



## LESSON PLAN

**Level:** Grades 8 to 12  
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# Watching the Elections

## Overview

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In this lesson students look at how elections are media events. They compare American and Canadian elections to other mass media events and then watch one or both debates with an eye to analyzing them as media constructs. Students will then study advertising techniques frequently used in political ads, then watch American and Canadian campaign ads from past years. They will then analyze the use of advertising techniques in these ads and compare the ads in a variety of ways, looking at how older ads differ from newer, Canadian from American, and categorizing ads by their approach. As a summative activity students will create a political ad that draws on the approaches and techniques they have studied.

## Learning Outcomes

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Students will:

- Learn advertising techniques used in political advertising
- Analyze elections, debates and campaign ads as media products
- Compare and categorize political campaign ads
- Design a political campaign ad

## Preparation and Materials

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Arrange for Internet access (ideally, at least one Internet-connected computer for every three students; if that is not possible, a single Internet-connected computer and a multimedia projector.)

Photocopy the following handouts:

- The Political Arena
- Political Advertising Techniques
- Political Advertising Analysis



## Procedure

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### Elections as a media event

Write the following phrase on the board: “An election is...” Ask students to offer possible endings for the sentence and write each one on the board. Prompt students to share what they know about the election process.

Once students have contributed a few endings to the sentence, write the following (if it has not been suggested already): “An election is a media event.”

Ask students what they think is meant by the phrase media event, and ask for some other examples of media events (examples, which you may give as prompts, include the Oscars, the Super Bowl, and the Olympics). You should quickly come to a definition roughly like this: a media event is something which receives a lot of attention from nearly all media sources and whose importance is based on how many people are paying attention to it. (For instance, the three examples above, though all competitions, don’t have any intrinsic value; they only mean something because the people watching agree that they do.)

Ask if anyone disagrees with the statement on the board. Ask students how an election is **different** from other examples of media events (it has a serious purpose, it has real consequences, its main purpose is not entertainment).

Ask if anyone agrees with the statement on the board. Ask students how an election is **similar** to other examples of media events (it mostly happens through the media, it has a story, it involves imagery and symbolism, it depends on public attention, it involves advertising).

Ask students what role the media play in elections. Encourage students to consider different media – not just TV news and newspapers but also advertising and the Internet. How do politicians and political parties use the media to get their message across and convince people to vote for them? How do media outlets use elections for their own purposes (to attract audiences and sell advertising)?

### The debates

Ask students what they know about the candidates who will be participating in the debates. (You may wish to do some research in advance to be able to fill in gaps.) Share information on the board so that students are able to build a fairly complete profile of each candidate. Ask students what they think the key issues of the election are and list them on the board.

Distribute the handout *The Political Arena* and go through it with students. Have students watch either the current Canadian or American debates live and complete the handout.

When students have completed the handout, take it up with the class.

### Campaign ads

Distribute the handout *Political Advertising Techniques*. Go through it with the class and then ask how many techniques they recognize from non-political advertising (most of them; ask for a few examples). Ask students why some of these techniques may be particularly appropriate for political advertising.



Distribute the handout *Political Advertising Analysis*. Divide students into six groups; each group will be responsible for finding three examples of the techniques studied (Group 1 will find examples of techniques 1-3, Group 2 will find examples of techniques 2-6, etc.). In addition, each group will have a specific task to perform:

- Group 1: View at least three Canadian and three American ads (from recent elections) and identify ways in which they are similar and different. Focus on the presentation rather than the content.
- Group 2: Using the American ad archive, view at least three early ads (between 1952 and 1964) and three recent ads (after 1992) and identify ways in which they are similar and different. Focus on the presentation rather than the content.
- Group 3: Find at least five ads that focus on the candidate's *personality and biography*. How do they try to sell the candidate as a person?
- Group 4: Find at least five ads that focus on an *issue*. How do they try to frame the issue so that the viewer agrees with them?
- Group 5: Find at least five ads that *attack the candidate's opponent*. How do they try to portray the opponent in a negative way?

Direct students to the following sites to find political ads:

#### Canadian ads

- [http://www.conservative.ca/multimedia/our\\_tv\\_ads/](http://www.conservative.ca/multimedia/our_tv_ads/)
- <http://www.liberal.ca/newsroom/blog/liberals-launch-television-ads-focusing-issues/>
- <http://www.ndp.ca/video>

#### American ads

- <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/>

Have students present their findings and then, as a class, compare what they have found. If possible, have each group select **two** ads to show the class to illustrate their comparisons.

Students should complete their *Political Advertising Analysis* handouts with information from the other groups' presentations. Which techniques were most commonly used? What differences did groups find between Canadian and American, early and recent, and left-wing and right-wing ads? Which approaches – personality, issue, attack – seemed most effective and why?

