

# POLITICAL ADS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

## OBJECTIVE

Students will analyze ads from two presidential campaign years. In the process, they will learn how ads reflect their historical context while also addressing themes and concerns common to most modern presidential campaigns.

## OVERVIEW

Presidential ads are products of the time periods in which they were made, and are inspired by domestic and world events. Effective campaign ads refer to the events and issues that concern the voting public during an election, but they do so in limited, casual, and fragmentary ways. Because ads are made to persuade voters, they usually focus on just a few major issues—those each campaign believes will be most important to voters. At the same time that ads address these specific issues, they make more general arguments about the candidates' personalities and leadership qualities.

Campaign ads are historical artifacts. In some instances, students would need to do additional historical research in order to understand an ad's content and the historical information it conveys. In other instances, an ad's meaning is not historically specific. Whether ads address timely issues or more general themes, they can help teach us what mattered to voters in a given campaign. As such, they are valuable primary sources.

## PROCEDURE

*In this lesson, students will analyze two different historic elections. You may wish to complete Part 1 or Part 2 of this lesson on its own, or you may complete both sequentially.*

*For a simpler activity related to the topics covered in this lesson plan, complete Part 2 of the "Developing Critical Analysis" lesson plan, in which students analyze the 1964 ad "Peace Little Girl (Daisy)" (Johnson). Screen the ad first without providing your students with historical context. Then screen it a second time, offering background on the election and the ad. After each screening, lead a discussion adapting questions from Part 1 of this lesson. Students will quickly appreciate the importance of historical context necessary to fully understand an ad.*

**PART 1**

TELL STUDENTS THEY WILL BE LOOKING AT ADS FROM THE 1952 ELECTION, THE FIRST ELECTION THAT FEATURED TELEVISED ADVERTISEMENTS.

Background: In 1952, the Eisenhower campaign identified three key issues to focus on in its commercials: the Korean War, corruption in government, and the high cost of living. Though these issues were specific to 1952, many subsequent campaigns would take a similar approach, focusing on a handful of important issues related to foreign policy (like the Eisenhower campaign's use of the Korean War), the need for change in government (corruption), and the economy (high prices) in their advertisements. Since the Eisenhower ads have a direct style, students should be able to easily identify these central campaign issues. However, students may also observe that like most campaign ads, neither Eisenhower's nor Stevenson's ads provide detailed information on the candidate's policy proposals.

Without providing historical background, screen the following four ads:

“The Man from Abilene” (Eisenhower, 1952)

“Never Had It So Good” (Eisenhower, 1952)

“Endorsement: Women” (Stevenson, 1952)

“Platform Double Talk” (Stevenson, 1952)

As the ads are playing, ask students to take notes on all of the issues raised in the ads. List student responses on the board.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

- Based on these four ads, what issues do you think were most important to voters in 1952? How do you know?
- How much information do you get about each of these issues? Is it a lot or a little?
- What is each candidate's position on these issues? Do you know? What do you learn from the ads?
- If you were a voter, would these ads give you enough information to decide which candidate to vote for? Why or why not?
- What historical sources could we consult to get more information about this election?

Give students additional information about the 1952 presidential election. Ask them to read the historical background section of *The Living Room Candidate*. They could also read the party platforms and candidates' speeches on The American Presidency Project website (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>).

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

- Now that you have done additional research, what issues do you think were most important to voters in the 1952 presidential election? How do you know? Are these the same issues that the ads raised?
- What is each candidate's position on these issues? How did the candidate present his position in his ads? (You may want to screen the ads again.)
- Were there any important issues the ads did not address?
- How much historical information do you get from the campaign ads?

**PART 2**

TELL STUDENTS THEY WILL BE LOOKING AT ADS FROM THE 1988 ELECTION.

Background: In early 1988, the biggest concerns of the campaigns included the October 1987 stock-market collapse; the Iran-Contra scandal, in which U.S. government officials illegally routed profits from arms sales to Iran to a military group in Nicaragua called the Contras; and the apparent thawing of the Cold War as the Soviet Union announced plans to withdraw from Afghanistan. Like the 1952 campaign, the 1988 campaign touched upon the economy, corruption and the need for change in government, and foreign policy. Unlike the 1952 ads, however, the 1988 ads make little mention of these central campaign issues. Instead, the ads focused on the character, track record, and leadership qualities of the Democratic nominee, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis.

Republican Vice President George Bush was not very popular with his own party, and Dukakis initially showed a strong lead over Bush. In his ads, Bush portrayed Dukakis as an ineffective liberal, soft on defense and soft on crime. Though the ads address few pressing policy issues, they contributed to Bush's victory. Since these ads give less information about events and issues than the 1952 ads, students will probably need less context to understand their content. Yet these ads are valuable primary sources for studying the 1988 presidential election, since they dramatically influenced its outcome. They are also useful for understanding how some campaign ads make only limited reference to specific events and issues, but instead address common themes of character, leadership, and experience.

Ask students to do some preliminary research on the 1988 election.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

- Who were the major parties' candidates?
- What were the most important issues in this election?
- What were the candidates' positions on these issues?

Screen the following four ads from 1988:

“New Era” (Dukakis, 1988)

“Credibility” (Bush, 1988)

“Tank Ride” (Bush, 1988)

“Counterpunch” (Dukakis, 1988)

As the ads are playing, ask students to take notes on all of the issues that are raised in the ads. List student responses on the board.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

- Based on these four ads, what issues would you say were most important to voters? Why?
- How much information do you get about these issues? Is it a lot or a little?
- Did the ads mention or depict the issues you read about while doing your research? If not, what did they leave out? What did the ads focus on instead?
- Imagine that you were a voter in 1988. Do these ads give you enough information to choose which candidate to vote for? Why or why not? What other information would you like to have?
- Did these ads give you more or less historical information than the 1952 ads?

## **ASSESSMENT**

Campaign ads reflect the concerns voters have, and can sometimes greatly influence the outcome of an election. They do so by addressing important political issues, while also presenting a picture of each candidate’s personality, experience, and leadership abilities. After completing this activity, students may write an essay in which they compare the importance of specific issues and policies with the importance of general concerns about character and judgment in deciding the outcome of an election.

## **EXTENSION ACTIVITIES/HOMEWORK**

1. Ask students to do primary research on another election year—locating newspaper articles, news broadcasts, books, and popular songs from the era—and compare the information they get from each source with the information presented in the campaign ads.
2. Ask students to consider how news outlets such as *The New York Times* or television networks reported on a historic campaign or on campaign ads when they appeared. Do the ads drive the coverage of issues?
3. After completing the above research activities, students write and storyboard their own political ads for a historic election year using the information they found through their research.

## **CURRICULUM STANDARDS ADDRESSED**

Common Core English Language Arts: 6, 7

New York State Social Studies: 1, 5

### **NOTES**

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