



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 8 to 12
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Watching the Elections

Overview

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alternatively, you may show students the video *How Presidential Debates Transformed Over Time* (bit.ly/debatestransformed) and ask students the following questions:

- How do they think television has changed political debates?
- How has the internet changed political debates?
- How does debate format influence what we think about candidates? How do media-savvy candidates take advantage of this? How can it backfire?
- What suggestions does the commenter make for improving debates? Do students think they would help? Why or why not?



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 five groups; each group will be responsible for viewing two ads and answering a question comparing them. (If you have only a single computer and projector available, do this as a whole-class activity. If YouTube is blocked at your school, assign as homework.) Have each group present the answers to their discussion questions to the class.

The ads can be viewed at bit.ly/watchingelections.

Canadian and American Ads

“Our Country”

“Country I Love”

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?

Early and Recent Ads

“High Prices”

“2013”

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?

Issue Ads

“Damning New Evidence”

“Risk”

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**?

Personality Ads

“I’m Ready”

“Journey”

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**?



Attack Ads

“Is This a Prime Minister?”

“Revolving Door”

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 print ad, a storyboard or a film. (Consult the MediaSmarts sourcebook [Resources for Making Media in Your Classroom](https://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/guides/media_making_resources_sourcebook.pdf) (https://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/guides/media_making_resources_sourcebook.pdf) for background and handouts on different media.) You may also require them to write a paragraph outlining and explaining their choices of approach and techniques.



The Political Arena

Opening sequence

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

Set

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

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

Format

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

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

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?

Post-debate analysis

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



Political Advertising Techniques

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

Watch the ads on the topic your group has been assigned and answer the questions for that topic. Be prepared to discuss your answers in class.

The ads can be viewed at bit.ly/watchingelections.

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