

EVALUATING INFORMATION: FOCUS ON THE 2008 ELECTION

OBJECTIVE

By studying ads from the 2008 presidential race, students will learn how to evaluate the claims and information presented in political ads.

OVERVIEW

How can voters make informed choices between political candidates? Commercials convey a message in a brief period of time—typically thirty seconds—and they often depend on the fact that viewers won't think too carefully about the information presented. While this may not be cause for concern in the case of an ad for shampoo or soda, it has greater implications for political ads.

The political commercials from the 2008 campaign are visually sophisticated, combining text, statistics, and a layered use of images, words, and music. These ads present a challenge of absorption, which may distract viewers from questioning the veracity of the information they are receiving. For this reason, it is important for young people approaching the voting age to learn how to make sense of the often contradictory information that is presented in campaign ads.

PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION

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

PROCEDURE

Discuss the students' responses to the questions above. Encourage students to think of ways of verifying information. How do we check sources? How do we know which "authority" to trust? How can we tell if information has been taken out of context? And why does this matter?

Show the following four ads: "What Kind" (Obama, 2008), "Rearview Mirror" (Obama, 2008), "Education" (McCain, 2008), and "Original Mavericks" (McCain, 2008). These ads all use a combination of on-screen text, quotations from newspapers and government documents, statistics, and various other forms of "official" content. The words and images onscreen move quickly and allow little time for careful consideration. Before showing the clips, give students the task of identifying at least two factual claims made in each ad. Screen the ads multiple times if necessary.

After viewing the clips, discuss the ways in which students might verify the information presented. What sources could they consult to evaluate the claims made in the ads?

Introduce students to the website www.factcheck.org, set up by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania as a nonpartisan organization for monitoring the accuracy of public political discourse. (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Politico* also fact-check political ads.) In class, search the site for information on each of the four ads:

"What Kind" (http://www.factcheck.org/elections-2008/school_funding_misleads.html)

"Rearview Mirror" (<http://factcheck.org/2008/10/reckless-driving/>)

"Original Mavericks" (<http://factcheck.org/2008/09/original-mavericks-old-bunk/>),

"Education" (http://www.factcheck.org/elections-2008/off_base_on_sex_ed.html)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What evidence does FactCheck.org use to investigate the claims made in each of the ads?
- What other sources of information could you use to "fact check" the claims made in these ads?

Wrap-up activity: Ask students to work together in small groups to write a script for a response ad to one of these commercials, highlighting the distortions in the original ad. Ask each group to share their script with the class.

ASSESSMENT

Students should have gained an understanding of some of the ways to evaluate the information presented in political ads, along 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 to be skeptical when viewing campaign commercials, because the "facts" asserted may be untrue.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES/HOMEWORK

1. Students select a recent political issue analyzed on the FactCheck.org website, and research the topic. They then write an essay summarizing their research results: What claims are being made in the press, in political speeches, and/or in political advertisements? Do any of these claims misrepresent facts or information? What evidence did they use to make this assessment?
2. Students choose another ad from 2008 (or an ad from a previous campaign) that claims to present facts or factual information. Students should then “fact-check” the information presented in this ad.
3. Ask students to discuss the effectiveness of the ads they examined. Does knowing the facts change their opinion of the candidate? Or do other factors (e.g., music, images, or emotional appeal) continue to influence them? How much do facts matter? Can an ad be unfair but effective? (You may also consult the lesson plan on “Playing on Emotions.”)

CURRICULUM STANDARDS ADDRESSED

Common Core English Language Arts: 7, 8

New York State Social Studies: 5

NOTES
