

Political Propaganda Posters and Their Influence on Public Opinion: Visual Rhetoric and Political Communication

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Citation: Almomani, I. G. & Alkhateeb, S. S. (2025). Political Propaganda Posters and Their Influence on Public Opinion: Visual Rhetoric and Political Communication, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 10(4), 2792-2798. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v10i4.3338>

Published: December 16, 2025

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of political posters in shaping public opinion, identity, and civic participation. By combining images and words, posters influence emotions and decision-making, with examples ranging from historical propaganda to modern election campaigns. Using a qualitative descriptive approach supported by case studies and a literature review, the research analyzes examples such as Shepard Fairey's Hope poster from Obama's 2008 campaign, Bogotá's 2019 mayoral election, Taiwan's referendum campaigns, and wartime propaganda. The findings show that design elements such as color, layout, and facial imagery strongly affect audience attention and memory, while slogans and short text reinforce first impressions. Cultural and social contexts further shape how these messages are received, with case studies revealing that posters not only attract attention but also build group identity and motivate participation. In the digital era, posters remain persuasive tools that circulate rapidly through social media, raising both opportunities for engagement and ethical concerns about manipulation and misinformation. Their continued effectiveness highlights the enduring importance of posters as instruments of persuasion, cultural expression, and civic engagement.

Keywords: Visual Rhetoric; Political Symbolism; Campaign Images; Voter Participation; Digital Political Communication

INTRODUCTION

Political posters have played a lasting role in shaping public opinion because they combine images, symbols, and persuasive messages that reach audiences quickly. Historically, they offered one of the most accessible means of spreading ideas, particularly when newspapers or radio were limited or costly. During World War I in the United States, for example, the government commissioned artists to design propaganda posters encouraging citizens to support the war effort and purchase defense bonds (New Yorker, 2019) [Figure 1].

The power of these posters lay in their strong imagery and symbolism, which appealed to emotions such as duty, pride, and urgency. Their influence continues in contemporary contexts, as seen in Indonesia where election posters remain highly visible and often surpass traditional media in their impact (Fox, 2022). This enduring relevance demonstrates that posters are among the most direct and persuasive forms of political communication.

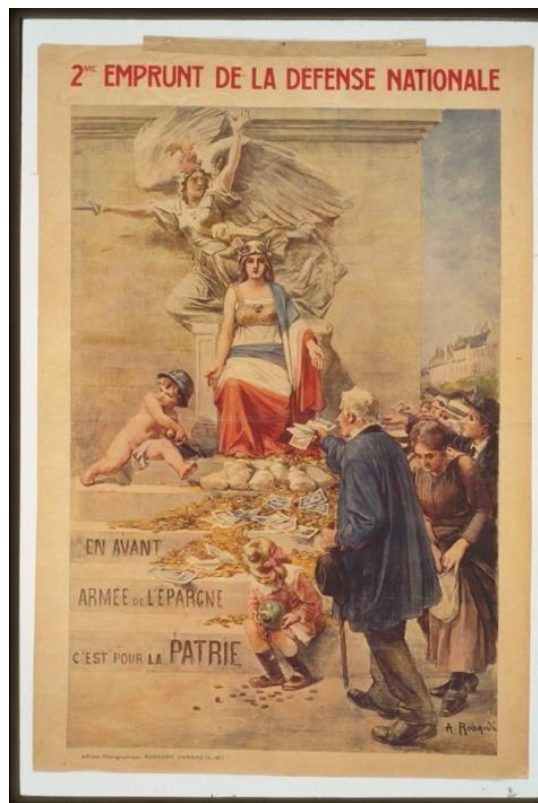


Figure 1: 2nd National Defense Loan. (Robaudi, 1916)

