

ATTACKING THE AIRWAVES: HOW TELEVISION CHANGED  
THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

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On the eve of the 1952 presidential election, Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson sat down with his family and running mate John Sparkman for a nationally-broadcast election eve special. For Stevenson, the 1952 election had been an uphill battle against Dwight Eisenhower, a popular and decorated World War II general. The election eve broadcast was Stevenson's last shot at a victory. After engaging in small talk with Sparkman and his two sons, Stevenson faced the camera for his closing remarks.<sup>1</sup> Speeches had always been Stevenson's forte; he was well known in political circles as a powerful orator.<sup>2</sup> However, as Stevenson neared the climax of his final speech of the 1952 campaign, the producer of the television station cut him off. He had run over time.<sup>3</sup>

Stevenson's election eve disaster signaled a new age for American politics. The era of long-winded campaign addresses and flowery radio speeches was over. Like it or not, presidential candidates now had to adapt to a whole new medium: television.

The process of selecting the President has always been a vital part of American democracy. One of the key components of this process is the presidential campaign, which allows the

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candidates to share their views with the American public. Over the past six decades, the advent of television has fundamentally altered the way in which campaigns are carried out. Television continues to be the cornerstone of the modern-day presidential campaign; in 2012 the Obama and Romney campaigns spent 41 percent and 50 percent of their respective campaign funds on television advertising.<sup>4</sup>

This paper analyzes the evolution of television's influence on the presidential campaign by examining the first five presidential races that widely incorporated television: Eisenhower vs. Stevenson (1952 and 1956), Kennedy vs. Nixon (1960), Johnson vs. Goldwater (1964) and Nixon vs. Humphrey (1968). Ultimately, television's overall impact on the American presidential campaign is mixed: while it increased the exposure average Americans had to presidential candidates, it also shifted the campaign away from issues and towards image and emotions.

#### What Is the Purpose of a Campaign?

Before analyzing the impact of television on the presidential campaign, it is important to discuss what a campaign is. A campaign can be defined as the period before an election marked by a heavy volume of "information flow."<sup>5</sup> Simply put, during a campaign candidates disseminate information about themselves and their policies to voters.

How, then, does a presidential campaign contribute to the democratic process? To answer this question, it helps to look at the history of American democratic philosophy. Although the Founding Fathers never imagined the campaign craze that surrounds modern-day elections, they still agreed on the importance of an informed electorate. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, long emphasized the "necessity of educating the people generally, and... strongly stressed the importance of keeping them informed about specific issues."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in its most ideal form a campaign works to create the "informed electorate" that Jefferson envisioned. Campaigns do so by "outlin[ing] the positions and character of the candidates so that voters can make informed decisions."<sup>7</sup>

Modern political scientists typically pay attention to two factors when evaluating an election: political equality and deliberation.<sup>8</sup> Political equality is the idea that all voters, regardless of background, should have their voices heard by actively participating in an election.<sup>9</sup> Deliberation is a process in which voters “weigh... competing considerations through discussion that is...informed... balanced...substantive...[and] comprehensive.”<sup>10</sup> Good elections uphold political equality while also encouraging deliberation among the electorate. To put it differently, the quality of an election depends on two benchmarks: (i) the number of citizens who participate in the election process; and (ii) the extent to which voters engage in serious, thoughtful consideration and discussion before casting their ballots.

Under this definition, a campaign should promote both deliberation and political equality to ensure a good election. For a campaign to encourage deliberation, it must focus on presenting the candidate’s political ideals, as well as his or her stand on various issues. That way, voters have the necessary information to engage in thoughtful dialogue prior to voting. At the same time, a campaign needs to uphold political equality. To do so, all citizens—regardless of background or socioeconomic status—should have equal access to a campaign and the information it provides.

Any campaign that fails either of these responsibilities does not fully perform its role of “outlin[ing] the positions and character of the candidates so that voters can make informed decisions.”<sup>11</sup> A campaign that reaches a wide audience but is devoid of discussions of policy and issues fails to spark deliberation. On the other hand, even if a campaign focuses on providing voters with information about a candidate’s views, it does not promote political equality if only a select group of citizens have access to the campaign. Only a campaign that informs the entire public of the viewpoints and policies of a candidate provides the ideal foundation for informed, meaningful voting.

