**Ten of the Most Effective Presidential Campaign Commercials Ever Made**

By Matthew Green

There once was a time not so very long ago when people actually functioned without television (gasp). And then, just like that, it arrived … and spread like wildfire.

In 1948 less than one percent of American homes had TVs. By 1954 – a mere six years later -  more than half of all American’s had a boob-tube in the house. By 1958, that rate had soared to over 80 percent,  and today hovers at about 97 percent.

That’s according to University of Wisconsin Journalism Professor [James L. Baughman](http://www.lib.niu.edu/1993/ihy930341.html), who documents the rapid rise of TV in American life. “No other household technology,” he writes, “not the telephone or indoor plumbing, had ever spread so rapidly into so many homes.”

It didn’t take political campaigns long to catch on to the enormous power this new technology offered; the green light to instantly infiltrate the living rooms of millions of Americans, more directly, personally, and visually than ever before. (Franklin D. Roosevelt was actually the first U.S. president to appear on TV – in 1939 as part of a World’s Fair exhibition in New York – a broadcast that reached a handful of TV sets in the vicinity).

The very first TV campaign ads were launched in the 1952 presidential race. Leading the charge was Republican candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower (and his running mate Richard Nixon). The campaign spent roughly $1.5 million on ads, twice that of Democratic opponent Adlai Stevenson. The first series of spot ads, called [“Eisenhower Answers America,”](http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1952) featured a seemingly average citizen asking a laughably scripted and leading question, to which Eisenhower frankly responded, staring directly into the camera, utterly devoid of emotion or charisma. The campaign soon followed up with the now legendary “I Like Ike” animation, as well as a newsreel style clip. The ads helped Eisenhower trounce his opponent. He became the first Republican to take the White House in 20 years.

[The Living Room Candidate](http://www.livingroomcandidate.org), a project of the Museum of the Moving Image, is an impressively thorough and well curated repository of presidential campaign ads in every election since 1952. Here are 10 of the heaviest hitters (note the wide variations between negative/fear-inducing and euphorically positive):

**Dwight D. Eisenhower’s “I Like Ike” (1952):** In a recent article about the birth of political consulting firms, [New Yorker](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/09/24/120924fa_fact_lepore) reporter Jill Lepore wrote: “Eisenhower was so unfamiliar with recording equipment that once, in front of a microphone, which was on, he grumbled, “How the hell does this thing work?” But, like everyone running for office after him, he was coached, and groomed, and buffed, and polished. And made up.”

Eisenhower won with 83 percent of the electoral vote

#### John F. Kennedy’s “Kennedy For Me” (1960): At 43, John F. Kennedy was to become the youngest elected candidate in U.S. history. Attacked by his opponent Richard Nixon as inexperienced, this jingle ad helped turn Kennedy’s youth into an asset, someone who is “old enough to know and young enough to do.”

Kennedy won with 56 percent of the electoral vote.

#### Lyndon B. Johnson’s “Daisy Girl” (1964): Part of Lyndon B. Johnson’s 1964 re-election bid, this became among the most famous campaign commercials of all time. It ran only once as a paid advertisement – during an NBC broadcast of Monday Night at the Movies on September 7, 1964 – but was enough to scare the pants out of the electorate and help paint his Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater,  as a dangerous right-wing extremist.

Johnson won with 90 percent of the electoral vote.

#### Hubert H. Humphrey’s “Laughter” (1968): Even though Democrat Hubert H. Humphrey ended up losing the election to Richard Nixon, this ad still packed a punch in its attempt to portray Spiro Agnew, Nixon’s relatively unknown running mate, as a political neophyte, so inexperienced as to be, well, laughable. The ad was created by Tony Schwartz, who also made Johnson’s “Daisy” ad.

Nixon won with 56 percent of the electoral vote.

#### Richard Nixon’s “McGovern Defense” (1972): In a re-election bid against Democratic challenger George McGovern, Richard Nixon’s campaign  very effectively emphasized the notion that Republicans represent military strength and the concern that a Democratic commander-in-chief would severely cut defense spending and place America in a dangerously vulnerable position. At this point, the U.S. was still enmeshed in the Vietnam War, and defense remained a pivotal issue.

Nixon won with 97 percent of the electoral vote.

#### Ronald Reagan’s “Morning In America”: This is part of a series of ads collectively known as “Morning in America” that use idyllic scenes of productivity and suburban life to suggest that President Reagan had successfully restored American optimism and revived the economy from the prolonged period of high inflation and unemployment that persisted under his Democratic predecessor Jimmy Carter. The ads helped Reagan defeat his Democratic opponent Walter Mondale in a landslide.

Reagan won with 98 percent of the electoral vote.

#### George H.W. Bush’s “Revolving Door”: This crushing ad attacked a program that Democratic challenger Michael Dukakis had supported as governor of Massachusetts allowing prisoners to be released on weekend furloughs. The ad capitalized on the case of Willie Horton, one of the program’s participants, who ended up committing murder and rape while on furlough. The black-and-white ad successfully cast doubt on Dukakis’ ability to govern, striking a major blow to his campaign.

Bush won with 80 percent of the electoral vote.

#### Bill Clinton’s “Man From Hope” (1992): An edited down version of a much longer biographical film shown at the 1992 Democratic Convention, it’s widely considered among the most compelling biographical ads ever made. Emphasizing Clinton’s small town roots it conveys the candidate’s strong work ethic, wisdom and sense of humanity.

Clinton defeated Republican incumbent George H.W. Bush with 69 percent of the electoral vote.

#### George W. Bush’s “Windsurfing” (2004): The most effective and memorable ad of the 2004 election, it successfully drove home the argument consistently used by the Bush campaign that his Democratic opponent John Kerry was a “flip-flopper” who followed the political winds.

Bush won with 53 percent of the electoral vote.

#### Barack Obama’s “Yes We Can” Web Ad: Among the most unconventional campaign ads to date, it was only available on the web and produced by Will.i.am of The Black Eyed Peas and Jesse Dylan, Bob Dylan’s filmmaker son (as opposed to professional campaign consultants). The ad put music to Obama’s New Hampshire Primary concession speech (after he lost the state to Hilary Clinton). It features a succession of over 30 celebrity performers singing his words. First posted on YouTube, the video quickly went viral, with over 26 million views in just a few days. It lead to an online fundraising boom and a new wave of momentum for Obama’s campaign.

Obama beat Republican John McCain with 68 percent of the electoral vote.