

# Using Digital Resources to Explore the Role of Children in the Framing of Social Issues

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In 1964, Lyndon Johnson's famous presidential campaign ad titled "Peace Little Girl (Daisy)" aired only once, but the image of an innocent little girl counting flower petals incited strong emotional reaction. As the girl calls out numbers, her voice is drowned out by a countdown to a nuclear explosion. At the termination of the countdown, the young girl looks at the sky, and a large mushroom cloud replaces the image of her face. At the conclusion of the ad, a message appeared: "Vote for President Johnson on November 3. The stakes are too high for you to stay home."<sup>1</sup> This controversial ad was a persuasive way to suggest that Johnson's opponent could not be trusted to protect the innocence and safety of the nation.

The first campaign commercials were aired on television in 1952, and from their inception, children have played a critical role in the framing of political ads. Understanding these frames provides important insight into a powerful communication element that is used to influence opinions by connecting with deeply held beliefs about American principles and ideals.

## Framing

Deborah Tannen explores the concept of framing:

People approach the world not as naïve blank-slate receptacles that take in stimuli ... but rather as experienced and sophisticated veterans of perception who have stored their prior experiences as an organized mass. This prior experience then takes the form of expectations about the world, and in the vast majority of cases, the world, being a systematic place,

confirms these expectations, saving the individual the trouble of figuring out anew all the time.<sup>2</sup>

Framing is a communication process that assists people in quickly making sense of the world. Shared cultural cues are used to trigger deeply held values and subsequently influence perceptions and opinions. Effective communicators strategically select words and images so that intended messages are conveyed through a lens that directs the viewer's judgments about social issues. These frames are used by news media, political movements, and organizations for information dissemination. The technology relied upon to communicate public affairs has evolved over time, and whether via the modality of radio, television, or the Internet, political leaders, corporations, and advocacy groups recognize the power of strategic communication to influence constituents and inspire the desired response to messages conveyed.

However, communication is a complex process because ideas are expressed through both verbal and nonverbal cues that activate preconceived notions about the world. As people try to process overwhelming amounts of visual and auditory information, they will ignore some cues and infer meaning from relevant frames based on their own life experience. People rely on these established frames as mental shortcuts to integrate and digest the vast information that bombards them everyday. This process occurs automatically unless there is incongruity in the message (which creates a shift in the frame) or purposeful study of frames reveals the meaning that is attributed to the constructed communication. Although frames are intended to direct people to a predetermined understanding, some frames may be confusing or subject to misinterpretation.

The importance of frames in communication has led to intensive study and analysis of these mental shortcuts.<sup>3</sup> Research has revealed that frames can be triggered by purposeful use of words, messengers, or visual images that promote issues or influence the public toward a political cause or candidate. Subsequently, these communication elements may attract attention amid the din of excess information and sway decision outcomes.

## Framing Children in Political Discourse

Why have children been employed in this iconic role? Historically, candidates for political offices have included children in their ads, but the trend recently has intensified. Young, innocent faces are now a standard image in political advertising. Some analysts of presidential campaign advertisements have hypothesized that modern political discourse has shifted to include personal issues and emotional frames due to the broader engagement of women in the political process as voters and candidates.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, when children are used to frame social issues they may make the communication efforts more compelling and directly connected to people's lives. Political policies and election jargon may be irrelevant or overly complex for many voters, thereby fostering disinterest in civic issues. To meet the challenge for appealing and relevant images, political rhetoric involving children has increased over time; however, observers of this trend have critiqued the manipulation of children to engage voters.<sup>5</sup>

Recent events around the world have raised concern that children are not just being manipulated to promote a cause, but children are being physically harmed and exploited in election campaign events.<sup>6</sup> In Sierra Leone and Kenya, children have been offered t-shirts and other compensation for participating in political rallies where their numbers create the appearance of strong public support. Some children have been engaged in efforts to heckle opponents or participate in violent exchanges, suffering harm in the process. The advancement of children's rights and wellbeing are not the focus of these efforts, but rather political gain at the expense of children.

