

Using YouTube to Teach Presidential Election Propaganda: Twelve Representative Videos

Wayne Journell

One of the primary goals of social studies education in the United States is to prepare students for civically active, politically informed, and socially engaged democratic citizenship. Too often, however, the curricula fall short of this goal. Textbooks and state curriculum standards tend to portray citizenship as a static concept rather than an active process that involves awareness of, and participation within, a democratic political system.¹

This is best illustrated by the way many teachers approach presidential elections in their classrooms, a topic Haas and Laughlin argue should be “the quintessential example of teaching social studies.”² Yet teachers often fail to adequately prepare students to understand the nuances of presidential politics, particularly with respect to political propaganda. Civics textbooks and teachers tend to cover the relationship between media and politics, but the majority of these units center on hypothetical scenarios and abstract concepts rather than actual examples. In many cases, examples presented are exceedingly simplistic, such as “a local sports hero appears on a commercial endorsing a candidate,” with students expected to recognize the type of propaganda being discussed.³

Yet a perusal of television advertisements used by the Obama and McCain campaigns during the 2008 Presidential Election shows that presidential propaganda is rarely that straightforward and simplistic in practice. It seems unlikely that students would be able to use such abstract concepts to fully understand the propaganda they encounter every time they turn on their televisions or surf the Internet during an election year. If

students are to make informed political decisions as adults, then they must learn to decipher ways politicians manipulate media.

The good news is that access to presidential propaganda has never been easier. The Internet, in particular, is a wonderful repository for examples of both historic and contemporary political television advertisements. In this article, I provide a starting kit for using YouTube to teach presidential propaganda by listing 12 well known political advertisements found on that website, along with a short description of how each represents a certain type of campaign propaganda. While many of these videos are from presidential elections that occurred well before current high school students were born, each represents a propaganda strategy that is evident even without knowledge of a particular election or candidate. The names of the types of propaganda are largely my own creations, influenced by my years as a high school U.S. government teacher and the various textbooks that I used.⁴

Using popular commercial websites, particularly ones like YouTube that allow community postings, may pose problems for some educators. In fact,

many schools block access to YouTube on school property. Certainly, many of the advertisements described in this article can be found on other websites or through a savvy Google search.⁵ However, YouTube has the advantage of an easy-to-use search engine and a name brand that middle and high school students recognize. At the conclusion of this article, I offer suggestions for minimizing any risks associated with using YouTube in the classroom.

Twelve Representative Videos

Name Recognition

“I like Ike” Eisenhower 1952

www.youtube.com/watch?v=va5Btg4kkUE

It did not take politicians long to capitalize on the mass appeal and increased affordability of televisions in the United States. By the early 1950s, most U.S. households owned at least one television, and commercials had become widely recognized as an effective, low-cost method of advertising products and transmitting information. The presidential campaigns of this era often operated with the same guiding principal as commercial advertising: that name recognition was essential to ensuring consumers chose one product over another.

This presidential advertisement from the 1952 election uses a catchy tune to repeatedly remind viewers that “Everyone likes Ike.” Yet the advertisement never

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gives a reason *why* Americans should like Dwight Eisenhower or why they should vote for him over Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson. However, one could argue that the strategy worked; throughout the campaign, the Republicans made good use of Eisenhower's name recognition and heroism in World War II, which led to a decisive victory on Election Day.

The Accomplished Biography "Bettering Society" Obama 2008

([www.youtube.com/
watch?v=NKGqyMtnO7E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKGqyMtnO7E))

There are two reasons television advertisements are so effective for presidential candidates: the first is that they allow campaigns to craft a particular message on their own terms; and the second is that they can compress large amounts of information into short segments that grab the attention of a targeted audience. The mudslinging that occurs in modern presidential campaigns often tarnishes candidates' character and personal history. Therefore, campaigns have to tell their candidate's story in the way he or she wants it represented.

