

Campaign Commercial Assignment
GOVT 370, Legislative Processes
Spring 2011

The purpose of this assignment is to expose students to the practical aspects of congressional campaign strategy by having them design and develop a 30-second video commercial on behalf of or in opposition to a current member of the U.S. House or Senate. Working in three-person groups, students will use on-line resources to research the constituency and record of the relevant candidate, as well as the record of the main opponent. After conducting this background research, you will use the resources of the Swem Media Services Center to actually produce the video commercial.

Throughout the course, I will show examples of high (and low) quality commercial scripts and videos that have been used in past congressional campaigns. In addition, there are a number of brief readings on the syllabus early in the course that provide useful background about designing campaign commercials.

1. Logistics

Early in the course, I will secure from students information about their general ideological leanings and partisan inclinations. If you are uncomfortable providing such information or completely lack ideological or partisan views, you will be assigned to a group randomly. But for the most part, I expect that students in each section of GOVT 370 will be assigned to three-person groups based on their ideological preferences and partisan inclination. As much as feasible, students who are very conservative Republicans will be grouped with other conservative Republicans, moderates will be grouped with moderates, and still other groups will be comprised of liberal Democrats. The members of each group will meet, and, via whatever process they agree upon, select an incumbent member of the U.S. House or Senate for whom they will serve as informal “campaign consultants” in preparation for a possible reelection run in 2012.

Within the groups, there will be three main roles or functions and an individual student will be assigned to work on each one. These roles are (1) researcher, (2) scriptwriter/videographer, and (3) editor. Although students will have primary responsibility for their own roles, the expectation is that there will be a lot of collaboration across the different roles within each group, especially between research and scriptwriting, on the one hand, and between video production and editing, on the other. The main responsibilities of each role are as follows.

Researcher. Gather background information about the member, his or her possible opponents, and the relevant constituency (district or state, depending on the candidate) and prepare a short memo (no more than three pages single-spaced) that answers the following questions. What are the key issues or topics that should be emphasized in a television commercial for your candidate? These topics can be positive attributes of your own candidate and party and/or negative characteristics of the opposing party. Given the nature of the district, why are these topics or themes likely to increase the probability that your candidate will prevail in November 2012?

How should these topics or themes be framed or presented in campaign literature for your candidate, including the commercial that your group is developing for this assignment?

Scriptwriter/Videographer. The individual fulfilling this role will prepare a comprehensive written script that delineates in detail all of the words and images to be included in the campaign commercial. The writing of the script is at the heart of this assignment and it is expected that the scriptwriter will collaborate closely with other members of his or her group. Since the commercial can only last for 30 seconds, the script does not need to be very long. But it does need to describe all contents of the commercial, including sound, words, and images. At the end of the script, there should be a brief paragraph demonstrating that it will be feasible to actually produce the commercial. The student fulfilling this role also will take the lead in gathering and/or creating the main components of the commercial. He or she will work closely with staff at the Swem Media Center.

Editor. Working with other group members, the person responsible for editing will integrate the component parts into the commercial and make any changes necessary to improve the final product. As is the case for the scriptwriter/videographer, the editor will work especially closely with the technical staff at the Media Center.

Indeed, we will be leaning heavily on the technical and substantive assistance of staff from the Swem Media Center throughout this exercise. In late January or early February, staff from the Center will speak to GOVT 370 during our regular class session about the project, introducing you to the facilities and discussing the kinds of commercials that are possible.

2. Schedule

2/1 or 2/2 (for section 2 or section 1): Students will receive assignments to three-person groups. As soon as possible, the students in a group should arrange to meet and develop a process for selecting a member of the House or Senate for whom they will serve as campaign consultants.

2/8 or 2/9: Each student group must submit to me a brief (no more than a paragraph or two) memo identifying the member that they will be working for and explaining why researching and producing a commercial for this campaign is feasible. I will respond with any comments or suggestions by Thursday, 2/10.

2/15 or 2/16: On behalf of his or her group colleagues, the student serving as “researcher” for each group will turn in a three-page memo (single-spaced) analyzing the relevant legislator and constituency, outlining the possible themes that might be emphasized in the commercial, and identifying a single theme that will be the focus. Although the “researcher” will take the lead at this stage of the project, I expect that other members also will contribute to the research effort. All stages of the project are interrelated. Any relevant theme, positive or negative, is fair game, albeit with a few exceptions. For one, I would like you to follow reasonable standards of good taste – for instance, no slurs that touch on race, gender, or sexual orientation. Please also keep in mind that campaign commercials are often subject to scrutiny by the media regarding fairness and accuracy and you should assume that your commercial will be held to such standards (such that they are). As mentioned, the memo should end by describing the single theme that will be

the focus of the commercial for the group. Be sure to explain the selection of this theme.

2/22 or 2/23: The group scriptwriter/videographer will turn in a polished draft of the script. Since the commercial is only 30 seconds, the script probably will not be longer than a page or two. The scriptwriter will take the lead here, but once again I expect that other group members will be integrally involved. The script should be a comprehensive description of all the words, images, and sound that will be included in the video commercial. Essentially, it should be the written “design” for the commercial and will serve as guidance for the rest of the project. The more detail in the script, the better. You should consult closely with the relevant Swem staff to ensure its technical feasibility given existing resources. As much as possible, the script should build on the themes identified by the researcher and outlined in his or her memo.

3/22 or 3/23: By this day, each group should have compiled all of the ingredients for their commercial. Any video photography, still photographs, and audio must be produced and/or compiled and made ready for the editing process. The scriptwriter/videographer also will take the lead in this part of the exercise, but I fully expect that all other group members will provide significant assistance. This is a collaborative exercise and this task in particular is critical to the production of the commercial. I urge you to begin the process of compiling or creating the component parts of your video prior to spring break if at all possible. I will expect the scriptwriter/videographer to provide me with a brief note (an email message is fine) describing the video and audio components of the commercial and making clear that the editing process is ready to begin.

4/1, before 5:00 pm. The final version of the video commercial is due. We will make an appropriate arrangement with the Swem Media staff about how and where the final versions will be stored and I will watch what you have produced over the following weekend. Working with the other group members, the editor will take the lead in this final aspect of the assignment. We will need to take steps to see that there is not excess demand for the nine studios at the Media Center, as well as the time of Center staff, during this portion of the exercise. Especially here, planning and careful scheduling will be critical.

3. Grading

As mentioned in the course syllabus, the entire campaign commercial exercise will count for 20 percent of your course grade. The grades for individual students will be based in part on the quality of the final product produced by their group, but I also will give special weight to different portions of the exercise that are particularly relevant to your role. So, the assignment grade for the researcher will weigh heavily the quality of the background memo submitted on 2/15 or 2/16. The grade for the scriptwriter/videographer will be based in large part on the quality of the script that the group submits on 2/22 or 2/23, as well as the creativity of the audio and visual ingredients of the commercial. Along those lines, the grade for the editor will be based on my observations of the quality of this individual’s work on the project. I also will be in regular contact with Swem Media staff about the project, assessing which students are making particularly strong contributions to their group efforts. Most likely, I also will be contacting students informally throughout the project, periodically touching base with them on their progress.

Sometime in early April, I will schedule a public viewing and discussion of the video commercials produced by the groups in both sections of GOVT 370. If possible, the session will be open to all members of GOVT 370, members of the government department, and any other individuals who would like to attend. I also hope to include one or more professional campaign consultants in the session; individuals who produce campaign commercials for a living. The goal would be to have them comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the commercials produced by the class.