### Presidential Campaigns before Television

Despite the over 200-year long history of the presidency in the United States, the presidential campaign is a relatively new concept. In the early days of the American political system, presidential campaigns were done in private among members of the political elite.<sup>12</sup> The beginning of the “modern” campaign can probably be traced back to the election of 1828. The race pitted Andrew Jackson, a War of 1812 hero dubbed “Old Hickory,” against John Quincy Adams. Unlike older campaigns, the race of 1828 saw the candidates appeal directly to the public.<sup>13</sup> This was especially true for Jackson, who was able to use his war hero status and charismatic personality to gain widespread public support. In the end, 57 percent of eligible electors cast ballots—a dramatic increase from the mere 27 percent that had voted the previous election—and Jackson was sworn into office.<sup>14</sup>

Jackson’s campaign had relied primarily on in-person communication; Jackson would organize rallies and speeches in which he would directly address voters about political issues.<sup>15</sup> Campaigns after that of 1828 relied on similar methods; candidates would travel across the nation, delivering speeches and meeting voters face to face. During the 1896 presidential race, for instance, Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan delivered over 600 speeches.<sup>16</sup> Despite the efforts of the candidates, such campaigning methods did not reach many individuals. William Jennings Bryan’s cross-country tour had a combined audience of only 5 million people.<sup>17</sup> To make matters worse, attendees of speeches and rallies were often politically involved individuals who already had knowledge of the candidate and his or her policy stands. Uninformed voters who were uninterested in politics remained uninformed.<sup>18</sup> Although these early campaigns often contained substantial discussion of policy, they failed to reach the general public. These campaigns, therefore, did not achieve political equality.

However, in 1928—exactly a century after Jackson’s victory—a new technological development fundamentally altered the campaign: the radio. Although it had been in existence for some time, 1928 was the first year the radio was used as a serious com-

munication tool by presidential campaigns.<sup>19</sup> That year, Herbert Hoover based his entire campaign around “seven well-crafted radio speeches to the nation.”<sup>20</sup> Following Herbert Hoover’s successful radio campaign, Franklin Delano Roosevelt also extensively used the radio in his presidential bid in 1932. The radio provided candidates with the unprecedented ability to address the entire nation simultaneously; by 1940, over 80 percent of American households owned one.<sup>21</sup> This was a sharp contrast to the campaigns of the past, where candidates could not reach a significant audience. Public excitement over the radio’s political potential is probably best summed up in a 1924 Radiola advertisement, which excitedly proclaimed that

“No ‘influence’ needed this year for a gallery seat at the big political conventions! Get it all with a Radiola Super-Heterodyne... It used to be all of the delegates’ wives and the ‘big’ folks of politics. Now it’s for everybody. Listen in. Get it all!”<sup>22</sup>

The introduction of the radio is therefore credited with creating campaigns that better informed the general public, as access to the candidates was no longer limited to rally participants and party leaders. The radio thus brought about a marked increase in the political equality of presidential campaigns.

#### Eisenhower/Stevenson and the Birth of the Spot (1952–1956)

The 1952 campaign would prove to be an even larger turning point for the presidential campaign. In 1950, only 10 percent of U.S. households owned television sets. By 1952 that figure had more than doubled to 25 percent.<sup>23</sup> Television was becoming a dominant communication medium, and the American democratic process began to adapt to this change.

The 1952 presidential race pitted well-liked World War II General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was then president of Columbia University, against Adlai Stevenson, who was serving as governor of Illinois.<sup>24</sup> Stevenson believed that, when addressing the nation through television, candidates would primarily communicate through speeches.<sup>25</sup> Speeches had been the medium du jour on the radio, and numerous candidates such as Franklin Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover had successfully used radio speeches to gain

popular support.<sup>26</sup> Stevenson was renowned in political spheres as an eloquent and witty public speaker; in fact, he had secured the Democratic nomination partly due to a rousing opening speech at the 1952 Democratic National Convention.<sup>27</sup> Believing his speeches would translate to television, Stevenson's campaign purchased 30-minute blocks of airtime on national television. However, the campaign quickly realized that ratings for these televised speeches were abysmally low.<sup>28</sup> The campaigning model that relied on 30-minute speeches was no longer relevant. Television required a more concise, brief, and attention-grabbing method of communication.

On the other hand, Stevenson's opponent, Dwight Eisenhower, used a different approach in his television communications. The Eisenhower camp quickly acknowledged that television was a medium that had no precedent in political communications. Therefore, they turned to Rosser Reeves, a prominent Madison Avenue television advertising executive, for guidance on the new medium.<sup>29</sup>

Reeves was well aware of television's celebration of brevity. In fact, he initially wanted to consolidate Eisenhower's entire platform into a single issue.<sup>30</sup> Reeves stated in a memo that "[Ike] cannot write an advertisement that says thirty-two things about the product and expect the audience to remember. [He] should have taken one of those issues and really wrung it out."<sup>31</sup> Reeves believed that speeches were an over-long and outdated medium that was incompatible with television. Instead, he suggested that Eisenhower base his television campaign on spots.<sup>32</sup> Spots, which were 30-seconds to a minute in length and modeled after television commercials, were short television segments in which candidates could communicate their views to the public.<sup>33</sup> Although the political spot was a nascent concept, the Eisenhower campaign poured \$2 million into a three week spot campaign.<sup>34</sup> Michael Levin, an adviser to Eisenhower, lauded the spot as the "quickest, most effective... means of getting across a message in the shortest possible time."<sup>35</sup>