This ad from the 2008 election exemplifies both attributes mentioned above. In less than one minute, the commercial uses selected moments from Barack Obama's past to showcase his devotion to service and willingness to engage in legislative bipartisanship. Reminders of his numerous accomplishments, including his Harvard education and experience in both the Illinois legislature and U.S. Senate, appear throughout the advertisement.

Glittering Generalities "Moving Forward" Bush 2004

([www.youtube.com/
watch?v=vnFNUzut_v0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnFNUzut_v0))

Another advantage to television advertisements is that they allow candidates

to advocate certain policy positions without having to explain how they plan to achieve such lofty goals. Often these policy statements are reduced to vague terms that many social studies textbooks refer to as "glittering generalities," or ideas that appeal to basic human emotions, such as "change" or "peace," that few can argue against. This 2004 ad for George W. Bush provides a masterful example. The centerpiece of the advertisement is the notion that the United States needs to "move forward," which is enhanced by words such as "hope" and "resolve" that are featured prominently on the screen. The commercial concludes by listing generic goals of "creating jobs" and "improving education," which are universal among politicians.

Reminder of Good Times "Morning in America" Reagan 1984

([www.youtube.com/watch?v=EU-
IBF8nwsy](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EU-IBF8nwsy))

While ads criticizing the status quo and calling for change are common during presidential campaigns, commercials also enable popular incumbents to remind Americans about how much he or she has accomplished over the previous four years. This famous advertisement from Ronald Reagan's 1984 campaign uses a soothing voice to remind citizens about the low interest rates and increased homeownership that had occurred since the end of the previous administration and concludes with the statement that the United States was "prouder, stronger, and better" under Reagan's leadership. Coupled with images of smiling people, scenic depictions of American life, and individuals hoisting American flags, this ad provides students with a prime example of why incumbents have a decided advantage in all levels of politics, particularly during times of prosperity.

Keep It Simple
“Laughing” Humphrey 1968

([www.youtube.com/
watch?v=FBDtdkKCcmA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBDtdkKCcmA))

Sometimes simple messages are more effective than ads that are full of flashy graphics and colorful rhetoric. Case in point: This attack on Richard Nixon’s vice presidential candidate, Spiro Agnew, by the Democratic campaign for Hubert Humphrey in 1968. Throughout the advertisement cackling laughter is heard while the camera slowly pans to a television with the words “Agnew for Vice President?” displayed on the screen. In less than 30 seconds, and without uttering a single word, the Humphrey campaign drew attention to Agnew’s qualifications and raised the suggestion that he may not have been qualified to take over the presidency if needed.

Make A Complex Problem Simple
“Bear in the Woods” Reagan 1984

([www.youtube.com/
watch?v=NpwdcmjBgNA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpwdcmjBgNA))

In a similar strategy, television advertisements allow candidates to take a complex issue and explain it succinctly and in a way that is easy for the average person to understand. Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency during the height of the Cold War and had spent millions of dollars on increasing the size of the military and improving the nation’s defense systems, yet faced criticism from those who questioned the need for such spending given the lack of open hostility with the Soviet Union and other communist nations. Moreover, many Americans were dubious about the threat such nations posed.

In this famous ad, the Reagan campaign used the metaphor of a bear in the woods to justify Reagan’s defense initiatives. Without ever mentioning the Soviet Union or the words “communism” or “socialism,” the advertisement raised the question of whether the United States could afford not to continue the

arms race. The commercial concedes, “No one can be sure” whether the bear is tame or vicious, but argues “Isn’t it smart to be as strong as the bear, if there is a bear?” By placing the Cold War into a context familiar to most Americans, that of confronting a wild animal in the woods, the ad allowed people to reevaluate their conception of the Soviet Union and the need to remain militarily superior, if only as a precaution.