In American politics, children provide a powerful frame that resonates with the daily experiences of many voters. Historically, children have served as metaphors for social constructs addressing a range of policy initiatives. In addition to political issues that are directly child-focused (e.g., education, child care, and immunization), children

have become a symbolic panacea for a range of disparate topics, such as crime, the economy, and health care. The visual imagery of children can serve as metaphors for many concepts, such as fear, innocence, and hope for the future.

...a child holding an American flag can symbolize the future of the nation, and by surrounding himself with children, a presidential candidate can similarly associate himself with America's future. In another context, such as during a discussion of defense spending, the candidate in the presence of a child becomes the guardian and protector, not only of the future but of the innocent and helpless.<sup>7</sup>

In a review of presidential campaigns, Sherr analyzed the use of children to symbolically highlight issues and messages. "The 'baby-kissing politician' is an American cliché, and it is a rare politician who does not propose that he or she can help bring about a better world for our children and grandchildren."<sup>8</sup> Former Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, a past governor of Massachusetts, noted, "babies are magnets to politicians."<sup>9</sup> Children are playing an unprecedented role in the current presidential campaigns, since more candidates have children under age 10 than at any time in recent U.S. history. The presence of the children are often used to help define who the candidates are, and these young family members frequently serve as agents of the campaign, playing an important role in charming voters.<sup>10</sup>

In the 2008 presidential campaign, children provide a lens for voters to confront the broader issues facing the nation.<sup>11</sup> In his ad "A Better America," then presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, the Republican former governor of Arkansas, included photos of himself as a child with his family and then featured current images of parents with children. Huckabee tells voters,

This is a great country, but those of us who are here have to make sure

that just as the generation before us gave us a better America, we commit ourselves to do whatever it takes to give our children, and our grandchildren an America that's even greater than the one that our parents gave us.

The commercial presumably focused on Huckabee's record, but it was most effective in portraying him as committed to the American dream of providing a better, more affluent life for American children. In the ad, children serve as potent symbols of the nation's future.

Similarly, Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama's campaign advertisement titled "Chances I Had" also featured the joyful images of children engaged in learning activities to demonstrate how he would provide children with educational opportunities and thereby lead the country into a new prosperous era.

On the other hand, children's vulnerability positions them as a powerful symbol of the need for order and safety during tumultuous times. A Romney campaign ad, called "Ocean," depicts children running around a beach, while the former governor talks about cleaning up the country's culture. "I'm deeply troubled about the culture that surrounds our kids today," Romney says. "Following the Columbine shootings, Peggy Noonan described our world as the 'ocean in which our children now swim.' She described a cesspool of violence, and sex, and drugs, and indolence, and perversions. She said that the boys who did the shooting had 'inhaled too deeply in the oceans in which they swam.'" The images and rhetoric of the ad convey the importance of selecting a leader who can protect children from harm and overcome the adverse issues currently afflicting the country.

Reminiscent of Lyndon Johnson's "Daisy" campaign ad, Senator Hillary Clinton's ad titled "Children" highlights national security. The spot features the cherubic sleeping faces of children as the narrator states: "It's 3 a.m., and your children are safe and asleep. But there's a

phone in the White House, and it's ringing. Something's happening in the world. Your vote will decide who answers that call, whether it's someone who already knows the world's leaders, knows the military—someone tested and ready to lead in a dangerous world.” As a concerned mother peeks in on her child, the narrator repeats, “It's 3 a.m., and your children are safe and asleep. Who do you want answering the phone?” Although the ad focuses on the question of who is ready and prepared to be commander-in-chief, the issue is framed with children asleep in their warm cozy beds—their most innocent and vulnerable state.

### Frame Analysis

Engaging students in the study of children's images in campaign advertisements introduces relevance to a process that often may seem disconnected from their lives. An analysis of children as symbols provides a concrete visual of the role that young people play through their civic participation in both indirect and direct ways. Youth can be empowered when they realize that children serve an important function in the social construction of political discourse. Children are persuasive icons that can raise consciousness of issues and lead to collective action.

Exploring the frames used in communication, students may consider the following questions:

**What is the message of the ad? Why are children included in this commercial? Is the ad misleading?**

**What are the broader values that are being conveyed through the framing of children in political campaigns?**

**How does the public react when children are included in the framing of political issues?**

**Which is a more powerful framing model, using families with children or individual adults in ads about national economic conditions? Find**



Lyndon B. Johnson's "Peace Little Girl (Daisy)" campaign ad, archived at <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/av.hom/streaming-index.shtm>.