#### Campaign ads: Alternate activity

*If you do not have access to a computer lab but have at least one Internet-connected computer and a multi-media projector, you may perform this alternate activity.*

Distribute the handout *Political Advertising Techniques*. Go through it with the class and then ask how many techniques they recognize from non-political advertising (most of them; ask for a few examples). Ask students why some of these techniques may be particularly appropriate for political advertising.



American ads can be accessed from the playlist at

<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/playlists/MediaAwareness/watching-the-elections>

Show the following ads:

“Michael Ignatieff”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-L3oq3CoL6w>

“Country I Love” (In the playlist)

Ask the class: What similarities do you find between the Canadian and American ads? What differences? What might be the reasons for some of the differences? Do you think each is more appropriate for its own audience? Why or why not?

“High Prices” (In the playlist)

“2013” (In the playlist)

Ask the class: What similarities do you find between the early and recent ads? What differences? What might explain how political advertising has changes, based on these examples? What might make the recent ad more appropriate to the modern media landscape?

“Corporate Tax Cuts”

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvvpu\\_6nMc&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvvpu_6nMc&feature=player_embedded)

“Risk” (In the playlist)

Ask the class: How does each ad try to convince the viewer of the candidate’s position on an **issue**? What advertising techniques are used? Why are they appropriate for an **issue ad**?

“Family Is Everything”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZfHe2LMRb0> or  
<http://www.conservative.ca/EN/4579/>

“Journey” (In the playlist)

Ask the class: How does each ad try to make the viewer like or respect the candidate as a **person**? What advertising techniques are used? Why are they appropriate for a **personality ad**?

“Country”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BVoT-1B3Os>

“Revolving Door” (In the playlist)

Ask the class: How does each ad try to make the viewer dislike or distrust the candidate’s opponent? What advertising techniques are used? Why are they appropriate for an **attack ad**?

### Summative activity: Design a political ad

Students may perform this activity solo or in groups.

Have students select a candidate or party for which they will create an ad. This may either be a candidate or party currently running in an election or a hypothetical candidate (themselves, a fictional character, etc.)

Students should then select: an **approach** (issue, personality or attack)  
**advertising techniques** to use

Students then create their ads. (Depending on time and resources, the actual product may be a script, a skit, a storyboard or a film.) You may also require them to write a paragraph outlining and explaining their choices of approach and techniques.



## The Political Arena

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### *Opening sequence*

What does the broadcaster do to make the debate seem more exciting in the opening sequence?

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### *Set*

How does the set make the debate seem more exciting or dramatic?

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How does the set enhance the sense of **conflict** between the candidates?

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### *Format*

How does the format of the debate help to keep answers short and dramatic?

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How does the format of the debate increase the conflict between the candidates?

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### *Topics and questions*

Who chose the topics and/or questions? Who asks them? How do they serve to make the debate more dramatic or increase the conflict between the candidates?

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### *Post-debate analysis*

Which candidate(s) do the commentators feel won the debate? Why? Do you agree? Why or why not?

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## Political Advertising Techniques

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1. Patriotism: The ad stresses the candidate's love of and service to his/her country.
2. Gender: The ad presents the candidate as appropriately "manly" (or feminine) to make viewers trust him/her.
3. Family: The ad uses images of ideal families to give you a positive image of the candidate.
4. Excitement: The ad tries to create a sense of energy and excitement around the candidate.
5. Star Power: A celebrity is telling you that they support the candidate
6. Bandwagon: The ad tries to create the impression that everybody already supports the candidate.
7. Put Downs: The ad insults the candidate's opponent.
8. Facts and Figures: The ad uses facts and statistics to support the candidate's policies.
9. Just Folks: The ad portrays the candidate as a "regular guy" (or girl).
10. Heart Strings: The ad tells a story that makes you feel good.
11. Sounds Good: The ad uses music (with or without lyrics) to be memorable, entertaining and exciting.
12. Cartoons and Animals: The ad makes its point with cartoon characters or (usually symbolic) animals.
13. Weasel Words: The ad includes promises that sound good but lack details.
14. Integrity: The ad tries to convince you that the candidate is honest and trustworthy.
15. Fear: The ad tries to frighten you into voting for the candidate (or at least not voting for his/her opponent).



## Political Advertising Analysis

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Give an example of an ad that uses each of the techniques below, briefly explaining how the technique is used.

1. Patriotism

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2. Gender

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3. Family

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4. Excitement

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5. Star Power

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6. Bandwagon

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7. Put Downs

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8. Facts and Figures

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9. Just Folks

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10. Heart Strings

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11. Sounds Good

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12. Cartoons and Animals

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13. Weasel Words

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14. Integrity

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15. Fear

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