The Sound Byte
“Nixon’s Experience?”
Kennedy 1960

([www.youtube.com/watch?v=
chnlZrxfF-M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chnlZrxfF-M))

Every politician, at one time or another, has said something he or she regretted. During a presidential campaign, when candidates are working 24-hour days and traveling from city to city, they are even more prone to verbal gaffes. When mistakes do happen, the opposing side is quick to pounce. Oftentimes, the miscue is only a small portion of a much larger speech, but campaigns will use that snippet as a sound byte that occasionally can help turn the tide of an election.

While sound bytes are regularly used in political propaganda (the 2008 contest had plenty in itself, from McCain’s assertion that the “fundamentals of the economy are strong” to anti-American rhetoric taken from sermons by Obama’s former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright), few are as obvious as this advertisement from the 1960 presidential election. John F. Kennedy’s campaign seized on a comment made by President Eisenhower when he was put on the spot by a reporter to describe one idea he had adopted from his vice president, Richard Nixon. Eisenhower could not immediately think of an answer, and the Kennedy campaign used his indecisiveness as an attack on Nixon’s credibility. The advertisement ends with another sound byte from Eisenhower, clearly taken from a longer



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answer, in which he says, "No one can make a decision except me," implying that Eisenhower did not rely on anyone, including then-vice president Nixon, for assistance with policy.

Fear Mongering

"Daisy" Johnson 1964

(www.youtube.com/watch?v=Er5h_TXUn6o)



Arguably the most famous political advertisement in history, the "Daisy" commercial run by the Lyndon Johnson campaign in 1964, was only shown once. The commercial features a little girl innocently picking and counting the pet-

als off of a flower. When the girl reaches 10, an ominous voice in the background starts a launch sequence as the camera zeros in on the girl's face. At the conclusion of the countdown, the scene switches to a loud explosion followed by a mushroom cloud. Finally, the words, "We must love each other, or we must die," are spoken and the ad encourages Americans to vote for Johnson on Election Day.

While the Johnson campaign was widely criticized for fear mongering and the advertisement was pulled after one airing, the controversial nature of the commercial provided fodder for news programs, where the ad was repeatedly played in its entirety. The insinuation that the election of Republican Barry Goldwater might lead to an escalation of the Vietnam War to the point that nuclear weapons would be used helped Johnson claim easy victory in November. In addition to its effectiveness, the commercial remains a valuable teaching tool

for students. Clearly, this advertisement raises questions pertaining to the moral costs campaigns and candidates are willing to undertake in order to win an election. The aftermath of the Daisy commercial also raises questions about the role of the media and whether they should perpetuate such fear mongering through free airtime after the fact.

Attacking the Record

"Willie Horton" Bush 1988

(www.youtube.com/watch?v=lo9KMSSEZOY)

Perhaps no tactic is more effective than attacking an opponent's political record, especially when a candidate appears to contradict a prior legislative act or when a particular policy does not work out as planned. In possibly the most famous political attack ad in history, the Republicans effectively sunk the 1988 campaign of Michael Dukakis using an isolated case linked to a weekend furlough program



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for Massachusetts criminals, which the governor had supported. The advertisement detailed the story of Willie Horton, a convicted first-degree murderer who was allowed a weekend pass in 1987. During his furlough, Horton kidnapped a couple, stabbing the man and raping the woman, before stealing the couple's car.

The advertisement, created by a Republican interest group and never officially endorsed by the George H.W. Bush campaign, depicts the case as an example of the differences between Bush and Dukakis on crime. After touting Bush's record of supporting the death penalty for convicted murderers, the ad explains the weekend pass program and then shows an ominous picture of Horton, who, according to the commercial, had been imprisoned for murdering a young man in a robbery, "stabbing him 19 times." The ad then describes Horton's furlough crimes, showing the words "kidnapping," "stabbing," and "raping" under Horton's picture. The commercial closes with the

words, "Weekend prison passes: Dukakis on crime." Subsequently, Bush won a landslide victory over Dukakis

**527 Advertisements
"Swift Boat Veterans for Truth"
Bush 2004**

(www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4Zk9YmED48)



Although the George H.W. Bush campaign never endorsed the Willie Horton advertisement, they openly criticized Dukakis for his support of the furlough program and even aired campaign-sponsored ads likening the weekend passes to a "revolving door" on crime.

