

Strengthening Middle School Students' Civic Identities with Presidential Commercials

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Introduction

During the middle school years, students are trying to figure out who they are. Their identities are malleable based on new life experiences (Roney & Lipka, 2013). Students are curious and ask many questions to better understand the world around them (Levstik & Barton, 2015). It is critical that middle school social studies teachers set up meaningful learning opportunities to build their students' civic identities as democratic citizens (Clabough, 2017). After all, the purpose of schools is to prepare students to be future democratic citizens (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1977). One way to build students' civic identities is to help them grasp political media messages within presidential commercials. Even with the advent of different forms of social media, presidential commercials are still one of the main media tools that politicians use to reach the voters.

In this article, I discuss how middle school social studies teachers can utilize presidential commercials to help build students' civic identities as democratic citizens. First, an overview of the C3 Framework is provided along with the type of civic education teaching advocated for within this seminal document. Next, a brief history of presidential commercials is given along with a discussion of common elements found within these political advertisements. I also focus on the potential benefits of using presidential commercials in the middle school social studies classroom. Then, the article shifts to three classroom-ready activities using presidential commercials connected to middle school civic indicators from the C3 Framework. These three activities prepare students to be critical consumers of political media messages.

A Brief Overview of the C3 Framework

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) released its C3 Framework in 2013 to advocate for a different vision of the social studies classroom. The C3 Framework stresses that social studies teachers should utilize inquiry-based activities to strengthen students' content-area literacy, thinking, and argumentation skills (NCSS, 2013a). Scholars in social studies education have earnestly taken up the call to integrate historical thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills in the classroom, as can be seen by the extensive body of literature on historical thinking (Wineburg, 2001; Wineburg, Martin, & Monte-Sano, 2012; Nokes, 2013; VanSledright, 2014; Monte-Sano, De La Paz, & Felton, 2014; Bickford & Bickford, 2015). However, the same cannot be said for how to develop students' civic thinking skills.

Civic Thinking Skills

Civic thinking is different from historical thinking. Political scientists ask different questions when examining issues and events as compared to historians (Clabough, 2018). In the United States, political scientists are often looking at questions such as how a certain public policy is aligned with the principles and intent of the U.S. Constitution; other questions examine how people view the role of the federal government in their daily lives. The differences between civic and historical thinking are easily noticeable when comparing the historical and civic indicators in the C3 Framework.

While there are multiple goals within the civic indicators of the C3 Framework, there are some general themes that emerge. I used many of these themes to construct my definition for civic thinking. Civic thinking refers to students applying the habits of mind to replicate the authentic activities and processes carried out on a daily basis by democratic citizens. This means

that students need to possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to analyze public policies on a local, state, and national level and apply their agency as change agents to impact and shape public discourses on these topics (Clabough, 2018; Levstik & Barton, 2015; NCSS, 2013a). After all, democratic citizens are stewards for their local communities, state, nation, and world (NCSS, 2013b).

Like historical thinking, there are multiple components of civic thinking because numerous elements go into being a democratic citizen. The following list provides some of the components with civic thinking.

1. Students are active participants through service-learning projects to address the needs in a local community.
2. Students research and compare alternative public policy options about an issue and then take civic action to support the option that best meets the needs of their local community.
3. Students take civic action to protest unjust laws and public policy recommendations that violate people's rights under the U.S. Constitution.
4. Students discern fact from fiction when it comes to the discussion of political issues through different forms of social media.
5. Students analyze political messages in different media outlets and call out inflammatory rhetoric by political candidates and parties.

This list of civic thinking skills is far from exhaustive. However, it does reflect the best teaching practices advocated for in the civic indicators of the C3 Framework. The components in this list contain disciplinary thinking skills that democratic citizens need to possess. These disciplinary thinking skills equip students with the knowledge and experiences to carry out the responsibilities of being a democratic citizen (Clabough & Wooten, 2016). One of the most fundamental elements of any civic thinking curriculum has to be preparing students to grasp the different political media messages by Republicans and Democrats. Usually, these political messages connect to the candidates and parties' values, biases, and vision for the United States

(Mason, 2015). The examination of these messages from both political parties helps students develop their own beliefs about which of the two political parties to support, if either at all. One tool that middle school social studies teachers can use to help with this examination of political media messages is presidential commercials.

Presidential Commercials

Presidential commercials have been a part of campaign cycles since 1952, with the advent of television. They utilize a combination of words, images, and background music and sounds to convey straightforward and often subtle political messages about a candidate and his or her opponent (Shyles, 1984). The majority of these commercials are only about a minute in length but can have long-lasting repercussions for candidates and their opponents. All of the presidential commercials from Republicans and Democrats can be accessed from Living Room Candidate, <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/>. Teachers click on a year of a presidential election in the left column to view all of the commercials from both political parties as well as major independent parties. Living Room Candidate is easy to use and has a great deal of potential for middle school social studies classrooms.

