

Public Abstract

First Name:Mark

Middle Name:

Last Name:Glantz

Adviser's First Name:Mitchell

Adviser's Last Name:McKinney

Co-Adviser's First Name:

Co-Adviser's Last Name:

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Title:NEGATIVE POLITICAL ADVERTISING AND THE CHARGE OF INCONSISTENCY: THE RHETORIC OF FLIP-FLOP ARGUMENTS

This dissertation examines a previously unstudied genre of televised political campaign commercials known as flip-flop advertisements. Political flip-flop ads attack rival candidates for being inconsistent in their words and deeds. The texts of flip-flop ads from 1952-2008 were analyzed here in order to understand their unique rhetorical force.

Chapter four examines flip-flop spots in relation to political values and repulsions and advanced three related arguments. First, flip-flop ads employ a distinct and archetypal wind metaphor that speaks to "changes" in political positions and political directions. Second, televised flip-flop ads often portray rival candidates as being involved in a vigorous debate with themselves. Such constructions of intra-candidate debates portray candidates as psychologically unstable. Third, flip-flop ads emasculate candidates by associating them with stereotypically feminine characteristics, the most notable of which is indecision. Fourth, flip-flop ads practice antipolitics, which is to say that they reflect and perpetuate destructive notions about politics and democratic government.

Chapter five examines the progression of ideas and arguments in televised political flip-flop spots. Kenneth Burke's theory of rhetorical form is used to critically evaluate how flip-flop ads create and satisfy audience appetites in such a way that creates a distinct "flip" and "flop" rhythm. This chapter also examines the arguments and fallacies made by political flip-flop commercials. Notably, flip-flop ads commit a previously unrecognized rhetorical fallacy here labeled the fallacy of False Contradiction. Ultimately, this analysis argues that appeals to reason and appeals to emotion are inseparable in televised flip-flop ads.