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Political Communication

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Ron Johnson vs. Mandela Barnes

According to Ron Johnson, “climate change is bullshit.” The senatorial election is Tuesday, November 8, 2022 between Democratic representative Mandela Barnes and Republican Ron Johnson. We did our political advertisement on this senate race, and after doing some research, we were able to find enough information to create a negative advertisement attacking Ron Johnson. Ron Johnson is regressive for Wisconsin. In this paper we will discuss the strategies used to create our negative advertisement, the reasoning as to why those strategies are effective, and whether or not the advertisement is ethical.

Several communications strategies are utilized in this advertisement. Incorporating pathos, attack approaches, an incorrect use of the problem-solution form, and borrowing from the classic horror genre, it was possible to narrow in on a target audience to experience a targeted emotion. The goal is for Wisconsinites, and more importantly, independent or politically moderate Wisconsinites, to feel fear towards Ron Johnson and his climate change policies. We are targeting Wisconsinites all over the state and of all ages because this issue impacts all Wisconsinites. Our incorporation of the statement “He’d rather regulate his daughters healthcare rights than protect Wisconsin's environment,” appeals to Wisconsin women and parents regarding women’s rights.

We start the advertisement with a metaphor that is: “Ron Johnson’s Wisconsin is a burning pit from Hell.” This is a very intense metaphor and starts the ad off with an attack on

Johnson. We also borrow from the classic horror genre by comparing Johnson to the devil, as well as the black and white images in our advertisement. Pathos is one of the three aspects of Aristotle's rhetorical triangle, and it specifically refers to not only the emotions that one experiences while consuming a rhetorical artifact but the targeted emotions that the speaker wants the audience to experience.

The last sentence, “Wisconsinites deserve snow this Christmas”, not only appeals to emotion but also societal symbols. In the north, people expect snow on Christmas as it is a long standing tradition. However, by using a scare tactic such as this one, people will associate Ron Johnson with a disappointing holiday instead of the typical joy people experience. It is intended for this advertisement to run around this time in the election cycle, where we are getting close to election day and also the holiday season. As people are starting to think about Christmas and other winter holidays, the winter season is also quickly approaching. Having snow and other winter activities fresh in the brain only enhances the disappointment one feels when there isn’t snow on Christmas, and that is the emotion we are looking to create.

Ron Johnson is being attacked in this advertisement. We state that “He would rather regulate his daughters healthcare rights than protect Wisconsin’s environment”. That statement directly refers to Johnsons harsh stance on abortion, and since that is a very important issue for a lot of voters, it is something that needs to be addressed. While subtly mentioned in the advertisement, it is still attacking one of his policy choices and character. Bringing Johnson's family into the equation takes the target away from his inherent ideas and policy choices and it puts it on his character. Historically, constituents look to see what type of candidate has a stronger character, and more often than not, candidates talk about their families. Here, we are using the same appeal to one's character, but instead of using Johnson’s family to highlight

positive qualities we are using it to highlight the negative ones. Making this implication shows voters that Johnson does not care about his daughter's autonomy, and that he would rather control his constituents than support what truly matters.

Our incorrect use of the problem-solution form contributes to the horror genre of our advertisement. We used conflicted horror by weaving together evil and normality. The monster, Ron Johnson, is a regular person who is invoking this horror on the audience. We scare the audience by taking away their “white Christmas” with Johnson staying in the Senate but don’t offer a clear solution to this problem. The advertisement ends with the statement “Wisconsin deserves snow this Christmas.” This line along with our visuals in this advertisement of a white Christmas and the quote “Vote Barnes this November. Vote White Christmas.” encourages the voters to vote for Barnes so they will have a white Christmas, but does so inadequately. We purposely didn’t have a clear end solution because it contributes to the unethical nature of our advertisement. The ad leaves the voter uneasy because of the threat of not having a traditional white Christmas.

The type of ad we aimed to use against Ron Johnson was an “attack ad.” Similar to Eisenhower's attack on the incumbent administration in 1952 for inadequate military preparation (Benoit pg.189), our group attacked Johnson on his stances on climate change and abortion. We were aiming to negatively portray Johnson to boost Mandela Barnes likeliness of winning the election. We attacked his policies on climate change and abortion because these are two things that Johnson is against and has publicly denounced. To add a fear factor to our negative ad we used the Scream voice from the horror film “Scream” to add an eerie feeling and reiterate that Johnson is a bad candidate. Another ad that can be related to our ad is the “Daisy” or “Peace, Little Girl” ad made in 1964. This advertisement consisted of a little girl picking a daisy while a

nuclear countdown occurred resulting in a mushroom cloud nuclear blast. Used by President Lyndon Johnson, the use of scare tactic with the eerie voice helped him secure a victory over Barry Goldwater. This relates to our ad where we used scare tactics and comparisons to a horror film and Hell to paint Johnson as evil.

Lastly, when we originally began this assignment, we were aiming to be unethical, but I don't think we succeeded. The ad is ethical for the most part. Although we did call him a liar, which can be considered unethical, the information provided is information that Johnson has made public multiple times in the past. Additionally, politicians call each other liars regularly, which has normalized it to a certain extent, but it can still be considered unethical. In this case, because the ad is not clearly or overtly unethical, each viewer has to decide for themselves whether they consider it unethical or ethical. With that being said, however, we acknowledge that this ad may be unethical to some. Since we include a direct attack on how Johnson treats his family, we tread more on the side of being unethical. It is one thing to attack one's direct policy choices, but another to deface his character. One can argue that the style used, alluding to the classic horror genre, can be considered unethical as well. However, like previously mentioned, other politicians across the country have engaged in similar media tactics. Falling in line with the current status quo when it comes to political attack advertisement is a stronger way to engage voters, as the fear instilled in them can lead to a higher motivation to vote in favor of our candidate.

Overall, this advertisement incorporates a multitude of political communication strategies. By engaging in pathos and utilizing aspects from the class horror genre, we are encouraging and expecting voters to associate Ron Johnson with fearful feelings. Looking back on similar advertisements in history, ours falls in line with similar emotional appeals.

Additionally, with today's level of political polarization, it is very common to see attack advertisements such as this one that cross the line into unethical territory. By including a statement about his family and treatment of his daughters, we are not only calling his policy choices into question but also his inherent character. This advertisement as a whole is effective, as appealing to the audience's emotions is a persuasive tactic to encourage constituents to vote for a specific candidate.

Works Cited

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