

Stunts and Storytelling: The Making of Political Strategy

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Today's Focus

- Understand how candidates go about shaping their image and message.
- Understand how candidates go about trying to define their opponent.
- What obstacles stop campaigns getting their message out there?
- Understand the range of media out there for campaigns to make use of.
- Have a go at applying this to the Trump-Harris election...

Ways of Thinking About Political Communication

- 1) Political communication as a “**process**”, e. g. legislative initiative; journalistic exposure of corporate malfeasance (Perloff, 2014, p. 30);
- 2) Reliance on **language and symbols**: e.g. Trump and Harris presenting two very different Americas that are to be ‘saved’
- 3) **Elites and margins**: “elites” of politics including parties, think-tanks, donors and endorsements, (e.g. Musk joining Trump rally), influential journalists (e.g. Laura Kuenssberg; Tucker Carlson); anti-elite sentiments; ‘forgotten’ people

Political Stunts



What do political stunts seek to achieve?

What makes a good/bad political stunt?

(What is your favourite/most memorable stunt by a political candidate or campaign?)



Media Stunts



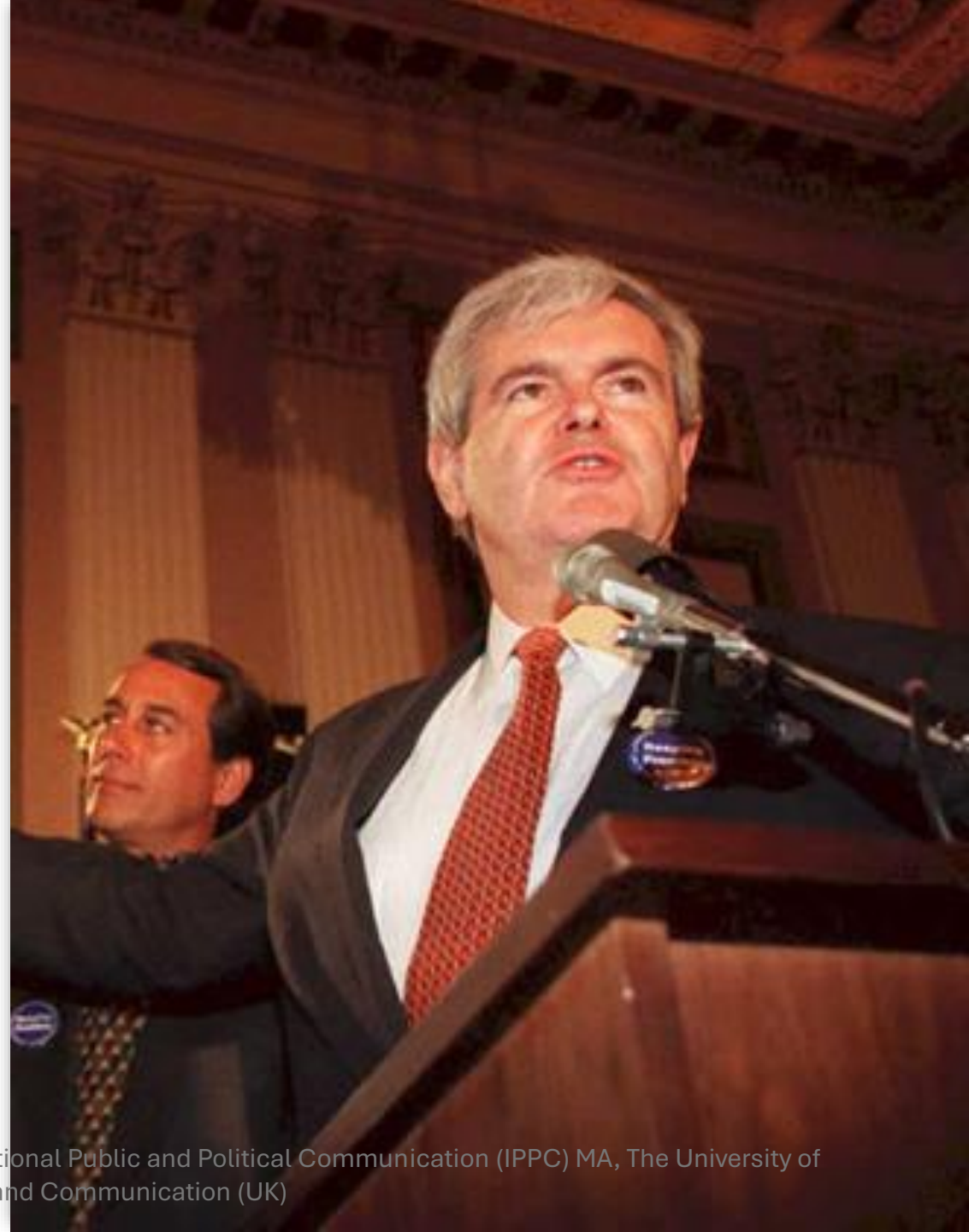
- Media stunts are ways for established television channels, newspapers, podcasters, citizen activist groups, and politicians (both outsider and establishment candidates) to highlight specific issues (mainstream or taboo).
- Media stunts help campaigners serve the ball (scrutiny) back over the net to their opponent.