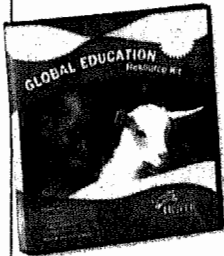
However, recent campaigns have been subject to advertisements made by 527 organizations (named after the section of the U.S. tax code that gives them freedom from regulation by the Federal Election Commission) that act outside the official jurisdiction of a campaign. These groups, which exist for both parties, have the power to create advertisements that are not officially affiliated with a particular candidate. The lack of affiliation affords candidates deniability, and some politicians have even publicly denounced 527 ads that unfairly attack their opponents. However, by the time the advertisement has been aired and rebroadcast on various news outlets, the damage has been done.

Perhaps the most prominent example of a 527's influence is the series of 2004 ads made by "Swift Boat Veterans For Truth." Members of this organization claimed to have served with Democratic nominee John Kerry during the Vietnam

continued on page 362

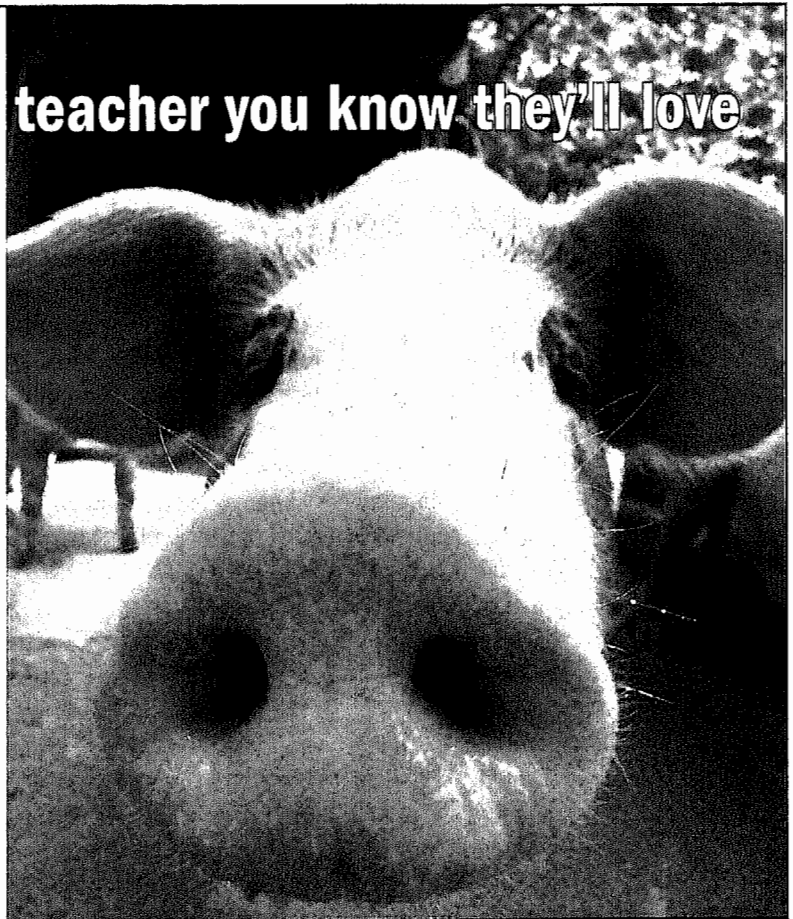
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USING YOUTUBE TO TEACH

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War and openly questioned his patriotism and integrity, including the circumstances surrounding the three purple hearts Kerry received. This particular ad starts with a sound bite from John Edwards, Kerry's running mate, that encourages people to evaluate Kerry's character by speaking to the men he served with in Vietnam. The remainder of the ad shows over a dozen of Kerry's former comrades, with names and ranks highlighted, all of whom essentially state that Kerry "could not be trusted."