There are numerous benefits for middle school students analyzing presidential commercials. First, students are able to see the values, biases, and beliefs of candidates and their political parties. For example, Bill Clinton defines himself and Al Gore as a new generation of Democrats in the 1992 presidential commercial “Leaders 2.” This same approach can also be seen in George W. Bush’s 2000 presidential commercial “Successful Leader.” Social studies teachers are able to discuss how candidates and political parties formulate solutions to issues and public policy recommendations based on their beliefs (Journell, 2009).

Students encounter a variety of media messages on a daily basis. This is magnified during a presidential election cycle. Presidential campaigns bombard voters with a variety of political advertisements and presidential commercials for why they should support a candidate and oppose his or her opponent. With presidential commercials, media tools are manipulated by campaigns to positively position a candidate and negatively frame his or her opponent. Sometimes, these political messages are straightforward while other times these messages are hidden just below the surface (Mason, 2015). For example, LBJ's "Daisy Girl" never mentions Barry Goldwater by name but subtly implies that he is an unstable leader whose actions could lead to nuclear war. Presidential commercials in this way play on the fears, biases, and prejudices of the electorate in a time period. In other words, people's emotions about issues and events often drive the content of presidential commercials (Sperry & Sperry, 2007). This can be seen with Nixon's commercial "Convention" that highlights the chaos and violence of the 1968 National Democratic Convention. The goal with this commercial was to show that the violence of the 1960's was the Democratic Party's fault. Therefore, the electorate can surmise that the opposite is true for the Republican Party. Presidential commercials create learning opportunities for middle school social studies teachers to discuss the subtle ways that media messages are constructed to influence voters' perceptions of the candidates and political parties (Sperry & Sperry, 2007).

Students are able through viewing presidential commercials to discern issues and events that drove an election cycle. For example, the specter of the attacks on September 11th shaped the public discourse, discussions, and political advertisements of the 2004 presidential election. The examination of presidential commercials creates research opportunities for students to explore

issues impacting presidential elections. This allows students to contextualize issues during a campaign (Journell, 2009).

Finally, presidential commercials allow students to see the evolution of political parties over time. The tone and substance of the two major political parties have changed over time based on events and people's changing sensibilities. For example, the violence that came from the protests associated with the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War created an opening for Republicans to frame themselves as the political party that was for "law and order" issues. This can be seen with Richard Nixon's 1968 commercial "Convention" and George H.W. Bush's 1988 commercial "Revolving Door." Democrats have felt the need at different points over the last 60 years to respond to this message as can be seen in Clinton's 1992 commercial "Leaders 2." In this way, presidential commercials can serve as learning tools to enable the social studies teacher to create clear contrasts with the changing values and beliefs of the two major U.S. political parties over time (Journell, 2009).

In the next sections, three classroom-ready activities drawing on different presidential commercials from election cycles over the last 60 years are discussed. Each activity connects to a different middle school civic indicator from the C3 Framework. The steps and resources to implement each activity are provided.

Deconstructing Political Media Messages within Presidential Commercials

Presidential commercials contain political messages. These messages are designed to sway the electorate to support a candidate and oppose his or her opponent. This is accomplished in a variety of ways. These include the presidential commercials containing biographical narratives about the candidate that makes him or her qualified to be president, attack ads

explaining why one's opponent would be a bad president, the articulation of a vision for the country, and the ability to relate to the needs of the electorate. Usually, presidential commercials contain several of these messaging tools (Mason, 2015; Sperry & Sperry, 2007).

When working with presidential commercials, the social studies teacher needs to start by setting up learning opportunities for students to analyze political messages. The following activity connects to middle school civic indicator D2.Civ.1.6-8 from the C3 Framework. It will take students multiple opportunities exploring the media techniques within presidential commercials before they can master this analysis process. The teacher should model an example of how to unpack the straightforward and subtle messages within a presidential commercial. For example, LBJ's presidential commercial "Daisy Girl" allows students to work with the layers of meaning often contained in presidential commercials. The teacher can point out that Barry Goldwater is never mentioned by name, but it can be implied that LBJ's statements are directed at him. The modeling of analyzing presidential commercials in this manner enables students to grasp how media tools can be manipulated for political ends (Journell, 2009).

After the teacher models how to analyze the contents of several presidential commercials, students are ready to work independently. They work in groups of three to examine "Journey" from the 1992 Clinton campaign, <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1992>. This commercial conveys Clinton's life experiences from humble beginnings that made him want to run for president. President Bush, though never mentioned by name in the commercial, is subtly framed as out of touch with the needs of everyday citizens based on the ideas and beliefs that Clinton is claimed to embody.

