

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

Mark Glantz

Dr. Mitchell S. McKinney, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

This dissertation performs a rhetorical analysis of televised presidential campaign advertisements that accuse rival candidates of being inconsistent or otherwise “flip-flopping.” The verbal, visual, and audible dimensions of flip-flop spots from 1952-2008 were critically examined in relation to voters’ values and repulsions as well as for the compelling progression of ideas and arguments within individual ads.

Chapter four presents four overarching arguments related to political values and repulsions. 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. Third, flip-flop ads emasculate candidates by associating them with stereotypically feminine characteristics, the most notable of which is indecision. Fourth, flip-flop ads reflect and perpetuate destructive notions about politics and 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. Ultimately, it is argued that these ads are designed to appeal to voters’ emotions as much as well as voters’ sense of reason.