

# THE 30-SECOND CAMPAIGN

Even in the age of social media, TV ads still play an enormous role in presidential elections. Can they be trusted? BY PATRICIA SMITH

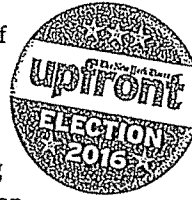
In one ad, a string of grim images of shuttered factories and struggling Americans are the backdrop for the ominous narration: "In Hillary Clinton's America, the middle class gets crushed." In the other ad, a series of dignified images of Clinton meeting with foreign leaders is followed by the narrator's reassuring message: "A steady leader in an unsteady world."

With ads like these, Clinton, the Democratic candidate, and Republican candidate Donald Trump are trying to present themselves to voters in the best possible light, while conveying unflattering—even frightening—images of their opponent. Like all advertising, political ads offer a biased point of view. Just as an iPhone ad is designed to sell iPhones, a political ad is designed to sell a specific candidate.

Americans are seeing a lot of political ads this fall—especially in battleground states like Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Florida. But voters everywhere are watching them—and debating them—on social media. That's because advertising plays such a key role in our elections.

"Old-fashioned TV advertising is tremendously important if for no other reason than most Americans don't pay very much attention to politics," says Erika Franklin Fowler of the Wesleyan Media Project in Connecticut, which tracks political advertising. "Campaigns are looking for ways to reach less-attentive citizens. One of the best ways you can do that is to reach citizens who are at home watching other programs."

Political advertising has been around since the mid-19th century. But in its



early days, it consisted mostly of buttons, banners, and posters intended to generate turnout at local rallies and polling places on Election Day.

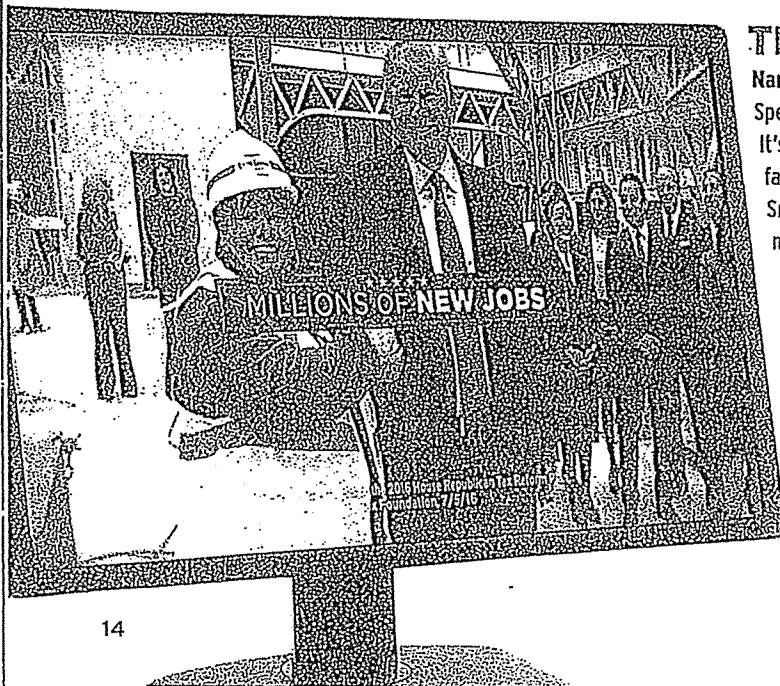
### Ads on *I Love Lucy*

That began to change in the 1920s when radio's reach became widespread. But the truly seismic shift came with the arrival of television. In 1952, an advertising executive convinced Republican candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower that the sights and sounds of TV offered the quickest, most effective way to get his message across to voters.

His short commercials ran during popular shows like *I Love Lucy* and were a huge hit. Eisenhower's opponent, Democrat Adlai Stevenson, thought such ads were undignified and

## A CLOSE LOOK AT TWO ADS

Upfront asked Erika Franklin Fowler at the Wesleyan Media Project to analyze a Trump ad and a Clinton ad.



### TRUMP AD: "Two Americas: Economy"

**Narrator:** In Hillary Clinton's America, the middle class gets crushed. Spending goes up. Taxes go up. Hundreds of thousands of jobs disappear. It's more of the same, but worse. In Donald Trump's America, working families get tax relief. Millions of new jobs created. Wages go up. Small businesses thrive. The American Dream, achievable. Change that makes America great again. Donald Trump for president.

