

3. MEDIA AND ELECTIONS

Subject: **American History**

Grade level: **12**

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● Introduction

Rationale or Purpose

This lesson plan focuses on the role media play in informing the public about political candidates and elections. By the end of this lesson, students will understand how candidates and news producers use different media forms, including newspapers, television and political advertisements, to convey messages about candidates and elections. Teachers can undertake the activities included in this lesson plan separately or in combination.

Background

"Media coverage is the very lifeblood of politics because it shapes the perceptions that form the reality on which political action is based. Media do more than depict the political environment; they are the political environment." -Doris Graber (From [Mass Media and American Politics](#), 2001)

Media are the prime source of information we have about political candidates. How media portray candidates and political issues can elect or defeat leaders. Over history, new technologies have changed the way election campaigns are conducted and even how people vote. Researchers in the 1940s found that the factors affecting voter choice (in order of importance) were: party affiliation, social group allegiance, the candidate's personality and consideration of the issues. Today, this order has been reversed. Social science research indicates that the candidate's personality, their position on issues, party affiliation and group membership are now the deciding factors. Many scholars attribute this reversal to the influence of media that allow candidates to communicate directly with voters and of media reportage that concentrates on the candidates' personalities over other issues.

Although it is not the only factor that influences voters, political advertising is also an important component of modern elections. Political advertising may sway voters in favor of one candidate or another. As of 1996, the average cost of winning an election was \$3,765,000 for the Senate and \$675,000 for the House of Representatives. Candidates of all stripes spend increasingly significant portions of their campaign budgets on advertising, ranging from bumper stickers and billboards to print and television ads. Political advertising allows candidates and their supporters to provide information, make arguments and raise issues relevant to their candidate and the election. Political advertising may not influence people with strong opinions for or against a candidate, but it can be a deciding factor among undecided voters. In presidential races where less than 1% of the electorate can determine the outcome of elections, this influence can be significant. Political advertising may be even more significant in lower profile races, such as congressional or local elections, which garner far less mass media coverage.

Materials

- "Analyzing political advertising" worksheet
- "Anatomy of an Advertising Campaign" worksheet
- Colored pencils
- Internet access
- Newspapers
- Paper

- Pens or pencils
- Sample shot logs
- Shot log templates

TEKS Objectives

- Gov.20 A The student is expected to analyze the potential impact on society of recent scientific discoveries and technological innovations.
- Gov.20 B The student is expected to analyze the reaction of government to scientific discoveries and technological innovations.
- Gov.22 D The student is expected to create written, oral, and visual presentations of social studies information.

● Activity 1 (Preliminary) - Reflecting on the role of media in elections (20 minutes)

Students will think about how political candidates utilize mass media to communicate with the voting public. This preliminary activity establishes a context for discussion and analysis of the diverse and complex roles media play in political elections and should precede the other activities suggested in this lesson plan.

Step 1

Either as a class discussion or in their notes, have students answer the following: What information is most important for voters to know about political candidates? What is least important? Relevant information might include party affiliations, personality traits, political qualifications and experience, positions on issues, and voting record. List their answers on the blackboard.

Step 2

Either as a class discussion or in their notes, have students answer the following: List all the ways people receive information about the candidates. These may include bumper stickers, print ads, television ads, billboards, placards, newspaper articles, press conferences, speeches, news reports, talk show appearances, debates, as well as direct encounters at rallies, parades and other political events, among others. List their answers on the blackboard.

Step 3

Using the list of media generated by the students, discuss whether each medium affords the candidate any control over their image or the information conveyed about them. Do they have direct or indirect influence over any of these media? For example, the candidate's own political ads and Internet site offer a high degree of direct control, while television news and newspapers offer a lower degree of largely indirect control. Have students take notes.

Step 4

Briefly discuss the relationship between the mass media and political candidates. What are the respective interests of both these entities? Do candidates have incentives or opportunities to try to influence how the press covers them? What needs and incentives do the media themselves have? Are the interests of media and candidates the same or do they sometimes conflict? Have students take notes.

• Activity 2 - Television advertising and election campaigns (2 45-minute sessions)

This activity shows students how political candidates use advertisements to disseminate strategic and targeted messages about themselves and their candidacy. By compiling and analyzing detailed shot logs of presidential campaign commercials, students will learn that political advertisements are made up of many component parts, each of which is carefully constructed.

