Lesson Two: The Critical Voter

Level: Grades 6–8

Purpose: Students will learn about the different strategies used in political campaign ads by examining historic presidential election television ads and discussing how the creators of the ads used words, music, and images to convey a specific message to voters. Students will be introduced to the FCC and the Equal Opportunities regulations for broadcast stations and political campaign ads. Students will also learn about the Supreme Court ruling in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission and its impact on the development of super PACs and campaign advertising practices. Students will be asked to take a position on the role of super PACs in political campaigns.
Objectives:

Students will:

• Learn about the different strategies used in political campaign ads to influence voters.
• Identify and discuss the techniques used in positive and negative political campaign ads.
• Analyze the use of images, sounds, and words in a series of political ads.
• Examine the FCC regulations for political campaigns and consider both the intention and implication of these regulations.
• Be able to define what super PACs are and how they can contribute to political campaigns.
• Argue reasons for and against super PACs.

Grades: 6–8

Duration: 60–90 minute class period

Materials:

• Internet access and projector to show political campaign ads from several websites including www.livingroomcandidate.org
• PowerPoint on Analyzing Political Campaign Ads available at www.lawday.org
• Copies of Analyzing Political Campaign Ads: Student Handout available at www.lawday.org

Introduction:

Opening questions for students:

Does anyone remember seeing a political ad on television during the last election?

Is there anything specific you remember about the ad or ads that you saw?

Political campaign ads have been featured on television during presidential elections since 1952. Political ads are intended to create positive or negative feelings about a particular candidate among voters. Campaign ads are created to persuade or cause voters to feel a certain way about a candidate. The purpose of a positive political ad is to create support for the featured candidate by emphasizing the candidate’s good qualities and accomplishments.

In contrast, negative ads use alarming statistics, visuals, and sounds to make the candidate’s opponent seem unqualified or unethical. Statistics are often included that may or may not be true and sound bites
or previous voting records may have been taken out of context. Often, little information is given about the featured candidate. The main purpose of a negative ad is to create fear in voters about what could happen if the opponent is elected.

Procedure:

Part 1: Learning about persuasive political ad techniques

### Techniques used in Political Television Ads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Generalities</strong></td>
<td>This technique always shows the subject of the message in a positive light, but provides little or no information. Generalities use simple words and clever slogans that appeal to peoples' emotions. These general statements are easy to remember but do not offer hard facts about the candidate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fear</strong></td>
<td>Fear is a persuasive technique often used in advertising. These types of ads draw on voters' fears by telling them that the future of the country's safety, prosperity, or economy will be doomed unless they vote for the featured candidate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Slogan</strong></td>
<td>Many political candidates establish a memorable phrase that is used throughout their political campaign, or in a series of political ads. Viewers remember the slogan and associate its message with the candidate. Some past presidential campaign slogans: A time for greatness 1960; Yes, We Can; For People, for a Change; In Your Heart, You Know He's Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional Appeal</strong></td>
<td>An emotional appeal is another persuasive technique used in advertising. This technique is intended to make viewers feel certain emotions, such as happiness, nostalgia, or excitement. If viewers feel good about the ad, they may transfer that feeling to the candidate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Video Production Techniques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Music</strong></td>
<td>Music can be used to create a mood. The mood might be celebratory, patriotic, dark, or angry, depending on the message that the candidate wants to create.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sound Effects</strong></td>
<td>Sound effects are also used to create a mood and emphasize certain points within an ad. For example, sound effects, such as a loud &quot;boom&quot; or a repeated pounding, might be featured in a negative ad to help create a threatening mood.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Go through the Analyzing Political Ads PowerPoint with students to review the various techniques used in political ads, available at: at www.lawday.org.

Part 2: analyzing political ads

Distribute copies of the Analyzing Political Campaign Ads: Student Handout. Have students use the chart to organize their thoughts on the persuasive and video production techniques used in the first four ads.

Show students the following political campaign ads featured below. You may want to play each video more than once. You may also want to play the videos first without sound to see if students’ impressions change once they hear the sound also with the images. **Note for teacher/lawyer in the classroom. You may choose to show more current campaign videos which are available in chronological order by year at www.livingroomcandidate.org.**

Questions for students after they view each video. **Note to lawyer/teacher in the classroom.** Depending on the responses from students, you may not need to ask all of these questions after each video. Choose the ones that seem most appropriate to the class discussion.