The teacher gives each group a set of questions to answer after watching "Journey." There are four sets of questions that look at the different political messages in this commercial:

personal narrative, attack advertisement, vision for the country, and ability to relate to ordinary citizens. Students use evidence from “Journey” to support their arguments in answering their assigned set of questions. Some of these political messages are more straightforward than others in presidential commercials, but all of these elements are present in “Journey” and other presidential commercials over the last 60 years. The teacher moves around the class to help groups as they answer these analysis questions. The four sets of questions for this activity are provided in the next section.

Personal Narrative

1. How is the candidate sharing biographic experiences to connect with voters?
2. How were images and words framed to highlight a candidate’s life experiences?
3. How does a candidate argue that his life experiences have prepared him for the demands of being the President of the United States?

Attack Advertisements

1. What negative emotions does a candidate want voters to feel about his opponent?
2. How are words and images in the commercial structured to make you think negatively about a candidate’s opponent?
3. How are an opponent’s public policies framed as being harmful for the United States?

Vision for the Country

1. How does a candidate articulate his goals as President?
2. How does the candidate use images to connect his vision to people’s values and beliefs?
3. How does the candidate articulate his vision to address a problem facing the United States?

Relatability

1. Through words and images, how is the candidate positioned as being able to relate to the electorate?
2. How is the candidate directly or subtly arguing his opponent cannot connect with voters?
3. How is a candidate's policies framed as positively impacting everyday citizens' lives?

These questions help students focus on different ways that presidential commercials are constructed. Students can grasp the symbolic meaning of how words, images, background music, and sounds are manipulated to convey political messages (Shyles, 1984).

After groups complete the assigned questions, there is a class discussion. Students share their responses and use evidence within the commercial of words, phrases, sounds, and music to support their arguments. They add onto their handout based on their peers' answers. This activity allows students to learn from their peers. All of the processes discussed in this activity can be replicated with other presidential commercials and is needed for students to gain the experience to independently examine the political messages contained within presidential commercials. This activity equips students with the analysis skills to deconstruct political messages connected to the candidates' arguments (Clabough, 2017; Journell, 2017).

Slinging Mud like a Pro

One defining attribute of presidential commercials is attack ads to undermine one's opponent. The most well-known commercial, "Daisy Girl," is an attack ad designed to play on people's fears of nuclear attacks during the Cold War. This attack ad was followed up on in the 1968 presidential election by the Nixon campaign playing on the violence and mayhem of the 1968 Democratic National Convention through "Convention" to paint the Democratic Party as

the group responsible for the violence of the 1960's. Attack ads have been more prolific with the increasing tribal nature of American politics over the last 30 years (Kornacki, 2018). The two political parties attempt to differentiate themselves from each other while framing the opposition's messages and policies as harmful for the United States.

This activity builds on the first one described above by focusing only on the analysis of attack elements in presidential commercials and connects to middle school civic indicator D2.Civ.6.6-8 from the C3 Framework. The teacher looks at a central topic of a presidential election such as how the role of federal government with small and big businesses impacted the 2012 presidential election. Students watch presidential commercials from the Romney and Obama campaigns in 2012. Then, they select one commercial for both campaigns and complete the following handout in pairs. The notes captured in the left column reflect Obama's beliefs about the federal government's role with the business community as well as his beliefs about Romney. The center column is for items that both Romney and Obama have in common. The notes in the right column are Romney's beliefs about the federal government's role with the business community as well as his beliefs about Obama. One combination of 2012 political attack ads that can be used for this activity is Obama's "Always" and Romney's "These Hands."

Attack Ad Analysis Graphic Organizer

Obama's Beliefs about Romney from Attack Ad	What are some ways that both Romney and Obama's attacks of the other have in common?	Romney's Beliefs about Obama from Attack Ad

What are Obama's beliefs about the role of the federal government with the business community?	What do both have in common about the role of the federal government with the business community?	What are Romney's beliefs about the role of the federal government with the business community?

The completion of this graphic organizer helps students to see how candidates and political parties frame their arguments in attack ads to undermine the messages, credentials, and policies of an opponent. This can be seen by the Obama campaign's relentless attack on Romney's experience with Bain Capital in the 2012 presidential election (Halperin & Heilemann, 2013). The type of questions used in this graphic organizer can be replicated to look at issues in other presidential elections.

After students complete this handout, there is a class discussion. Here the teacher needs to focus the class discussion on the differences between the two candidates. Some questions that might be asked include the following:

1. How does a candidate try to negatively frame his opponent? How does this feed into people's pre-conceived notions about that individual?
2. How does Romney's commercial play into pre-conceived notions that Republicans have about Democrats and their vision for the United States?

3. How does Obama's commercial play into pre-conceived notions that Democrats have about Republicans and their vision for the United States?

These questions help students explore how attacks ads are used in presidential campaigns to try and negatively frame the opposition.

