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AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

C-SPAN IN THE CLASSROOM

On a Tuesday night in October a dozen Harvard University students settled into their seats to learn about the political stump speech. Seven weeks later they would stand in front of each other to deliver their own stump speech as if they, instead of people named Dole and Dukakis, Gore and Jackson, were running for President in 1988. Who knows? By the year 2012, C-Span might be following one of them around on its "Road to the White House" series.

This fall is the first time a course devoted solely to the stump speech is being taught at the John F. Kennedy School of Government's Institute of Politics. The idea is to give students a chance to think about how a candidate constructs and delivers a core campaign message. Unlike formal speeches on particular issues, the candidates rely on essentially the same stump speech day after day along the campaign trail. As the candidacy evolves so, too, does a successful stump speech.

In designing this course it was essential to bring examples of stump speeches directly into the classroom, not fifteen second sound bites but eight or ten or twelve minutes worth of public speaking. After all, students who are trying to learn how to give a stump speech should hear what the voters are hearing, not excerpts selected by some news producer. This point was underscored during our first meeting when students were asked to talk about speakers they admired. "I don't really have any in mind," said one student, "I've only heard short sound bites from a lot of different speakers."

Without access to C-Span's new "Road to the White House" series the task of providing students with full length stump speeches would have been virtually impossible. Sound bites would not do. But neither the networks, nor radio stations, nor newspapers, nor magazines give full coverage to stump speeches, even though political analysis, particularly in the early going, is based to a large extent on the effectiveness of a candidate's stump message.

Fortunately C-Span decided last winter to take its cameras and microphones into living rooms in New Hampshire and American Legion Halls in Iowa where candidates meet small groups of voters and deliver their informal stump speeches. For political junkies, C-Span provides a rare opportunity to see candidates at

work in intimate settings. For my students, the videotapes from C-Span in the Classroom made the actual stump speeches of Robert Dole and Michael Dukakis, Jesse Jackson and Albert Gore a reality to a roomful of students who wanted to learn how to create their own.

By Melissa Ludtke.

[She is currently a Boston-based correspondent with Time magazine who teaches a course on the Political Stump Speech at Harvard's Institute of Politics. In 1986 she was speechwriter and issues director for Joseph P. Kennedy's Congressional campaign.]

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