1. What is your first impression of the ad? What images did you see?
2. What feeling(s) do you get from these images? Why?
3. Can you tell which political candidate this ad is for? Can you tell from the ad who the candidate’s opponent is? Can you tell who paid for the ad?
4. Is this a positive or negative ad? How can you tell?
5. Can you tell which election year this political ad was made in? What issues were going on in the country during that time? Does the ad mention any of these issues?
6. What key words are used in the ad? Why do you think these words were used?
7. What theme or message is trying to be conveyed in the ad?
8. What is the tone of the ad? (Is it hopeful, energetic, angry?) What about the ad gives you that impression?
9. Are production techniques used with music or sound effects to help convey the message?
10. What persuasive techniques are used in this ad? (fear, slogan, emotional appeal, and/or generalities)
11. What impression does the ad give you about the candidate?
Campaign Videos

- Kennedy vs. Nixon, 1960

- Nixon vs. Humphrey vs. Wallace, 1968

- Reagan vs. Mondale, 1984

Concluding question:

After viewing these videos, did you find the negative or positive ads to be more persuasive? Why?

Part 3: Comparing two ads

Inform students that they will be viewing two final ads from candidates running against each other in an election.

- Clinton vs. Bush, 1992
  - Bush attack ad “Federal Taxes” (Bush, 1992)

Questions for students:

After showing “Federal Taxes” (Bush, 1992)

- What type of ad was this? (negative)
- What types of persuasive techniques were used?
- What types of people were featured in the ad? Why do you think these people were chosen to put in the ad?
• Did you notice anything new in this ad that wasn’t in the some of the others you have seen today? (information hotline number at the end)

• What impact does this have on the message of the ad?

• Does the ad seem more believable to you because of the information hotline?

• After showing “Scary” (Clinton, 1992)

• What are your reactions to this ad?

• How was it different from some of the ads you have seen today? (It was a direct reaction to the opponent’s negative ad.)

• How do you feel about the first ad now that you have viewed this one?

• Note to teacher/lawyer in the classroom. You may have to show both videos again.

• There were quotes used in both ads. Which ad was more persuasive in its use of quotes? Why?

• In these ads, two different candidates were stating persuasive information about the other. What if the information in the ads was false? Are there laws to protect citizens from false advertising?

Part 4: Looking at the law

Note to teacher/lawyer in the classroom. The second half of the Analyzing Political Ads PowerPoint includes slides on the FCC and its rules for broadcast stations and political campaigns.

The Constitution guarantees freedom of the press, but the government does regulate certain aspects of the media industry.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) licenses the broadcast industry and regulates both content (especially obscenity, indecency, and profanity) and industry competition. Television and radio broadcast media are subject to the most government regulation.

The FCC has a role of ensuring that television and radio broadcast stations act in accordance with the following regulations in regard to political candidates and political campaigns.

Note to lawyer/teacher in the classroom. The full text of the FCC statutes and rules on candidate appearances and advertising can be found at http://transition.fcc.gov/mb/policy/political/candrule.htm.

Overview of the FCC regulations for broadcasters regarding political campaigns

Equal Opportunities states if a broadcast station provides one legally qualified candidate with air time (including paid advertising air time) then they must provide equal broadcast time to all legally qualified
candidates. If a station gives free airtime to one candidate, it has to offer an equal amount of free air time to all candidates. The station shall have no power of censorship* over the material broadcast by any such candidate.

*No power of censorship only applies to ads produced in coordination with a candidate and not those produced by other religious organizations or labor unions.

With the exception of:
1. regularly scheduled newscasts,
2. news interviews shows,
3. documentaries (if the appearance of the candidate is incidental to the presentation of the subject or subjects covered by the news documentary),
4. on-the-spot news events (including, but not limited to, political conventions and activities incidental thereto) shall not be deemed to be use of broadcasting station.

Why do you think the FCC regulates how broadcast stations are allowed to provide opportunities for candidates to have air-time?

What part of the Equal Opportunities rule would be important for citizens to be aware of as they watch political ads?