Eisenhower's Levin-assisted campaign was tailored to the brevity of television broadcasts. By comparison, Stevenson's speech-heavy strategy seemed hopelessly backwards. Unbeknownst to Stevenson, lengthy speeches had slowly begun to go out of fashion long before the campaign of 1952. During radio's heyday in the 1920s and 1930s, campaign managers quickly found that the medium had a low tolerance for lengthy speeches. John W. Davis, who was the Democratic presidential candidate in 1924, commented that the radio "will make the long speech impossible or inadvisable...the short speech will be in vogue."<sup>36</sup> The birth of radio thus marked the end of the long campaign speech.

However, whereas the radio had merely shortened the campaign speech, television largely eliminated it altogether. Spots, which replaced speeches, boiled down a candidate's platform and message to a meager 30 seconds. Inevitably, these shorter lengths came with a significant limitation: it was more or less impossible to discuss policies in depth in such a limited time frame. An adviser to Richard Nixon's 1968 campaign went as far as to state that "the shorter lengths" of spots "are less suited as a vehicle for examining issues."<sup>37</sup> Speeches had provided candidates with opportunities to support their claims with evidence and propose specific policies; such a luxury of time was not available in television spots.

The effects of this length difference are best observed when spots are compared to radio speeches. In 1936, during the depths of the Great Depression, then-candidate Franklin Roosevelt made a radio campaign address discussing the economic downturn. During the speech, he outlined several policies and changes he would enact if elected to combat poverty. Roosevelt stated he would work "to reduce hours over-long, to increase wages that spell starvation, to end the labor of children, to wipe out sweatshops....continue every effort to end monopoly in business, to support collective bargaining, to stop unfair competition, to abolish dishonorable trade practices."<sup>38</sup> Roosevelt continued by discussing American agriculture, urging "for reforestation, for the conservation of water all the way from its source to the sea, for drought and flood control, for better marketing facilities for

farm commodities, for a definite reduction of farm tenancy, for encouragement of farmer cooperatives, for crop insurance and a stable food supply.”<sup>39</sup> Of course, Roosevelt’s speech was not based solely on policy points; nevertheless, he outlined several concrete steps he would take to fight the effects of the Great Depression.

Like Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower also tackled a number of economic issues in his 1952 campaign. Chief among these issues was the concern surrounding high inflation. To address the topic of rising prices, Eisenhower’s campaign produced and aired a spot entitled “High Prices.” The spot began with an actor playing a female citizen. She complained about how “high prices are just driving [her] crazy.”<sup>40</sup> The camera then cut to Eisenhower, who delivered a brief response:

Yes, my Mamie gets after me about the high cost of living. It’s another reason why I say it’s time for a change, time to get back to an honest dollar and an honest dollar’s worth.<sup>41</sup>

Unlike Roosevelt, who had had the opportunity to deliver speeches, Eisenhower could only speak for around 10 seconds in his spots.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, Eisenhower’s spots featured far fewer policy points than Roosevelt’s speeches. In his radio speeches, Roosevelt had given voters a detailed idea of what actions he would take to alleviate poverty if elected president. Voters were able to learn that Roosevelt would, for example, create “better marketing facilities for farm commodities” and push for “farmer cooperatives” and “crop insurance.”<sup>43</sup> In contrast, viewers of Eisenhower’s spots were only treated to vague promises of getting “back to an honest dollar.”<sup>44</sup>

This is not an isolated incident; research shows that in general, television spots have failed to propose or discuss specific policy initiatives.<sup>45</sup> As the campaign transitioned from radio-based to television-based, candidates lost the chance they once had to discuss issues and policy at length. To put it differently, the shortening of political communication by television spots made it harder for campaigns to fulfill their responsibility of promoting deliberation.

Eisenhower, who was the favorite to begin with, eventually won the race in a landslide, capturing 422 Electoral College votes

to Stevenson's 89. In retrospect, just as important as Eisenhower's victory were his milestones in political communication. Eisenhower had introduced America to the presidential spot, and in doing so he had paved the way for television's increased role in American politics. Adlai Stevenson's 1952 debacle also served as a powerful reminder that television was not a mere extension of the radio: it was an altogether different medium with a different set of characteristics and expectations.