Students should note the disclaimer at the end of the advertisement that "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth is responsible for the content of this advertisement" and is not authorized by any candidate or party. Given that these advertisements did untold damage to Kerry's campaign, students can easily engage in discussions about the right of 527 groups to influence presidential elections while not operating under the same guidelines as the two major parties.

Transfer

"Obama's Celebrity" McCain 2008

(www.youtube.com/watch?v=KOrmOvHysdU)

John McCain Celebrity Ad - Feat. Paris Hilton



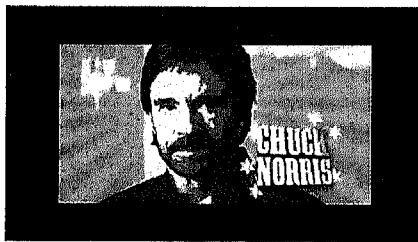
One of the more deceptive tricks used by political advertisers is to subtly associate a candidate with a particular person or image. While the message behind shots of candidates standing in front of an American flag may be fairly obvious, other examples of transfer are not as easy to detect. Often, campaigns

try link opponents with unpopular or polarizing figures in the hopes that voters will begin to make the same associations. While this particular ad from 2008 lacks subtlety, it provides an excellent example of transfer. In an effort to mock the hype surrounding Barack Obama's candidacy, the McCain campaign used this advertisement to suggest that Obama was a celebrity who could not be taken seriously, juxtaposing him with notable socialites Britney Spears and Paris Hilton. While students may not have the political sophistication to understand the significance of partisan individuals such as Rush Limbaugh and Ted Kennedy in presidential propaganda, they are familiar with the reputations of Spears and Hilton and can better understand the notion of transfer.

Celebrity Endorsement "Chuck Norris Facts"

Huckabee 2008

(www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDUQW8LUMs8)



Believe it or not, politicians occasionally do welcome associations with well-known figures. Celebrities tend to attract attention, raise money, and may even sway people to vote for a certain candidate. This lighthearted advertisement by Mike Huckabee during the 2008 Republican primaries used Chuck Norris, a Huckabee supporter, to inject humor into serious issues relating to the governor's positions on immigration, taxes, and second amendment rights. This advertisement and others that use celebrity endorsements can be used to broach the question of whether celebrities should play a role in presidential campaigns, and if so, what influence should they have on voters. Many ad-

lescents have little knowledge of policy and may be swayed by the endorsement of a favorite actor or sports star; therefore, it seems important for teachers to raise these issues in the classroom.

Conclusion

YouTube offers a free and easy way for teachers to bring notions of political propaganda to life in the classroom. These 12 commercials certainly do not comprise the entirety of campaign advertisements that teachers can find on YouTube, but they are representative of many of the various propaganda techniques used during presidential elections. Moreover, teachers can make use of these ads in a variety of ways to further students' conceptions of politics and political history.

Certainly, teachers could show these advertisements to explore the different forms of propaganda used in presidential elections (as I have done in this article). Teachers could also time a propaganda unit to coincide with presidential, congressional, or local elections and use the videos to link classroom instruction with real-life events. A particularly instructive assignment would ask students to chronicle the political ads that they view during their favorite television shows and document the type of propaganda technique used in each.

Teachers could also show the advertisements in chronological order, noting similarities and differences as well as technological advancements, to document political change over time. Somewhere between "I Like Ike" and "Swift Boat Veterans For Truth" political advertising turned increasingly negative while becoming more aesthetically pleasing. This type of activity could prompt discussions on whether negative advertising is successful (even though a majority of Americans claims to be put off by such ads), and whether the government should enforce tighter regulations on campaign advertising, including 527 organizations. The various approaches used in these advertisements also lend

themselves to discussions on election strategy and the moral responsibility of candidates.