**FOWLER'S ANALYSIS:** In order to make his opponent look untrustworthy, the ad opens with dark, fuzzy, and unflattering images of Clinton. It then uses a montage of troubled but ordinary-looking Americans—a technique that makes the ad more accessible to viewers—to communicate how bad things would be with Clinton in charge. As the ad shifts to Trump's vision, the color gets much brighter. We see a montage of smiling Americans in Trump's America, and classic patriotic symbols, like a happy black family raising an American flag.

ran half-hour speeches on TV instead. (He lost, and in 1956, when he again ran against Eisenhower, he used TV ads, but lost anyway.)

In 1964, the campaign of President Lyndon B. Johnson, a Democrat, ran

what's considered TV's first negative political ad. The "Daisy" spot capitalized on concerns that Johnson's Republican opponent, Senator Barry M. Goldwater, wouldn't rule out the use of nuclear weapons against America's enemies. The ad showed a little girl in a field, pulling petals off a daisy and counting up from one. Then her voice was replaced by an official-sounding male voice, counting down from 10 as a prelude to an atomic blast, which filled the screen with a mushroom cloud. The ad was so controversial that it aired only once.

Negative ads have been with us ever since. Even though most politicians claim to dislike them, the simple fact is that negative ads work, meaning they can influence voters to change their minds and affect a candidate's poll numbers (see "According to the Latest Poll," p. 16). But just because an ad is negative doesn't mean it has no value, experts say.



The first negative ad: Lyndon Johnson's "Daisy"

"Negative ads invariably have more substantive policy information than positive ones do, so negative advertising may actually be good for democracy," Fowler says.

this before. It's either brilliant, or it's complete incompetence."

Clinton's huge advertising edge could allow her to define Trump's image to voters before he has a chance to counter it, Franz says. On the other hand, research shows that viewers often don't remember political ads for long, so maybe spending money on ads earlier in the race is a waste, he says. And it's possible that paid advertising is less important this year for Trump because he's been so successful at getting free media exposure.

In any event, most media analysts expect Trump to boost his advertising before Election Day in November.

It will be up to voters to decide what to believe in Trump's and Clinton's ads (see "A Close Look at Two Ads," below). Al Tompkins, a broadcast media expert at the Poynter Institute in Florida, says voters should always be wary.

"No candidate is going to come on the air and say, 'Here are a few things I'm not very good at, and I have no idea how to solve these problems,'" Tompkins says. "The bottom line is it's a sales job, so we all have to look at these ads with a critical eye. But that's our job as a voter." ◦

### Clinton vs. Trump

Usually, the number of commercials on TV for each of the major-party candidates is pretty balanced. But in the first few months of this year's general election, ads by Clinton and super PACs\* supporting her aired more than 100,000 times; commercials for Trump hit the airwaves just 8,500 times in that same span. Trump's campaign hasn't had nearly as much money as Clinton's to buy ads, and Trump triumphed in the primaries without them. Instead, he's been relying on Twitter and lots of free media coverage of his provocative sound bites.

"I would never advise a presidential candidate to be off the air for so significantly long," Michael Franz, a political scientist at Bowdoin College in Maine, says of the lopsided advertising picture. "We've never seen anything like

**'We all have to look at these ads with a critical eye.'**

SHUTTERSTOCK (TV); VIA YOUTUBE (ALL OTHER IMAGES)

Watch these political ads and historic ones at [upfrontmagazine.com](http://upfrontmagazine.com)

## CLINTON AD: "Myself"

**News anchor:** Who are you consulting with consistently so that you're ready on day one? **Donald Trump:** I'm speaking with myself because I have a very good brain. My primary consultant is myself.

**Narrator:** While Donald Trump consulted with himself, as secretary of state, Hillary Clinton negotiated a cease-fire in Gaza, a reduction in nuclear weapons, took on Vladimir Putin, and stood up against the trafficking of human beings. A steady leader in an unsteady world.

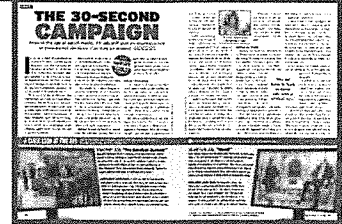
**FOWLER'S ANALYSIS:** Starting with a news clip showing anchors interacting with Trump adds credibility to Clinton's attack on her opponent. The images of Trump are very unflattering—a classic technique. Then the ad shifts to highlight Clinton's qualifications, and we see a series of images of her looking presidential: getting off *Air Force One*, meeting with world leaders, and talking with military leaders.



\*A super PAC is an independent political action committee that can raise unlimited amounts of money from corporations, unions, and individuals, but cannot give that money directly to candidates.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

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# Analyze the Article

1. Why does Erika Franklin Fowler say TV advertising is still important for political campaigns?
2. Why was 1952 an important year in the evolution of political advertising?
3. What has been different this year about advertising by the major-party presidential candidates?
4. What does Al Tompkins mean when he says, "The bottom line is it's a sales job"?