# Brands and Politics

A brand is not just a specific product, but also a look, a style, a form of individual presentation and expression. Activities ask you to critically examine ads for popular product brands and then design a brand for a political figure or group.

Do you have a favorite brand of clothing, footwear, coffee, food, cosmetics, or other everyday consumer item?

A **brand** emerges from the meaning or identity that people, advertising, and popular culture give to a product. One adopts a brand (that is, buys that product instead of others that perform the same function) in part to share in the images and values the brand conveys. For instance, what are different images associated with Versace sunglasses, Wrangler jeans, L.L. Beans boots, and Converse sneakers?

How did you learn about and come to adopt your preferred brand? The influence of family and peers is one answer, but many people chose brands based on the ways **those items were marketed and advertised** through online and print media.

Ivory Soap, trademarked in 1874, is considered to be the first branded product in the U.S. The pictures below show two different Ivory Soap ads from 1898, directed toward different gender-specific buyers. What branding ideas do you see at work in the following two advertisements?
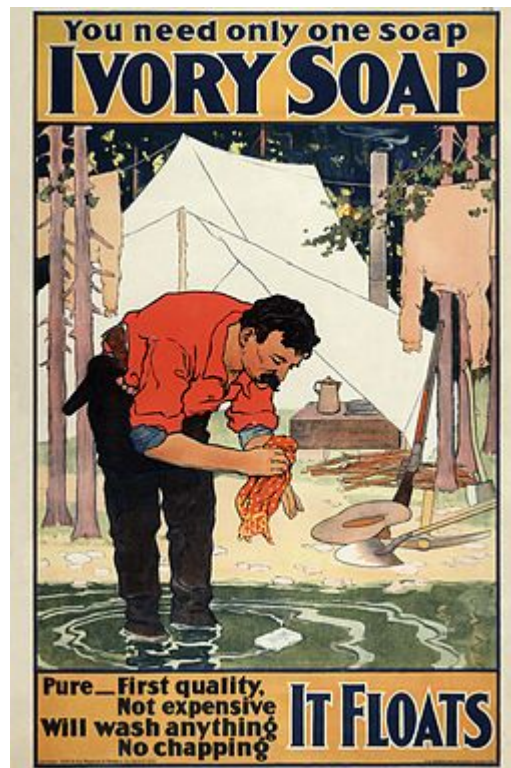
"[You Need Only One Soap—Ivory Soap](#)", 1898 advertisement for Ivory Soap, by the Strobridge Lith. Co., Cin'ti & New York. Copyright 1898 by The Procter & Gamble Co., Cin'ti, O., U.S.A. Restoration by Adam Cuerden. | Public Domain

"[The Nursery](#)" by Alice Barber Stephens, 1898 Ivory Soap advertisement | Public Domain

The most popular brands more than 100 years ago (in 1920-1921) were Eastman (Kodak) cameras, Singer sewing machines, Campbell soup, Arrow shirt collars, and Waterman fountain pens ([A Century of Big Brands](#), American Business History Center, 2020).

What are the most popular product brands today? The answer is ever-changing, as products are marketed through mass media. Marketing is how manufacturers and sellers seek to convince consumers to want and buy a product. Marketing brands is a pervasive feature of today's media-driven consumer cultures. One 2022 [study](#) from researchers in New Zealand found that **young children, ages 11 to 13, were exposed to 554 brands (about one a every minute) during the course of a 10 hour day** (Watkins et al., 2022).

What do you think would be the case for youngsters in the United States - more brand exposure? Less?

Brands and Politics

Product brands are now increasingly politicized, to the point where researchers, manufacturers, and marketers think in terms of "red brands" (preferred by conservative groups and the Republican Party voters) and "blue brands" (favored by liberal groups and the Democratic Party voters).

In today's highly partisan political culture, it is assumed that increasingly more people will buy items from companies they perceive as supporting or expressing their political views. Even wearing a clothing style or drinking a coffee brand may be perceived as political statements. Red and blue brands represent the entry of politics into parts of life that once seemed separate from it ([Red Brands and Blue Brands: Is Hyper-Partisanship Coming for Corporate America?](#); Gelles, 2021).

Many consumers now buy some products based on political preferences. For example, in recent years the Black Rifle Coffee Company, a veteran-founded and operated organization that seeks to compete with Starbucks, has found support among conservative political groups and supporters of former President Donald Trump. Starbucks, by contrast, has increased its support for liberal and progressive issues, including saying the company will pay the abortion expenses for its employees who must travel more than 100 miles to receive reproductive health care services. One marketing firm found that **nearly two-thirds of consumers worldwide, including the United States, say they will support or shun companies based on that firm's positions on political issues** ([Edelman](#), 2018).

Politically influenced buying extends to many more products besides coffee. ["Are Your Jeans Red or Blue?"](#) asked Kapner (2019) in a *Wall Street Journal* article noting how the political alignment of customers has been shifting in recent years, with more Democrats purchasing Levi's (the company supports greater gun controls) while more Republicans buy Wrangler.

In another example, people from different political perspectives tend to buy different types of cars -- Republicans purchase more sedans and trucks and Democrats buy more SUVs and hybrids ([Vehicles and Voting: What Your Car Might Say About How You'll Vote](#); Howard, 2020).

All these buying patterns seem connected to both the political positions of manufacturers as well as the personal self-image that consumers associate with a product or a brand.

What brands would you characterize as red or blue and why? For instance, Facebook or Snapchat; Chick-fil-A or Wendy's; GMC and Ford or Honda and Subaru; Walmart or Target; what other examples would you include?

Activity 1: Critically Examine the Ads for Popular Brands

- Select a popular brand (see the [most popular brands in 2022](#)).
- Curate a collection (on Wakelet, Sway, Padlet, Google Slides, or another tool) of print, digital, and video-based ads for that brand.
- Use the [Teacher and Student Guide to Analyzing Advertisements](#) to critically investigate the design, language, production, and audience of the ads. Consider how the ads might be designed to appeal to people with specific political viewpoints.
  - If the ads do not seem to be geared toward a speciifc political audience, take a look at the recent political donations of that brand, using [OpenSecrets](#) (see [Apple, Inc](#). as an example). Then, reinvestigate the ads.
- Select one ad for that brand and redesign it to appeal to a different audience (e.g., someone with a different political viewpoint, someone younger or older, someone from a different country).

Designing for Learning: Student-Created Activity Example

[Critically Examine the Ads for Popular Brands](#) by Alexa Sortino

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Activity 2: Investigate and Design a Political Brand

- Select a state politician (e.g., House of Representatives member, State Senator) and critically investigate their brand.
- Use the following prompts to guide your investigation:
  - What colors do they use for their political campaigns?
  - What language do they use?
  - How would you describe their brand? (see "[Brand Obama: The Implications of a Branded President](#)")
  - Who is their brand designed for? How do you know this?
  - Who, do you think, will find their brand most appealing? Why?
- Use the findings from your analysis to guide the design of your own brand as a politician. Select a political role you would consider running for one day. Design a brand for you in that role.

Designing for Learning: Student-Created Activity Example

[Investigate and Design a Brand for Politics](#) by Alexa Sortino

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Additional Resources

- [The brands that transcend politics](#)
- [Companies increasingly using politics in marketing, but there are risks](#)

Connecting to the Building Democracy for All eBook

Building Democracy for All: Persuasion, Propaganda, and Political Language in Elections

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