Note to lawyer/teacher in classroom. If students need more help, refer back to the last few questions asked about the Bush and Clinton attack ads.

- What if the information in the ads was false? Are there laws to protect citizens from false advertising?
- What does “the station shall have no power of censorship” mean? Are stations responsible for checking if the information presented in ads is true? This should start a discussion on the no censorship rule for broadcast stations on ads that have been created by a candidate’s campaign.

What about political campaign ads?

- Stations are required to offer all legally qualified candidates the opportunity to buy ad time at the same rates.
- Candidates must have a sponsorship identification statement that tells viewers who has paid for or sponsored the ad.

The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 requires that:
- Candidates must verbally state that he/she approves the ad.
Questions for students:

Is there a possibility that one candidate might have more ad time than others? Why?

Do you think this is fair?

All of the ads you have seen today were created by the candidate’s official campaign committee.

In the 2010 landmark case, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, the Supreme Court ruled to allow corporations and unions to use their general treasuries to pay for political advertisements that clearly call for the election or defeat of a candidate.

As a result, the 2012 presidential election was the first time in over 60 years that outside groups, super Political Action Committees, were allowed to raise and spend their own unlimited funds to advocate for the election or defeat of a candidate. Super PACs are allowed to raise unlimited sums of money from corporations, unions, associations, and individuals, and then spend unlimited sums to directly advocate for or against political candidates. They are not allowed to contribute to the candidate directly or coordinate with a candidate’s campaign.

Question for students:

What impact do you think the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* ruling and the creation of super PACs had on the 2012 presidential campaign?


Questions for students after watching the video:

Why was the 2012 presidential election campaign different from presidential campaigns in the past?

Where do super PACs get their money?

Why would a corporation or union want to fund a super PAC? *(If students need help, you might ask, for example, why might an environmental group want to contribute to a super PAC to support a particular candidate? What would their ad focus on?)*

**Show students** the 2012 presidential primary ad from the super PAC Red, White, and Blue fund. Available at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQD-CjT0dZk&feature=player_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQD-CjT0dZk&feature=player_embedded)

Questions for students:

Who was responsible for the content of this ad?
What candidate is the Red, White, and Blue fund supporting in the ad?

Do we know what individuals, unions, or organizations are members of the Red, White, and Blue fund?

Does this matter?

What are some of the advantages of allowing super PACs to raise and spend funds to create their own campaign ads?

What are some of the disadvantages of allowing super PACs to raise and spend funds to create their own campaign ads?

Show students a list of super PAC spending leading up to the 2012 election.

Note to lawyer/teacher in the classroom. If you click on the names of the super PACs you will be shown detailed information about the super PAC and, in some cases, including ad videos. http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/campaign-finance/independent-expenditures/total

Part 5. Take a stand

Based on the information that students have learned today, they will be participating in an activity that will ask them to choose a position on an issue and share their position with the group.

Use a wall of the classroom as an imaginary line with one end representing no and the opposite end representing yes. After hearing the following question, students will physically place themselves somewhere along that wall or imaginary line based on how they feel about the issue.

Question: Should super PACs be allowed to raise funds to create political advertisements to endorse or attack candidates during political campaigns?

After students have chosen their spot against the wall ask them to briefly state their position and decide if they are in the right place based on the positions of those around them. They may need to physically switch spots to accurately represent the spectrum of positions. Students may move to another spot along the line at any time during the discussion.

Additional resources:
- If there is time, introduce students to www.FactCheck.org. FactCheck.org is a nonpartisan group, meaning that they do not choose sides between any political party or candidate. Their mission is to educate voters and reduces the levels of misunderstanding in U.S. politics by monitoring the accuracy of what is said by politicians in TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews, and news releases.
- Have students research, compare, and debate on political campaign laws in other countries. France, for example, has much stricter election laws for candidates than the United States. You can find a good comparative article from Time Magazine at http://world.time.com/2012/04/20/frances-stringent-election-laws-lessons-for-the-americas-free-for-all-campaigns/print/
- Students can look up their local affiliate stations and see how much advertisers have spent on political campaign ads during the 2012 presidential or congressional elections. What companies or organizations are influencing the reach of a candidate through advertising dollars? https://stations.fcc.gov/find-station/