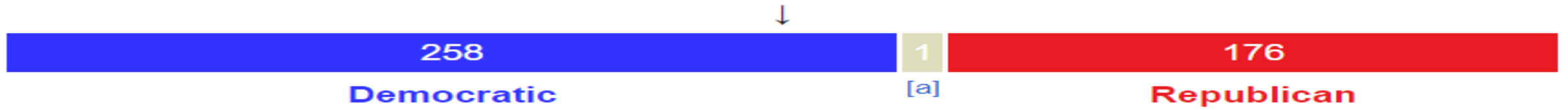


Contract With America - 1994

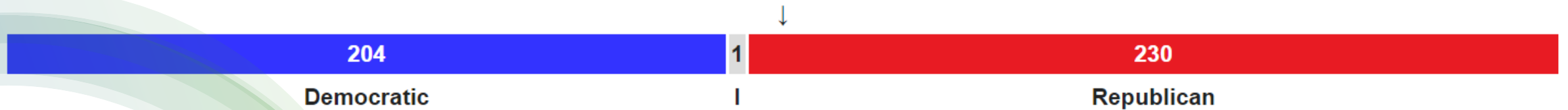
Some candidates are insiders who run as outsiders in the political system. During an election campaign, this “outsider” status is often communicated through use of the term “contract with the people”

- 1994 US Congressional Election
- Newt Gingrich
- Lower taxes, smaller welfare state, and judicial reform.





1992 US Congressional Election



1994 US Congressional Election

The (UK) Brexit Party's “Contract With The People”

- “Everybody knows that a manifesto is little more than a set of vague promises that its authors have no intention of keeping. **By contrast, our Contract with the People is a targeted set of deliverable pledges.** We are not seeking election as a government. We are seeking to deliver the Brexit that we were promised three and a half years ago.”
– Nigel Farage, Brexit Party Manifesto (2019)



5 Simple Steps to Win An Election

1. Diagnose the problem
2. Highlight the urgency of the moment
3. Define your opponent's character
4. Distinguish it from your own character
5. Reinforce the message!

1. Diagnose the problem

- What is this election (unavoidably) about at a national level?
- What is this election (unavoidably) about at an international level?
- What *could* this election be about? (incoming problems at home and abroad)
- What do I *not* want this election to be about? (incoming problems at home and abroad)
- Who is responsible for this problem?
- Does my candidate share any of the blame for this problem?

2. Highlight the urgency of the moment

- Why should voters opt to “fix” the problem in this election, and not wait another cycle?
- What if we all promise to ignore the problem?
- How can the problem be made worse by my opponent winning?
- If the problem gets worse, how quickly will voters know about it/ “feel” it?

3. Define your opponent's character

- The top three words voters current associate with my opponent are...
- The top three words *I would like* voters to associate my opponent with are...
- Do these character flaws stop by opponent doing the job at all, or just slightly?
- What evidence is there that my opponent is not up to the job?
- Is the opponent candidate actually aware of these character flaws?
- How is my opponent trying to define themselves?

4. Distinguish it from your own character

- I want voters to know that my candidate has these three characteristics...
- Right now, voters use these three words most frequently to describe my candidate...
- In four words, how would my candidate define the gap between them and their opponent in a TV debate?
- What evidence is there that my candidate has (and has always had) the characteristics and values I'm telling voters they do?
- Is the gap between my candidate and their opponent(s) a policy technicality, or a severe personality difference?