Eisenhower's introduction of the spot, however, was not met with universal support. Adlai Stevenson decried it as the "ultimate indignity to the democratic process" because it "merchandise[d] candidates like breakfast cereal."<sup>46</sup> Stevenson had produced spots in his 1952 race, but his campaign had considered them an afterthought.<sup>47</sup> Stevenson's spots during this campaign were shoddily produced to the point of being laughable; they often featured choppy animation and uninteresting visuals.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, by the time Stevenson ran for office again in 1956, he was forced to admit that television had permeated the political system. Working with an advertising agency, Stevenson produced several spots, including two attack ads on Dwight Eisenhower and a biographical spot about his upbringing in Libertyville, Illinois.<sup>49</sup> Stevenson had, in effect, agreed to be "merchandised like breakfast cereal."<sup>50</sup> Eisenhower also made changes in his television campaign in 1956. Most significantly, he produced several spots that relied on testimonies from ordinary citizens.<sup>51</sup> Such spots reinforced the idea that Eisenhower had been a popular president who was in touch with the average American.<sup>52</sup> Stevenson's surrender to television in 1956 showed just how powerful and unavoidable a medium television had become. 1956 also marked the first year when a larger percentage of Americans learned about candidates through television compared to any other medium.<sup>53</sup> Eisenhower again won by large margin in 1956, capturing 457 electoral votes; Stevenson only obtained 73.<sup>54</sup>

### Kennedy/Nixon and the Introduction of the Presidential Debate (1960)

Pitting young Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy against then-Vice President Richard Nixon, the 1960 presidential race was among the closest in history. Kennedy eventually prevailed by a margin of less than 200,000 votes.<sup>55</sup> Television played a major role in the campaigns of both candidates. As Stevenson and Eisenhower had done in the previous decade, both Kennedy and Nixon used spots extensively. Kennedy's spots often highlighted his youthfulness and willingness to enact change. A jingle from Kennedy's campaign lauded him as a man "who's seasoned through and through/ but not so dog-goned seasoned that he won't try something new."<sup>56</sup> In an unprecedented move, Kennedy also produced two celebrity-endorsement spots that featured Henry Fonda and Harry Belafonte.<sup>57</sup> These spots reinforced Kennedy's image as a young, down-to-earth politician who was in tune with modern popular culture. Nixon's spots took a radically different approach. Unlike Kennedy, who stressed his youthfulness, Nixon used his spots to highlight his experience. Almost all of Nixon's campaign spots followed the same format: Nixon sat at his desk, stared directly into the camera, and answered questions about foreign and domestic policy.<sup>58</sup> Through his spots, Nixon tried to continuously reinforce the idea that he was the more qualified and experienced candidate, and that such political experience was necessary to defend American freedom from Communist threats.<sup>59</sup>

Although spots did play a major role in the campaign, the 1960 election is best remembered for the introduction of the televised presidential debate. Political debates are a process as old as democracy itself. Athens, the birthplace of direct democracy, frequently hosted lengthy debates about political affairs.<sup>60</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, however, presidential debates have only a brief history in American politics. Before the mid-1900s, the closest thing America had seen to a presidential debate was the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas senatorial debates.<sup>61</sup> In 1948, Harold Stassen and Thomas Dewey, who were both candidates for the Republican nomination, held a radio debate on the issue of outlawing the

Communist party.<sup>62</sup> Although the Stassen-Dewey debates were a success, drawing an estimated 40 million to 80 million listeners, subsequent campaigns did not follow their example.<sup>63</sup>

In 1960, however, Nixon and Kennedy agreed to a series of four hour-long debates that would be aired on all television networks.<sup>64</sup> Because the debates were specifically tailored to television, they inevitably differed from political debates of the past. For one, television shortened the length of the debate. Each Lincoln-Douglas debate had given both candidates 90 minutes to discuss the topic of slavery.<sup>65</sup> The radio-broadcast Stassen-Dewey debates allotted one hour total for the discussion of Communism.<sup>66</sup> Unlike these previous debates, which focused primarily on one issue, the Nixon-Kennedy debate covered a wide array of topics in a one-hour period. Consequently, each candidate had only 2 to 4 minutes to address and discuss each individual issue.<sup>67</sup>

Most importantly, the 1960 debates allowed everyday Americans to visually experience a discussion between the candidates. Previous debates had not been visual experiences; the Lincoln-Douglas debates were primarily accessed through newspaper reports, while the Stassen-Dewey debate was solely broadcast through the radio.<sup>68</sup> The visual component of the 1960 presidential debate proved to be an important factor. Average Americans were able to feel a personal connection to the candidates that they had previously been unable to experience. As Theodore White points out,