**examples of each framing approach and compare the key messages and impact.**

**Throughout history, has the use of children in campaigns changed? Compare the children who are depicted in contemporary and historical political ads (e.g., their ages, gender, socioeconomic status, and appearance).**

**What role do adults play in the campaign ad? Are they featured with the children, or are children highlighted separately from adults? Do the candidates interact with children?**

**Are children effectively used to communicate the message of the campaign? What are the advantages and disadvantages of using children in the ads?**

**How do political ads that frame children in positive contexts have different effects from those ads that frame children in negative situations? How do you choose between these competing frames? Is one approach more effective in promoting certain policy issues?**

**When presented with a social issue, how could you use children to reframe the message and evoke a desired opinion?**

### Internet Resources

Online resources provide concrete visual examples of the role of children in the framing of social issues. By identifying frames in political advertisements, young people can be empowered through awareness of their central role in political discourse. Moreover, finding examples of children in campaign ads and critically analyzing how children are used to shape public opinion can foster important skills. These include interpreting visual and verbal information; comparing primary sources; discovering the changing role of children's images in U.S. history; using strategic frame analysis to identify main and supporting values and worldviews; arranging political events in sequence; and learning to analyze frames used to signal the public how to think about a given social issue.

### ***Museum of the Moving Image***

*The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials, 1952–2004*

[livingroomcandidate.movingimage.us/index.php](http://livingroomcandidate.movingimage.us/index.php)

The Museum of the Moving Image presents online exhibitions, including *The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials, 1952–2004*. The exhibit contains 284 presidential campaign commercials in their searchable database. Ads are organized based on election year, type of commercial, and issue, and there are 20 commercials identified as related to the theme of children. The commercials are available on the site via streaming video with accompanying transcripts, historical background, and commentary. Downloadable lesson plans are available to help guide instruction.

### Washington Post Political Ads

*Database: Mixed Messages—Tracking Political Advertising*

[projects.washingtonpost.com/politicalads](http://projects.washingtonpost.com/politicalads)

The database includes more than 400 political advertisements funded by campaigns, parties, committees, and independent advocacy groups. In addition to presidential campaigns, some ads reflect congressional or gubernatorial races throughout the country. The site also has examples of general “issue” or advocacy ads not tied to a particular race or candidate. The database is searchable based on year, type of race, candidate/organization, state, party, issue of focus, characters portrayed in the advertisement, cues that are emphasized to trigger connections to messages, modality of dissemination, type of music, gender of the narrator, and type of ad. Dating from 2006 to 2008, there are 77 political ads that include children, and 50 of the ads specifically frame children to cue powerful emotions, including fear, anxiety, and hope for the future.

### EASE History

[www.easehistory.org/castream.asp?id=2](http://www.easehistory.org/castream.asp?id=2)

EASE History includes nearly 200 U.S. presidential campaign ads from 14 presidential elections, dating from 1952 to 2004. The site can be searched by year, candidate, political party, issues, themes, as well as other criteria. Resources available through campaign ads include: text descriptions, analysis, learning sequences, U.S. election maps, external links, candidate profiles, election issues, and election

polls. Related events and advertising are also available through each ad.<sup>12</sup>

### Boston Globe

*Modern Politics: Courting the Kids*

[www.boston.com/news/politics/gallery/010908\\_politicos\\_kissing\\_babies/](http://www.boston.com/news/politics/gallery/010908_politicos_kissing_babies/)

*The Boston Globe* has compiled photos of

2008 presidential candidates posing with children. Images of a candidate with his or her children, grandchildren, or children from the community help to convey the message that the candidate cares for the nation’s youth and promote the positive association of family values. Captions detail the setting of the photos.

### Daisy: The Complete History of an Infamous and Iconic Ad

[conelrad.com/daisy/index.php](http://conelrad.com/daisy/index.php)

The Conelrad website provides extensive background information about the Daisy commercial, including narratives on the men who created the ad and a compilation of historical documents associated with the 1964 campaign. The resources provide insight into the evolution and aftermath of the Daisy ad itself and the political / media environment surrounding its creation.