Session 1

Step 1

Assign students course reading covering election campaigns before completing this activity.

Step 2

Discuss the purpose of political advertising and its potential impact on audiences. You may use the background information at the beginning of this lesson plan.

Step 3

Divide the students into teams and have each team view a political advertisement. Videotape political advertisements for classroom use in advance or assign historical political advertisements available online at the Museum of the Moving Image online exhibit, "The Living Room Candidate," www.ammi.org/livingroomcandidate.

Step 4

Ask students to view their advertisement once. After the first viewing, students should write one paragraph describing their initial reaction to the advertisement. Students should answer the following questions: What images and sounds struck them as memorable? What overall impression does the advertisement give of the candidate? What is the candidate like? What does he or she stand for?

Step 5

Distribute sample shot logs and several copies of the shot log templates to each group. Using the template, have students create a shot log for the advertisement.

Session 2

Step 6

After they have finished their shot logs, have students analyze the political advertising techniques used by completing the "Analyzing Political Advertising" worksheet.

Step 7

Have each group present their findings to the class.

Step 8

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of political advertisements as a means of political communication. What kind of information do the ads include? What do they leave out? How much control does the candidate have over the medium? How informative or effective are the advertisements? The class may also debate whether political ads are likely to have an impact and on who? Note that political ads may have their biggest impact when people know little about a candidate, are undecided, or when alternative information is not available (such as in local or congressional races).

Assessment: Shot logs and "Analyzing Political Advertising" worksheet.

• Activity 3 - News coverage and election campaigns (45 minutes)

By examining the differences between election news coverage in newspapers and on television, students will learn how different technologies cover the democratic process.

Step 1

Assign students course reading covering election campaigns before completing this activity.

Step 2

As homework prior to this activity, distribute the "shot log template" and "sample shot log." Review these with the students. Ask students to locate and create a shot log for a TV news story approximately 2 minutes in length about a political candidate and to find a newspaper article on the same story from the same day. (CNN, CBS and the other major news networks provide video streaming of their daily news stories. See <http://www.cbsnews.com/> (click on video on demand options) or <http://www.cnn.com/video/> for examples.) Instruct students to bring both the shot log of their TV story and the newspaper article to class on an assigned date.

Step 3

Have students use different colored pencils to underline words or phrases from both the broadcast and print stories that fall into each of the following categories: campaign issues, campaign events, the candidate's personal characteristics or attributes, the candidate's personal life, the candidate's substantive job qualifications, the candidate's stance on issues, the candidate's prior record, facts about the candidate and opinions about the candidate.

Step 4

Once their article and shot log are color coded, on a separate sheet of paper have students work in teams to answer the following questions on a sheet of paper. Do print and television cover the candidates differently? If so, how? How is their coverage the same? What information is mentioned in both stories? Does one medium contain more information than the other? Does one medium stress issues, personal characteristics, and campaign events more than the other? How many of the candidate's qualities does the newspaper story convey? How many does the TV news story convey? What might be some reasons for similarities or differences between news coverage in these media?

Step 5

On the blackboard, create one column for newspapers and one for television news. Ask students to list the different characteristics of each medium and enter their responses in the appropriate column.

Step 6

As a class, discuss how well print and broadcast media help voters decide who to vote for in democratic elections. What do they do well? What do they do poorly? What are the advantages or disadvantages of getting news from newspapers or television?

Assessment: Group answer sheet, color coded shots logs and newspaper articles

• Activity 4 - Create a Media Campaign (2 45-minute class sessions)

Following the steps used to construct a real advertising campaign, students will design a campaign for a real or imaginary candidate or for a student running for a school office.

Session 1

Step 1

Assign students course reading covering election campaigns before completing this activity.

Step 2

Distribute and review the "Anatomy of an Advertising Campaign" worksheet. Assign students a real or imaginary candidate or allow them to choose one.

Step 3

Working in teams, students should design an advertising campaign for a political candidate. Each team will prepare a report for their candidate using the "Anatomy of a Campaign Worksheet." Individual team members should take responsibility for various sections of the report. Assign each group a budget of \$500,000 for campaign related media.

Session 2

Step 4

Each team should present their report to the class for feedback.

Assessment: Written report and class presentation

● **Extension** - Production Activity

Have students write a storyboard for a 30 second television advertisement for their candidate. Their ad should fit with their candidate's advertising campaign. If students have access to a video camera and editing equipment, have them shoot and edit the advertisement using their storyboard as a guide.