Research has shown that high school students are political beings and enjoy discussing controversial issues in their classes, though substantive discussions are more likely if teachers can provide realistic prompts rather than hypothetical examples.⁶ The use of authentic campaign propaganda has the potential to stimulate purposeful classroom discussion while fostering the necessary skills for informed political decision making. However, these benefits become moot if teachers are unable to access YouTube in their classrooms or students are accidentally exposed to inappropriate material.

There are very few restrictions to what individuals can post on YouTube. The overwhelming volume of videos also makes it impossible for YouTube to catch all infractions of regulations. Therefore, it is essential that teachers preview any material they plan to show in class in its entirety. Occasionally, YouTube users will post politically-driven videos using pieces of historical campaign ads that they have digitally manipulated in order to make a political statement, often using inaccurate information or inappropriate language to prove their point. Watching only the first few seconds of a video will not always alert users to fake campaign advertisements so it is important that teachers use diligence when selecting and previewing videos.⁷

Teachers can minimize these risks by controlling student access to unwanted material. With community-driven websites, instruction is safest and most effective when teachers take responsibility for finding and using videos rather than giving students control and letting them haphazardly enter information into search engines. In fact, teachers can remove almost all risk associated with using YouTube by embedding videos into PowerPoint slides that they can then show in class. In just a few easy steps, teachers can find videos on YouTube, insert them into PowerPoint, and create

a presentation where students see the desired video and no inappropriate comments or commercial advertising.⁸

Finally, teachers will need to work with their school's technology departments, particularly if the school has a policy that blocks community-driven websites like YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook. Even though schools may have policies that restrict access to certain websites, most operate on servers that allow technology specialists to unblock restrictions on specific computers or grant administrator rights that allow individuals to view and download restricted content. It is doubtful that administration officials will want to allow access to YouTube on lab or library computers, but they may be willing to lift restrictions on faculty computers, especially if teachers explain the planned usage and its pedagogical potential.

In this digital age of increased communication, political propaganda has become ubiquitous. The fact that political advertisements have made their way onto community-driven websites like YouTube is further proof that it is nearly impossible for today's students to avoid interacting with politics. It is certain that students will encounter political television advertisements every election cycle, with even more frequency during presidential election years. If teachers can train students to analyze the propaganda they see and hear, then social studies courses may move further toward our goal of producing engaged, discernable voters. 🗳️

Notes

1. Wayne Journell, "Standardizing Citizenship: The Potential Influence of State Standards on the Civic Development of Adolescents," *PS: Political Science & Politics* (in press); Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, "High Quality Civic Education: What Is It and Who Gets It?" *Social Education* 72, no. 1 (2008): 34-39; Stephen Macedo et al., *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation, and What We Can Do About It* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).
2. Mary E. Haas and Margaret A. Laughlin, "Teaching the 2000 Election: A K-12 Survey," *Journal of Social Studies Research* 26, no. 2 (2002): 20.
3. Journell, *Teaching Politics: A Study of High School Government Courses and the 2008 Presidential*

Election (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, Ill., 2009).

4. For example, Magruder's *American Government* textbook by William A. McClenaghan (Needham, Mass.: Prentice Hall, 2003) contains the terms "glittering generalities," "scare tactics," and "name calling" among others.
5. Another free website that contains a number of historical and contemporary political advertisements is The Living Room Candidate (www.livingroomcandidate.org), but the selection is not as extensive as YouTube.
6. Andrew L. Forrest and Allyson J. Weseley, "To Vote or Not to Vote? An Exploration of the Factors Contributing to the Political Efficacy and Intent to Vote of High School Students," *Journal of Social Studies Research* 31, no. 1 (2007): 3-11; Diana Hess and Julie Posselt, "How High School Students Experience and Learn From the Discussion of Controversial Public Issues," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 17, no. 4 (2002): 283-314.
7. An example of a manipulated campaign advertisement can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYK5MNjYhmK. The video uses the beginning of the Lyndon Johnson "Daisy" advertisement to launch into an attack on several of the Democrats running for president in 2008.
8. For an online tutorial on how to embed YouTube videos into PowerPoint, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=hChq5drjQl4.

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