### Moveon.org: Child’s Pay

[www.bushin30seconds.org](http://www.bushin30seconds.org)


“Child’s Pay” was a controversial campaign ad by Moveon.org. The online commercial portrayed young children working in difficult service and manufacturing jobs—washing dishes, hauling trash, repairing tires, cleaning offices, assembly-line processing and grocery checking—followed by the line: “Guess who’s going to pay off President Bush’s \$1 trillion deficit?”

### Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse

[www.sla.org/content/Events/conference/2000conf/Confslides/annenburgcd.cfm](http://www.sla.org/content/Events/conference/2000conf/Confslides/annenburgcd.cfm)

Another available resource is the

Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse. This collection of resources includes transcripts of speeches, television ads, and debates of 12 United States general election presidential cam-

paigns—1952 through 1996. The archive is available on CD-ROM and is fully searchable by subject and keyword. 

### Notes

1. The complete political ad “Daisy” can be viewed at EASE History, [www.easehistory.org/castream.asp?id=2](http://www.easehistory.org/castream.asp?id=2), Conelrad [conelrad.com/daisy/video.php](http://conelrad.com/daisy/video.php), and the Museum of the Moving Image, [livingroom-candidate.movingimage.us/election/index.php?nav\\_action=election&nav\\_subaction=overview&campaign\\_id=168](http://livingroom-candidate.movingimage.us/election/index.php?nav_action=election&nav_subaction=overview&campaign_id=168).
2. Deborah Tannen, ed., *Framing in Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 20-21.
3. For more extensive discussion of framing, see FrameWorks Institute, *Framing Public Issues* (Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute, 2002), [www.frameworksinstitute.org/strategicanalysis/FramingPublicIssuesfinal.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/strategicanalysis/FramingPublicIssuesfinal.pdf).
4. Susan S. Sherr, “Scenes from the Political Playground: An analysis of the Symbolic Use of Children in Presidential Campaign Advertising,” *Political Communications* 16 (1999): 46.
5. See Robert Pear, “Greasy Kids Stuff: Washington Kidnaps Dick and Jane,” *The New York Times Week in Review* (June 15, 1997): 1; Bruce Schimmel, “Exploiting Kids, Again,” *Philadelphia City Paper* (January 25, 1997): 4; J. M., Borgman, “Washington Discovers the Magic Words,” *Newsday* (July 14, 1997): A2.
6. See UN Integrated Regional Information Networks, “Congo-Kinshasa: Children Abused in Electoral Campaign,” *Africa News* (July 30, 2006); Child Rights Information Network, “Kenya: Politicians Warned Against Using Children,” (November 19, 2007), Available at [www.crin.org/resources/InfoDetail.asp?ID=15478](http://www.crin.org/resources/InfoDetail.asp?ID=15478); and Child Rights Information Network, “Sierra Leone: Children Used for Political Gain,” (June 8, 2007), Available at [www.crin.org/resources/infoDetail.asp?ID=14290&flag=news](http://www.crin.org/resources/infoDetail.asp?ID=14290&flag=news).
7. Sherr, 47.
8. Ibid, 45.
9. Modern Politics: Courting the Kids, Photo Essay (December 2007-January 2008). Available at [www.boston.com/news/politics/gallery/010908\\_politicos\\_kissing\\_babies?pg=11](http://www.boston.com/news/politics/gallery/010908_politicos_kissing_babies?pg=11).
10. Jodi Kantor, “In 2008 Race, Little Ones Go on the Trail with Daddy,” *The New York Times* (August 26, 2007), [www.nytimes.com/2007/08/26/us/politics/26kids.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/26/us/politics/26kids.html).
11. Campaign ads are available at [projects.washingtonpost.com/politicalads/](http://projects.washingtonpost.com/politicalads/).
12. See Brian P. Collins, Rand J. Spiro, and Aparna R. Ramchandran, “Comparing and Contrasting U.S. Presidential Campaign Ads from the Cold War,” in *Digital Age: Technology-Based K-12 Lesson Plans for Social Studies*, eds. Linda Bennett and Michael J. Berson (Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, 2007) for a lesson plan that uses EASE History presidential campaign ads to instruct about campaign issues and their historical context, presidential leadership attributes, U.S. culture, and media literacy.

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