[The debates were able to give] the voters of a great democracy a living portrait of two men under stress and let the voters decide, by instinct and emotion, which style and pattern of behavior under stress they preferred in their leader... What the TV debates did was to generalize this tribal sense of participation, this emotional judgment of the leader, from the few to the multitude.<sup>69</sup>

White's analysis of the debates, however, applies also to television as a whole. Before television's advent in politics, political candidates rarely received much individual attention. Oftentimes, political parties were the deciding factors of elections; the personal qualities of individual candidates were less important. By allowing for a visual connection with the campaign, television humanized the

candidates. In effect, television encouraged “a sense of personal choice of leader” that had been lacking in previous presidential elections.<sup>70</sup>

This humanization of presidential candidates changed the criteria with which they were evaluated by the public. Because candidates were now viewed as individuals instead of mere representatives of their respective political parties, voters began to judge candidates on personal qualities. The personality and public image that a candidate projected became crucial parts of the campaigning process. This is reflected in the painstaking efforts campaigns made to groom the public images of their candidates. Kennedy’s 1960 campaign constantly emphasized his youthfulness and willingness for change. Kennedy tried to paint himself as “the shy young sheriff ready to thwart the scheme[s]” of Nixon, who the Kennedy campaign portrayed as a “slick, shady railway lawyer about to bilk the townspeople.”<sup>71</sup> In his 1968 presidential bid, Nixon’s advisers wrote copious memos before each of his major television appearances, stressing the importance of having Nixon appear “smiling, confident, [and] easygoing.”<sup>72</sup>

Television, therefore, helped create an entirely new criterion for judging candidates that was based on image. Of course, the growth of image politics meant that campaigns were less prone to focus on issues and policies.<sup>73</sup> This made it difficult for television-era campaigns to fulfill their duty of providing in-depth information about candidates to voters. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that television’s humanization of politicians and candidates was an important turning point in 20th century America politics.

#### Johnson/Goldwater and the Visual Campaign

The most defining characteristic of television was its potential for visual expression. Unlike the mass mediums of the past, such as the radio, magazines, and newspapers, television was not a textual or verbal medium; it was instead a fundamentally visual one. Between 1952 and 1960, many spots failed to creatively use television’s visual potential. Most spots were in the “talking head” format, where a candidate addressed the camera directly.<sup>74</sup> Never-

theless, a small number of campaign advertisements during this period showcased an appreciation for television's visual possibilities. Dwight Eisenhower used a Roy Disney-directed cartoon spot called "Ike for President" to convey a warm and approachable persona.<sup>75</sup> In his 1956 campaign, Adlai Stevenson released a spot titled "National Parks" which effectively used photographs and video clips of national parks to criticize Republican environmental policy.<sup>76</sup>

However, campaign communication did not fully adapt to television's visual nature until the 1964 race, which pitted Democrat Lyndon Johnson against Republican Barry Goldwater. At the time, Johnson was enjoying popularity due to the recent passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>77</sup> Goldwater, on the other hand, was a more divisive figure. Although many Republicans respected his firm commitment to conservative values, Goldwater also caused controversy with his blunt, outspoken demeanor.<sup>78</sup> He went as far as to state in his acceptance speech for the candidacy that "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice."<sup>79</sup> Goldwater, however, was perhaps most notorious for his statements supporting the use of nuclear weapons. In an age of Cold War paranoia, Goldwater's attitude towards nuclear weapons was met with outrage.<sup>80</sup>

Taking advantage of this fear, the Johnson campaign released the spot "Peace, Little Girl" in September 1964. The spot opened with an image of a young girl, who was seen counting daisy petals in a field. Suddenly, she was interrupted by a menacing male voice, which slowly began a countdown. The camera gradually zoomed in on the girl's face, which was by then panic-stricken. When the man finally reached zero, a bright flash appeared on-screen, accompanied by a deafening boom. After the infamous opening, Johnson declared in a voiceover that "these are the stakes: to make a world in which all of God's children can live, or to go into the darkness. We must either love each other, or we must die."<sup>81</sup> The minute-long spot ended with a narrator calmly reminding viewers to "vote for President Johnson on November 3rd" as "the stakes are too high for you to stay home."<sup>82</sup>

Despite airing once, "Peace, Little Girl" went on to be a crucial factor in Johnson's landslide victory.<sup>83</sup> The spot also marked

a watershed moment in American political communications, as it was the first time that a visual image had played such a major role in a candidate's victory.<sup>84</sup> In retrospect, this shift from verbal to visual is extremely significant. Compared to verbal mediums, visual mediums have a higher emphasis on the visceral and emotional as opposed to the logical. As Gavriel Salomon once wrote, verbal communication is "logical...and sequential" whereas visual communication is "impressionistic, dense and 'fuzzy.'"<sup>85</sup> Verbal communication relies on language, which consists of universally agreed-upon rules, definitions and meanings. In contrast, visual images are often subjective and open to interpretation. Due to this, it is much more difficult to present logic-based arguments through visual images. Since it cannot effectively appeal to logic and reason, visual communication instead relies on emotional and visceral appeal. In effect, the criteria for evaluating presidential candidates were shifting away from a logos-based discussion of policy and ideas to a pathos-based discussion of emotions.

