Politicalese: Spotting Election Campaign Tactics

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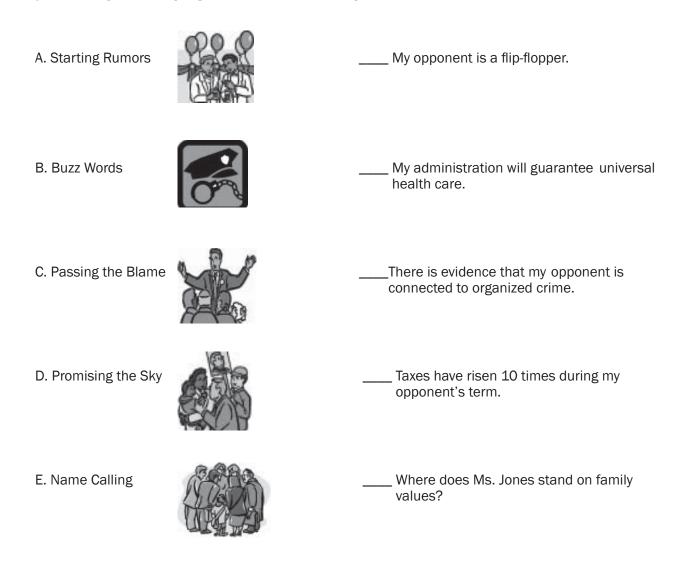
Guilt by Association: If a candidate is criticized based on his/her supporters, pay attention. For example, "Mr. Baines receives money from anti-Christian groups." Does this necessarily mean that Mr. Baines is anti-Christian?

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. See <www.youtube.com/youchoose> for candidates' election ads. Also, check out <www.c-span.org/classroom/govt/rwh050204.asp> for a lesson on negative campaigning.