Nixon campaign consultant Roger Ailes, 1968

With which quotation do you agree more? In your answer, explain what kind of effect TV advertising has had on the American political process, voter opinion, and election results.

2. Select two ads from either 1952 or 1956, and two ads from 2008. Describe the differences between television of the two eras, and how they are reflected in the candidate's presentations. What differences do you notice in the production choices, style, and overall effect of the commercials? What do these changes suggest about how the medium itself has evolved?

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### Curriculum Standards Addressed

New York City English Language Arts: E1c, E3d;

New York State Social Studies: 5

### To View

[“Never Had It So Good” \(1952, Republican\)](#)