"Peace, Little Girl" showcased television's reliance on the emotional. The intended purpose of the spot was clear: Johnson wanted to firmly associate Goldwater with nuclear destruction.<sup>86</sup> What was interesting, however, was not the message of the spot, but how the message was delivered. Johnson did not state or attack any of Goldwater's nuclear policies or beliefs; in fact, the spot never even mentioned Goldwater by name. Instead of such a logical approach, the spot capitalized on nuclear anxiety and society's protective instincts towards children to create a powerful appeal to emotions.<sup>87</sup>

Other spots released during the Johnson campaign showed a similar reliance on visual and emotional appeal. The spot "Poverty" consisted of photographs of poverty-stricken children;<sup>88</sup> the spot "Ice Cream" juxtaposed the image of a young girl eating ice cream with narration warning of Goldwater's support of nuclear testing;<sup>89</sup> "Merely Another Weapon" used a video clip of an exploding bomb to suggest a Goldwater presidency would lead to disaster.<sup>90</sup> The visual spots proved to be extremely effective; they

created a powerful link between Goldwater and chaos in the minds of the public.<sup>91</sup>

Johnson wound up winning the presidency with 486 votes to Goldwater's 52. Looking back, historians believe Johnson's spots to be a deciding factor in his massive victory.<sup>92</sup> The 1964 race proved, in essence, that visual images could help decide elections. American politics had now entered a phase where visual communication was on a near-equal level of importance with verbal communication. However, visual communication is subjective and vague; each viewer interprets visual messages somewhat differently. Visual mediums are thus discouraged from conveying factual information, which is objective as opposed to subjective.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, the cultural transition towards visual images made it difficult for a campaign to fulfill its duty of providing the information necessary for thoughtful deliberation.

Goldwater's spectacular failure in the election highlighted another important facet of television: it "reject[ed] sharp personality."<sup>94</sup> The size of television's audience surpassed that of any previous method of political communication. The broadcast nature of television meant that candidates could now reach larger numbers of voters than ever before. At the same time, this meant that candidates now had to cater to an extremely diverse set of interests and opinions. Because of this need to please a broad audience, television discouraged controversial or polarizing statements. In other words, instead of outspoken or opinionated politicians, television favored politicians with a friendly, non-controversial demeanor. In his book, *The Selling of the President 1968*, Joe McGinniss notes that

Television demands gentle wit, irony, understatement. . . . The TV politician cannot make a speech; he must engage in intimate conversation. He must never press. He should suggest, not state; request, not demand. Nonchalance is the key word. Carefully studied nonchalance.<sup>95</sup>

In fact, candidates had avoided taking controversial stances on camera since the early years of television. During his 1952 television spot series "Eisenhower Answers America," Dwight Eisenhower tackled a number of divisive topics such as taxation. However,

Eisenhower's campaign staff discouraged him from explicitly taking a stance on these issues, fearing such an approach would "prematurely commit" Eisenhower to a "strait-jacketing answer."<sup>96</sup> Instead, the spots were purposely vague and open-ended. In effect, television made campaigns "unsuited to hot issues and sharply defined controversial topics."<sup>97</sup>

Television created a political climate that avoided controversy and firm ideological stances. Goldwater, who was a firm conservative, refused to adhere to these expectations. He spoke passionately about his political ideals and openly took strong stances on highly polarizing topics such as nuclear warfare and the Vietnam War. Furthermore, he addressed the public in a blunt, outspoken manner that contrasted heavily with that of his contemporaries.<sup>98</sup> Goldwater's refusal to play by television's rules can therefore be seen as a contributing cause to his defeat.

Although television's ubiquity made political information more accessible, some criticize its aversion to controversial topics. According to detractors, television hindered meaningful political discourse by discouraging candidates from publicly discussing divisive issues. As Edith Efron points out, "despite official freedoms from censorship" television had "a self-imposed silence."<sup>99</sup>

#### Nixon/Humphrey and the Television Election of 1968

Following Lyndon Johnson's refusal to run for reelection, the Democrats chose then-Vice President Hubert Humphrey as their 1968 presidential candidate. Humphrey was up against Richard Nixon, who had successfully returned to the political sphere after years in the private sector.<sup>100</sup>

By the time the 1968 presidential race arrived, television was ensconced as the main communications medium in presidential campaigns. During the election, a record 89 percent of Americans used television to learn about presidential candidates.<sup>101</sup> Many of the practices and trends that television had created and developed over the past decade were on full display in both the Nixon and Humphrey campaigns.