The analysis of attack ads through completing the handout and class discussion prepares students for the following short writing assignment. Students assume the role of an advisor to either Barack Obama or Mitt Romney and write a half page memo responding to the claims in either Obama's "Always" or Romney's "These Hands." The memo should include evidence to counter the claims in the opposition's attack ad and should be a half page in length. This writing activity helps students explore how both political parties frame arguments differently while also allowing them to examine the core values of both (Clabough, 2017; Journell, 2017).

Contextualizing Issues of a Campaign with Presidential Commercials

Presidential commercials do not happen in a vacuum. They are primary sources from an era. As such, the values, biases, and beliefs that influence and shape how people view issues and events are ever present (Vest, 2005). Presidential commercials can be used as learning tools to help students contextualize life in an historical era.

The following activity connects to middle school civic indicator D2.Civ.1.6-8 from the C3 Framework. The teacher starts by selecting "Bear" from Reagan's 1984 presidential campaign. Students watch this commercial and then talk with a partner to answer the following questions.

1. What presidential election is this commercial for? Use evidence from the commercial to support your argument.
2. What issue is being addressed in the commercial? How does this issue connect to a specific time period?

The teacher floats around the classroom to help pairs as they are answering these questions.

These analysis questions help students to see how a presidential commercial is a window into an historical era in which it was produced.

Then, the teacher guides a class discussion and uses supporting questions to get students to apply evidence from the presidential commercial to support their arguments. One guiding question might be how does this commercial get at the mindset of the U.S. during the Cold War? Guiding questions like this help students make the connections for how primary sources are products of a time period. Students add onto their answers based on peers' comments. This step in the activity enables students to grasp the ways that issues are framed.

The specter of 9/11 terrorist attacks hung over the 2004 U.S. presidential election. This tragedy impacted and shaped public discussions, presidential commercials, and debates during the 2004 election cycle. The teacher starts by building students' background knowledge with the events that happened on this fateful day by using excerpts from chapter one of *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* (Jacobson & Colon, 2006). This graphic novel gives a great overview of what happened during this tragedy. Graphic novels use words and images to convey a chronological narrative about issues, historical figures, and events (Botzakis, 2015).

Then, the teacher places students in pairs. The pairs watch presidential commercials from the George W. Bush and John Kerry 2004 campaigns to focus on how the September 11th attacks are discussed. They select one presidential commercial from the 2004 election cycle and complete the graphic organizer in the following section. Their answers should be supported by evidence from a presidential commercial.

Contextualizing an Issue Graphic Organizer

What is mentioned about 9/11 attacks in your selected commercial?	How are words and images in your selected commercial designed to make you feel?	How is a candidate portrayed in the commercial to be best suited to address national security issues?	What values, beliefs, and emotions are conveyed in the commercial that connect to the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks?

The questions in this graphic organizer help students contextualize how presidential commercials from the 2004 campaign connect to issues of national security with the September 11th attacks. Issues and events from an era often find their way into campaign advertisements for why a particular candidate is best suited to meet certain challenges facing the United States (Journell, 2017).

Then, there is a class discussion where students show their commercial and share their responses to the questions in the graphic organizer. If pairs select the same commercial, other groups simply add onto their peers' comments. The teacher asks supporting questions here to help students better unpack their thinking. One sample question might be how does the candidate use words, images, and background sounds to frame how he will address national security issues? This class discussion gives students the opportunity to articulate how presidential commercials are constructed to speak about issues and events in a time period.

These steps prepare students for a writing activity. In the same pairs, students write a script for a presidential commercial for either the George W. Bush or John Kerry campaign that

discusses national security issues connected to the 9/11 attacks. The script should be about one page in length and needs to contain similar arguments and images from one of the campaigns examined. After pairs write and edit their script, they create a director's cut explaining why words and images were selected for their presidential commercial (Yancie & Clabough, 2017). This writing activity allows students to apply and articulate content knowledge and media literacy skills. Students are able to convey how candidates construct political messages, which prepares them to be more critical consumers of political media messages (NCSS, 2016).

Conclusion

In this article, I discussed several ways that presidential commercials can be utilized to build middle school students' civic identities. The steps in the three classroom-ready activities can be replicated with other presidential commercials to explore different issues and events with a presidential campaign cycle. The teacher would obviously have to change the analysis and guiding questions based on the issues of a time period. The ability to analyze political media messages has never been more important for our students to possess given the hyper-partisan and tribal nature of contemporary American politics (Kornacki, 2018).

The ability to engage in a critical dialogue with political media messages helps students judge for themselves the merits of a candidate's arguments and public policies. Students are also better able to realize candidates and political parties' beliefs about the best ways to address public policy issues. This helps students to develop their own political beliefs. Students are better prepared to make informed decisions as democratic citizens about political candidates and public policies to support (Engle & Ochoa, 1988).

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