5. Reinforce the message

- What is the main message in one sentence?
- Do you have a ranked list of messages you want to get out there?
- How are you reinforcing the message?
- *Who* is helping you reinforce that message?
- Do you have ready some variations on the central message?
- Which voter will be most receptive to your message?
- Which voter will be least receptive to your message?
- What do you want receptive voters to do to help spread your campaign's message even further?

Donald Trump, 2016 US Presidential Election

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Diagnose the problem | 1. America is weak in a hostile world. |
| 2. Highlight the urgency of the moment | 2. “The American Dream is dead.” |
| 3. Define your opponent’s character | 3. “Crooked Hillary” |
| 4. Distinguish it from your own character | 4. “[I am] a very stable genius” (2018) |
| 5. Reinforce the message! | 5. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN! |

Tsai Ing-wen, 2024 Taiwan Presidential Election

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Jair Bolsonaro, 2018 Brazilian Presidential Election

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Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen, 2017 French Presidential Election

1. Diagnose the problem
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Angela Merkel, 2013 German Federal Election

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But before you put your campaign video out there for voters to see, there's a few things your campaign is going to need to do/know....

Know Who Your Voters Are

Your side, (2) their side, and (3) swing/marginal voters.

Always vote, (B) Often vote, (C) Sometimes vote, (D) Rarely vote, (E) Never vote, (F) Can't vote.

Registered or unregistered?

Know *where* to vote, or don't know *where* to vote?

What do they care about right now?

Why do they care about the issues that they do?

Know Who Your Donors Are

Large private sector donors

Small grassroots donations (paid online)

Party members

Overseas/non-domicile donors?

Donors who usually give money to your opponents?

Wealthy individuals?

Does your donors list align with the type of campaign (and government) you'd want to run?

Who is involved in a national election campaign?

How much money is involved and where does it come from?

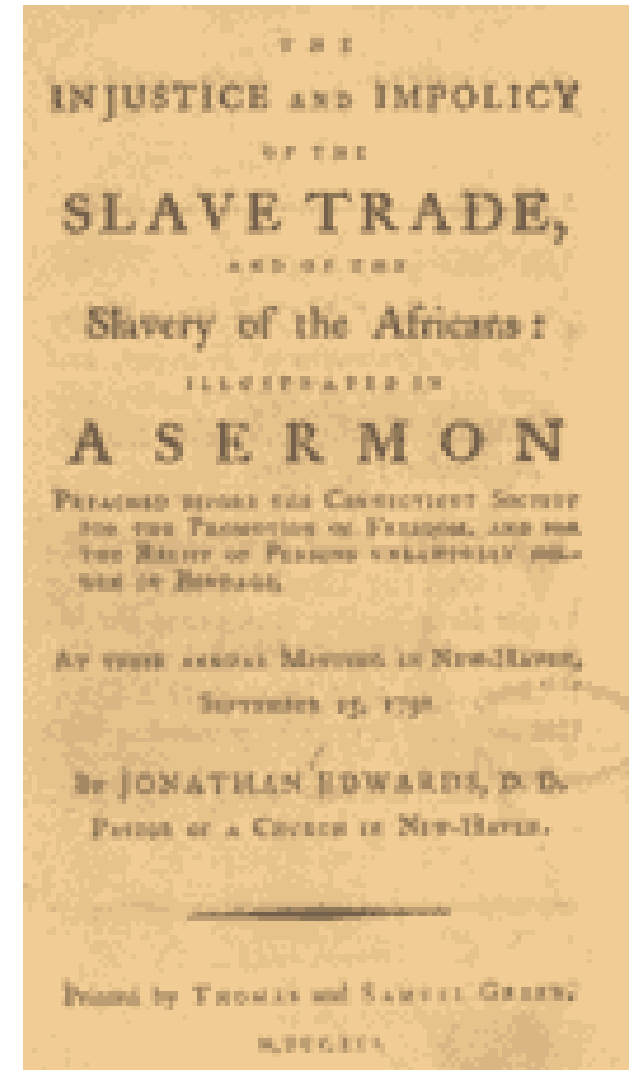
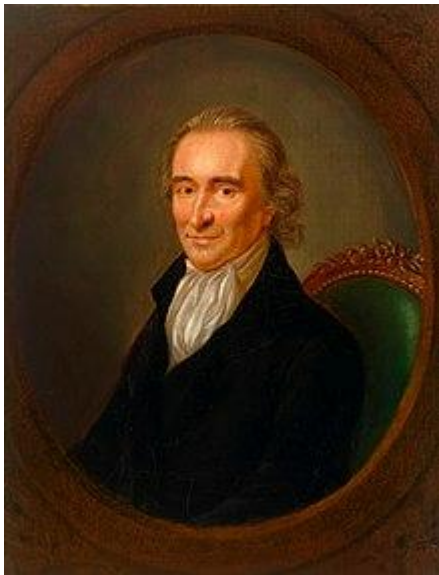
- <https://www.opensecrets.org/2020-presidential-race/joe-biden/expenditures?id=N00001669>
- President of Ireland (*Citizens Information, 2024*)

Presidential elections

The spending limit for a candidate in a presidential election is €750,000.