Spots, which had slowly grown in importance since their introduction in 1952, played a larger-than-ever role in the 1968 campaign. Both candidates produced a quantity of nationally-broadcast spots that was unrivaled by any previous campaign.<sup>102</sup> Nixon, in a move that further demonstrated the importance of spots, even chose to run a primarily spot-oriented campaign.<sup>103</sup>

The 1968 campaign saw a massive influx in emotional, visual-oriented spots by both major party candidates.<sup>104</sup> At the forefront of this change was Richard Nixon. During his first campaign in 1960, Nixon's major spots had virtually all been in the "talking head" format; Nixon sat at his desk and directly addressed the camera, answering questions about civil rights, taxes, communism, and foreign policy.<sup>105</sup> It was a strategy similar to that of Dwight Eisenhower, whom Nixon had served under.<sup>106</sup> Nixon's 1968 campaign, however, employed a different method. Only a small percentage of Nixon's spots featured the candidate addressing the camera; instead, Nixon created spots that focused on personality and image.

Nixon relied mostly on a series of advertisements produced by filmmaker Eugene Jones.<sup>107</sup> Jones took a new approach to spots: instead of creating spots that merely incorporated visual images, he directed spots that were based entirely on visual images. The most controversial of these was "Convention," which aired a mere eight days before the election. "Convention" featured no written or spoken text.<sup>108</sup> Instead, it displayed a rapid montage of photographs of Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey addressing the Democratic National Convention.<sup>109</sup> These photographs were interspersed with images of poverty-stricken farmers and dying Vietnam War soldiers which were accompanied by dissonant sound effects.<sup>110</sup> "Convention" was another turning point in political communication. For the first time, a candidate had created a spot that completely abandoned verbal communication and relied entirely on visual communication.

Nixon was clearly creating a link between Hubert Humphrey and the various socioeconomic problems of the 1960s through "Convention."<sup>111</sup> Because the spot is entirely visual, how-

ever, Nixon was unable to criticize Humphrey's ideas or policy initiatives. Therefore, he could not make a logical argument against Humphrey. Instead, the spot relied solely on the emotional responses triggered by the graphic images and haunting music. "Convention" was, not surprisingly, met with disdain from the Democratic community, and Nixon pulled the spot after one broadcast.<sup>112</sup> Nonetheless, "Convention" continued the growth of visual campaign communication that had been started by "Peace, Little Girl." Aside from "Convention," Jones produced eight other spots for Nixon. All but one of these spots revolved around rapid cuts, music, sound effects, and photographs. Like "Convention," these spots were largely emotional in nature, with little discussion of policy or issues.<sup>113</sup>

Hubert Humphrey also broadcast a number of visually oriented spots. Like those of his predecessor Lyndon Johnson, these spots heavily depended on images of children and nuclear weaponry to provoke fear. One, titled "Bomb," opened with a video clip of a nuclear bomb exploding in the ocean.<sup>114</sup> A narrator then criticized Nixon's refusal to pass the United Nations' Non Proliferation Treaty.<sup>115</sup> Another advertisement, titled "Mother and Child," depicted a mother hugging her young son and worrying about his future.<sup>116</sup> Both attempted to elicit strong emotional responses from the viewer: "Bomb" aroused fear about nuclear arms, while "Mother and Child" targeted the concerns parents had for the well-being of their children. Like the spots of Nixon, however, Humphrey's spots also contained little discussion of policy.<sup>117</sup>

Although Hubert Humphrey proposed a presidential debate, Nixon refused. He had experienced a crushing defeat at the hands of Kennedy in the 1960 debate, and was unwilling to risk a repeat of this disaster.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, Nixon's campaign wanted to promote a warm, universally approachable public image for their candidate. A debate risked alienating viewers and shattering this facade.<sup>119</sup> By deliberately avoiding making controversial statements to the media, Nixon steered clear of the mistakes Goldwater had made in the previous election.<sup>120</sup> Nixon's decision to forgo the 1968 debate showed that television was a

medium where image-making took precedence over educating voters and discussing policy. Furthermore, it demonstrated that the presidential debate, which was hailed in 1960 as a landmark development for American politics, was not a guaranteed part of elections. Debates were not a mandatory public service candidates needed to perform; instead, whether a debate happened or not depended on the preferences of the candidate. All of these developments called into question whether television campaigns were truly beneficial to the American voters.

