Politicalese: Spotting Election Campaign Tactics

Pat Nelson

Political *campaigns* flood the public with lots of ads, flyers, mailings, rallies, and debates. Sorting through all the information to choose a *candidate* can be difficult. It can be even more difficult to recognize the *tactics* that candidates use to make their opponents look bad. In an ideal world, candidates would focus on the *issues* and clearly explain what they would do if elected. However, in our world, voters have to work hard to see the tactics that candidates use to get elected. Here are some examples of common tricks and *strategies*:

Name Calling: Candidates choose negative terms to describe their *opponents*. A candidate can be called a "flip-flopper" for changing an opinion on an issue. If a candidate wants to reduce funding for the military, he or she is deemed "unpatriotic." Attacks on a candidate's family, gender, race, or personal traits that have no bearing on the ability to lead are also used to distract the voter.

Starting Rumors: Candidates will often make statements that can't be proven: Quotes like, "I've heard that Mr. Jones is soft on terrorism" or "My opponent will raise your taxes." Statements like these can affect the results of an election if voters do not know if such statements are true or not.

Buzz Words: Empty phrases like "law and order" or "the American Way" or "family values" are designed to cause an emotional reaction but do not mean much. What does the candidate really mean by these terms?

Passing the Blame: One candidate may accuse another of being the cause of major problems like inflation, a rise in terrorism, or job losses. When this happens, check it out. The *incumbent* or a *political party* is often accused of causing some problems. Was the candidate in a position to solve the problem? What other factors were at work? Has there been time to tackle the problem?

Promising the Sky: There are some promises that no one can fulfill. "I will solve the problem of world hunger." "All children will be able to read." "Everyone will have health care." When you hear such promises, consider how realistic they are. Does the candidate have a plan?

Guilt by Association: If a candidate is criticized based on his/her supporters, pay attention. For example, "Mr. Baines receives money from anti-Christian groups." Does this necessarily mean that Mr. Baines is anti-Christian?

Loaded Statements: "I oppose wasteful spending." "I won't raise taxes." A candidate who gets away with such statements should be forced to fully explain his/her positions. *Loaded questions* can have the same effect. "Where was my opponent during the debate on immigration reform?" Without the facts, this implies that the opponent did not do his/her job.

Evading Real Issues: Many candidates are good at not answering questions directly. For a candidate to say, "I am deeply concerned about the lack of affordable health care" and leave it at that is not acceptable. Watch out for the candidate who never outlines a clear plan for achieving stated goals.

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Try matching the campaign tactic with its example:

A. Starting Rumors

_____ My opponent is a flip-flopper.

B. Buzz Words

_____ My administration will guarantee universal health care.

C. Passing the Blame

_____There is evidence that my opponent is connected to organized crime.

D. Promising the Sky

_____ Taxes have risen 10 times during my opponent's term.

E. Name Calling

_____ Where does Ms. Jones stand on family values?

Now Try This

Practice watching TV, newspaper, and internet ads to see if you can spot some of these tactics that politicians use. For examples of negative campaigning, search for "attack ads" on youtube. Also, check out <https://newseumed.org/tools/lesson-plan/evaluating-election-ads> for a lesson on evaluating election ads.

Using the Media to Analyze Political News

Kristen McKenna and Wendy Quinones

Most people receive most of their news from the mainstream media. Can you trust what you see on TV and read in the newspaper? Use the guidelines here to improve your "media literacy." Watch news coverage on different stations and compare how they report the news. Pick one political news story and compare the report between each network. Use the Five Key Questions and the Five Core Concepts as a guide to help you evaluate what you see.

Five Key Questions of Media Literacy

> Media Literacy means thinking critically about what you see and hear in the media.

1. Who created this message?
2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently than me?
4. What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
5. Why is this message being sent?

Five Core Concepts

1. All media messages are constructed.
2. All media messages use a creative language with its own rules.
3. Different people experience the same media message differently.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.
5. Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

Five Key Questions for Editorial Cartoon Analysis

1. What is the event or issue that inspired the cartoon?
2. Are there any real people in the cartoon? Who is portrayed in the cartoon?
3. Are there symbols in the cartoon? What are they and what do they represent?
4. What is the cartoonist's opinion about the topic portrayed in the cartoon?
5. Do you agree or disagree with the cartoonist's opinion? Why?

Adapted from The Center for Media Literacy website and The Media Literacy Kit. More lessons on Media Literacy at <www.medialit.org>.

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