Political Pamphleteering

- During the eighteenth-century, an American Founding-Father, Thomas Paine, wrote pamphlets, encouraging American independence from Great Britain.



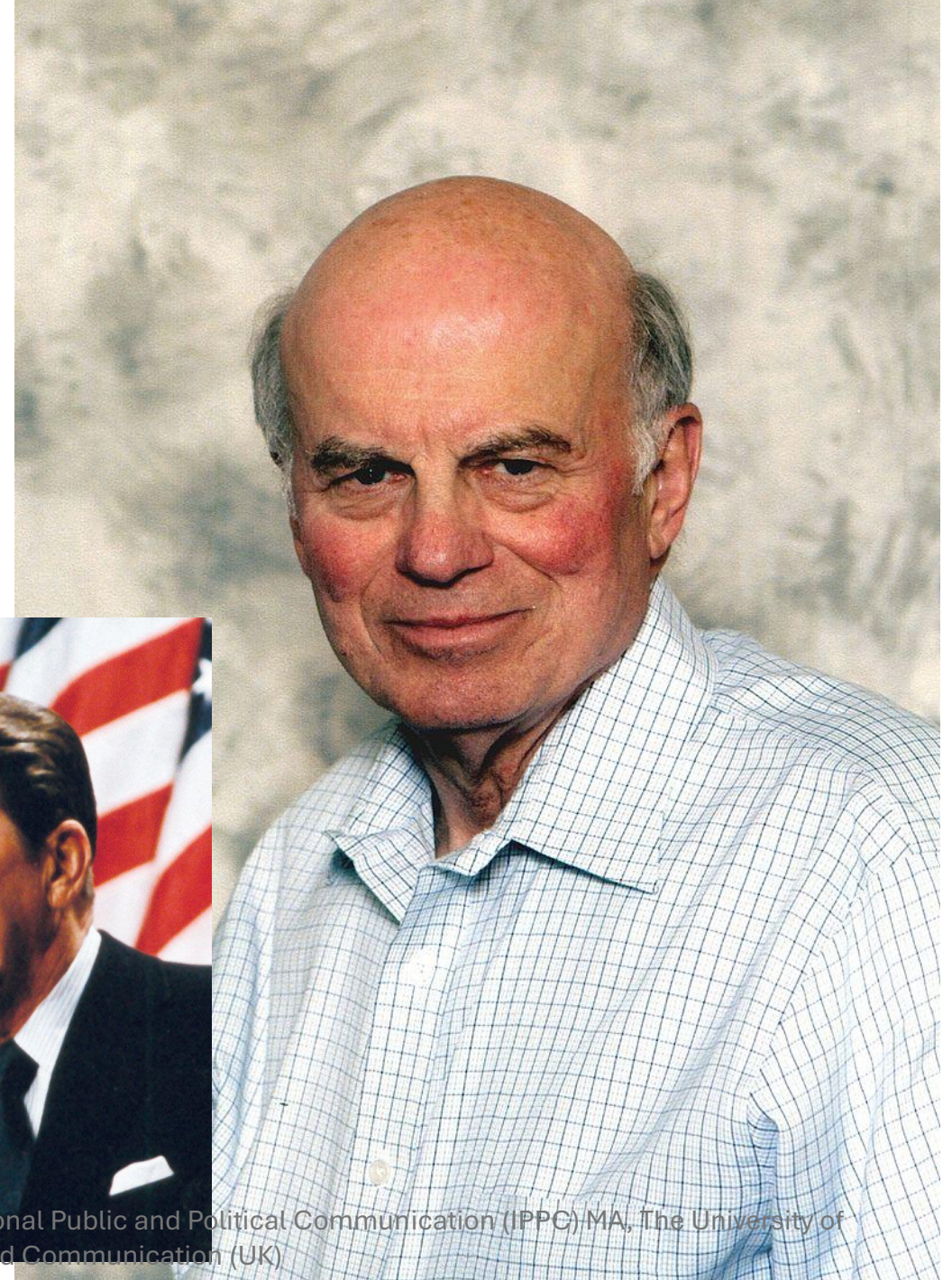
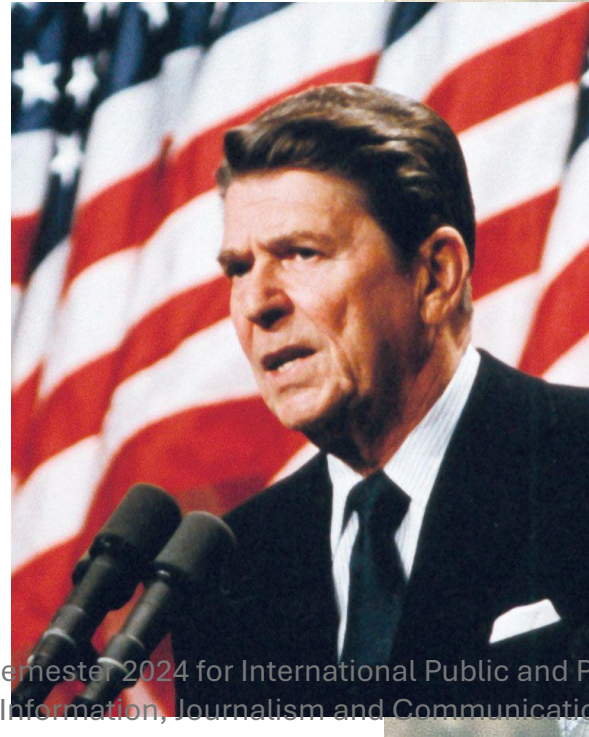
Radio and Teleprompters