One final political development in 1968 was the proliferation of presidential primaries. This change would have the unintended consequence of cementing the influence of television. Previously, convention delegates, who voted for party candidates, were dominated by party leaders. A few states held primaries, but the practice was not widespread.<sup>121</sup> The 1968 race, however, proved to be a chaotic one, featuring both the withdrawal of Lyndon Johnson and the assassination of Robert Kennedy. Furthermore, chaos ensued due to infighting between Democratic candidates Eugene McCarthy and Hubert Humphrey.<sup>122</sup> In response, the Democratic Party decided that it needed to change its candidate selection process. A committee proposed the adoption of primaries in every state as a solution. Average citizens would vote in the primaries, and convention delegates would vote in accordance to the results of these primaries.<sup>123</sup> By the 1972 race, primaries had become the norm for Republican and Democratic presidential nominations.<sup>124</sup> The primary meant that “candidates had to appeal directly to the public” as opposed to “party activists and leaders” to secure the nomination of their party.<sup>125</sup> Television, which allowed for such public appeal, was now as important to the candidate selection process as it was to the general election.

It is no exaggeration, therefore, to call the 1968 election a television election. In 16 short years, television had completed its journey from a fringe medium to the preeminent method of political discourse in America.

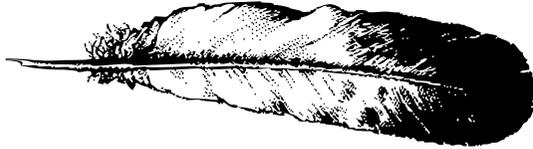
## Conclusion

Television's effects on the campaigning process are impossible to ignore. Whether those effects were positive or negative, however, is a difficult question to answer. According to the criteria established in the beginning of this paper, a campaign can be evaluated based on its ability to spark deliberation and maintain political equality. Judging by these benchmarks, television is a somewhat mixed blessing. On one hand, television provided campaigns with a far greater ability to communicate directly with the public. As a result, campaigns were able to reach larger audiences than previously possible. This introduced an unprecedented level of political equality to campaigns. On the other hand, television campaigns moved away from a logic-based discussion of policy. Instead, these campaigns often relied heavily on emotions and public image. To make matters worse, television discouraged the open conversation of controversial issues. All these changes made it harder for voters to get an accurate idea of what actions and policy initiatives a candidate planned to pursue if elected President. Consequently, it became more difficult for voters to engage in meaningful deliberation. In short, television lowered the quality of the information campaigns provided, but disseminated this information to an exceptionally large audience.

Famed media theorist Marshall McLuhan famously stated that "the medium is the message."<sup>126</sup> In other words, when information is communicated, the content of the information will inevitably be influenced by the method of communication that is being used. As an examination of campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s shows, political campaigns are not exempt from this rule; political communication adapts to the medium through which it is conveyed, not the other way around. Every era of history has its dominant medium, and the presidential campaign will adapt itself to fit the unique characteristics of that medium.

Television was a concise, broadcast, and visually-oriented medium, and thus political campaigning through television became concise, broadcast and visually-oriented. As our society slowly abandons television and moves towards online mediums,

the same principle will most likely hold. Online mediums, such as social networking sites and blogs, have a number of characteristics that separate themselves from television. For one, they are interactive; whereas television viewers passively consumed content, Internet users can share and comment. Furthermore, as shown by the 140 character limits of Twitter and the short lengths of most YouTube videos, online mediums favor brevity even more than television. The campaigns of the future will no doubt adapt to fit these idiosyncrasies. How effective these new mediums will be in promoting ideal campaigns remains to be seen.



## Notes

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285

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<sup>12</sup> “History of the National Nominating Convention,” U.S. Political Conventions & Campaigns (1 August 2012), <<http://conventions.cps.neu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/History1.pdf>> (accessed 3 December 2014)

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- <sup>24</sup> Boller, pp. 280–281
- <sup>25</sup> Edwin Diamond and Stephen Bates, The Spot: The Rise of Political Advertising on Television (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1984) p. 46
- <sup>26</sup> "The Campaign and Election of 1928"
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- <sup>28</sup> The Living Room Candidate, Museum of the Moving Image, 2012, <<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/>>
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>32</sup> Noel L. Griese, "Rosser Reeves and the 1952 Eisenhower TV Spot Blitz," Journal of Advertising (1975)
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<sup>40</sup> “High Prices,” Political advertisement (1952; Citizens for Eisenhower, 2012) from The Living Room Candidate

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<sup>53</sup> Benoit, p.92

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<sup>119</sup> McGinniss, p. 81

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And with regard to my factual reporting of the events of the war, I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions; either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible. Not that even so the truth was easy to discover: different eye-witnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other or else from imperfect memories. And it may well be that my history will seem less easy to read because of the absence in it of a romantic element. It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past, and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future. My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last for ever.

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