• Analyzing Political Advertising

Name:

Date:

Course:

Directions: On a separate sheet of paper, answer the following questions.

Content

What is the main idea or point of the ad?

What is the ratio of fact to opinion?

What verifiable information does the ad give?

What assertions does the ad make?

How is the candidate portrayed?

What kind of person is he/she?

What attributes or characteristics are associated with the candidate?

What policies are associated with the candidate?

What job qualifications or competencies are associated with the candidate?

In what activities or actions is the candidate engaged?

Audio

How does the ad use audio?

Does the ad use music, voice, voice-over, or sound effects, and to what effect?

How many speakers are in the ad?

Are they male or female?

What are the tone and pace of the soundtrack used in the ad?

Editing

Count the number of shots used.

What is the pace of the ad?

Are individual shots paced differently or the same?

What effect does the pace have on the audience's ability to absorb information?

What kinds of transitions occur between shots and what is their effect?

Do the shots contain straight cuts, dissolves, fades to black, or wipes?

How are successive shots visually or thematically connected?

What kinds of images are juxtaposed?

Camera Work

How are different types of shot distances used and to what effect?

How are close ups (CU), medium shots (MS) or long shots (LS) used?

How are different camera angles used, and to what effect?

How are high, low, and normal camera angles used?

Does the ad make use of depth of field or sharp or soft focus?

Does it make use of lighting or particular color schemes (such as a predominance of red, white and blue)?

Audience

Is/Was the ad broadcast nationally or locally?

Who is/was the intended audience (age, gender, economic level, etc.)?

Who is likely to pay attention or be influenced by this ad?

• Anatomy of an Advertising Campaign

Name:

Date:

Course:

Directions: Use the following handout as a guide for developing your own advertising campaign.

Situation Analysis

What is the candidate's current image and what image does he or she want to project in the future? What problems should the advertising campaign address related to the candidate's background, history or public image? Which of the candidate's qualities should be emphasized and/or downplayed? How much emphasis should be placed on issues and on image?

Objectives

What objectives will the advertising campaign achieve? Objectives will differ according to candidate and should be specifically stated.

Target Market Profile

Who do you need to convince to vote for your candidate? Remember, your target voters don't include those who are already voting for your candidate, but may include new voters, undecided voters, or voters with specific reservations about your candidate.

Positioning Statement

A short paragraph that addresses how the candidate wants to be perceived by the intended audience for his or her ads. What are the most important things the advertising campaign will convey about the candidate?

Creative Strategy

What themes will the advertising campaign use, and what overall approach? What will the advertising look like? What main idea will the campaign convey? Will different ads get the main idea across differently?

Media Plan

What media outlets and venues will carry the candidate's advertising? Will you use television, radio or the Internet? Why or why not? How will the campaign budget be spent among the different media (see media price list below)? Why is this the best use of your media budget?

Yard signs	\$4,000 per 5,000 signs
Bumper stickers	\$750 per 5,000 stickers
Billboards	\$2,500 per month per board
TV ad	\$1,000 per 30 second local ad on one station
Radio ad	\$100 per 30 second local ad on one station
Newspaper ads	\$6,500 per full page, \$5,400 per 3/4 page, \$3,600 per 1/2 page, \$2,000 per 1/4 page
Targeted direct mail	\$1,600 per 5000 (printing, stamps, artwork and processing)
Posters	\$600 per 200 posters (artwork and printing)
Internet Site	\$5,000 per year (content development, web design & web hosting)

Note: Local candidates commonly spend about \$1,000 per day per TV station every day for 60 days prior to the election. If your candidate has 1 TV market in his or her district with 4 major stations, TV ads on all 4 stations will cost approximately \$4,000 per day.

Additional Background Readings

Graber, Doris A. (2001) Mass Media and American Politics, 6th edition. CQ Press.

Jamieson, Kathleen Hall (1996). Packaging the Presidency, 3rd ed. Oxford University Press.

McGinness, Joe. (1988). The Selling of the President. New York: Penguin Books.

The Teaching Educators about Media (TEAM) Project, housed in UT's Radio-TV-Film Department, designed these lesson plans and resources. Project Director: Laura Stein, Ph.D. <http://utopia.utexas.edu/explore/team/>