- Herbert Hoover ran (unsuccessfully) for re-election as US president in 1932.
- This is the first use of a teleprompter.



Direct Mail

- Richard Viguerie was the mastermind behind the use of **direct mail** to revive right-wing politics in the United States. He played a significant role in the election of Ronald Reagan as 40th president of the United States in 1980, defeating the incumbent President Jimmy Carter.



AI “clones”

- Imran Khan campaigned in the 2024 Pakistani general election from prison.
- <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/18/imran-khan-deploys-ai-clone-to-campaign-from-behind-bars-in-pakistan>



What role can ordinary citizens
play in helping their favoured
campaign achieve the 5 steps?

How to Communicate With Voters



How do you make sure people
who usually vote for your
opponent hear your message?

Why are candidates finding it more difficult to tell their stories?

How do campaigns make sure they're not stuck in a bubble?

How do campaigns know
when to focus on convincing
“other” voters to switch to
their side, or to get their own
supporters out to the polls?

Why is there demand for a politics of personalities and celebrity?

- Spectacular and Ordinary
- Serious and Relatable
- Energetic and Statesperson-like
- Experienced and Youthful
- Global and Accessible
- Family-oriented and Focused on the Job
- Workaholic and Healthy
- Qualified and an Outsider/Underdog



Have these demands changed? If so, how and why?

- Spectacular and Ordinary
- Serious and Relatable
- Energetic and Statesperson-like
- Experienced and Youthful
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- Family-oriented and Focused on the Job
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Sexism makes it harder for
female candidates to
achieve the five steps. How
have campaigns sought to
meet this challenge?

Let's have a go....

The US Presidential Election is ACTUALLY three weeks away.

I would like half of you to pretend you work for the Trump-Vance Campaign (Republican), and the other half for the Harris-Waltz Campaign (Democrat).

Try and apply the 5 Steps we covered earlier. What would you do with the time remaining? What events, stunts and slogans? What counter-arguments would you ask your candidate to prepare?

- 1. Diagnose the problem**
- 2. Highlight the urgency of the moment**
- 3. Define your opponent's character**
- 4. Distinguish it from your own character**
- 5. Reinforce the message!**



Today's Seminar

- We will be discussing the assigned reading:
- Lakoff, G. (2016) Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think. "Chapter 19 – Can There Be A Politics Without Family Values?" pp. 128-132.
- Lakoff, G. (2004) Don't Think of An Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame The Debate. "Chapter 1 – Framing 101: How To Take Back Public Discourse" pp. 3-34.