Political parties treat posters as more than decorative campaign materials, investing substantial financial and logistical resources into their design, production, and distribution. The value placed on this medium is reflected in the protective measures often taken to guard against vandalism, emphasizing the strategic importance of posters in political communication (Navarro, 2023). Around the world, posters are crafted with deliberate attention to visual and textual elements to shape voter perceptions. A stylistic analysis of Philippine campaign posters, for example, shows a consistent use of bold colors, emotionally charged imagery, and concise yet descriptive text—techniques that also reinforce their public identity (Cristobal, 2022). Political posters deserve more study because of their ability to shape public opinion, strengthen group identity, and catch attention in public spaces. This research looks at their symbolic meaning, communication strategies, and cultural role, seeing them as lasting tools of persuasion and participation in both past and present campaigns.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, I used a descriptive qualitative method to understand how political posters affect people's opinions and voting behavior. I chose case studies on purpose so I could compare historical and modern examples from different campaigns. To study them, I looked closely at the design — the colors, images, and slogans — and the meanings behind these choices. I also read other academic studies and reports to support my analysis. By combining these steps, I was able to see how posters work not only as persuasive tools but also as symbols that shape group identity and encourage participation in politics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers agree that political posters are important tools for reaching people. They influence view politics, spread ideas, and sometimes push groups to act together. Schell (2012) noted that overlooked, even though images have a strong, substantial effect on emotions and thinking. In recent years, more research has turned to the role of visual politics. Farkas (2023), for instance, reviewed ten years of studies and explained how technology and social media have made posters and political images more influential. He showed that posters still matter in campaigns because they combine simple images with short text that grabs attention and affects opinions.

In the Philippines, Cristóbal (2022) found that bright colors, emotional pictures, and short slogans helped candidates stand out and shape their public identity. In Indonesia, Fox (2022) showed that posters continue to be

important, especially in areas with little access to TV or the internet. Designs that used local cultural symbols worked best because they created quick emotional reactions.

Research on voter psychology also shows how looks and design play a role. Herrmann and Schikano (2021) found turnout. In Taiwan, Wang et al. (2023) showed that posters with clear visuals and simple wording helped people feel more engaged and remember campaign points. TheseTheseThese studies suggest that design and emotion can influence choices just as much as policies.

Posters also carry historical meaning. The Palestinian Poster Project Archive (n.d.) shows that since the 1960s, posters have been used for resistance and identity-building. During apartheid, the South African Prairie Arts Group created posters to unite people against oppression (SAHA, n.d.). Seidman (2008) adds that campaign posters are about connecting with culture and values. This shows how art, politics, and psychology often mix to shape opinion.

To summarize, political posters can work in many ways — they can persuade, act as cultural symbols, or serve as campaign tools. Because they mix images, emotions, and short text, they often shape how people react to politics. These findings suggest that posters should keep getting attention in research, since they can guide debates, build group identity, and motivate participation.

Case Studies

Shepard Fairey's Hope Poster (2008 U.S. Presidential Campaign)

Shepard Fairey's *Hope* poster became one of the most potent symbols of Obama's 2008 campaign [Figure 2]. The design transformed a simple photo into a bold graphic with red, beige, and blue tones that were easily recognizable. Obama appeared in a serious pose, but street-art style gave the image a modern, approachable feeling (Fisher, 2012). This unusual combination of formality and urban art gave the poster emotional power and helped make it one of the campaign's most memorable visuals. That combination made Obama look serious but also approachable.

The poster spread quickly. Reports mention around 300,000 prints and than a million copies in circulation (The New Yorker, 2009). It was everywhere — on walls, online, and in campaign events. Because of that reach, the poster became more than just campaign material. It into a shared symbol of hope and optimism, showing how a simple design can influence identity and public emotion.



Figure 2: “Hope”. (Shepard Fairey, 2008)

Alfred Leete's Your Country Needs You (1914, United Kingdom)

Another famous example is Alfred Leete's 1914 British recruitment poster of Lord Kitchener pointing at the viewer with the words “*Your country needs you.*” [Figure 3]. It first appeared in *London Opinion* magazine and spread widely, with about 300,000 copies circulation (London Mint Office, n.d.). The direct stare and pointing hand gave the message a personal touch, as if Kitchener was speaking to each individual. This made the call to enlist much stronger (Szurmiński, 2022). The poster was put up in busy public places like trams and building walls, which helped it reach vastvast numbers of people and become a national symbol of duty and patriotism. This case showed how a simple image could turn the idea of national duty into a personal call for each individual during a crisis.



Figure 3: “Your Country Needs You”. (Leete, 1914)

E. J. Kealey’s Women of Britain Say “Go!” (1915, United Kingdom)

In 1915, E. J. Kealey designed the Women of Britain Say “Go!” poster to generate emotional and social pressure for military enlistment during World War I [Figure 4]. Commissioned by the Parliamentary Recruitment Committee, the image depicts two women and a young boy looking out from a domestic window at soldiers marching by. By drawing on traditional gender roles and portraying women as moral guides encouraging men to enlist, the poster invoked feelings of duty and familial obligation through its domestic imagery (Cohen, 2012). Cohen (2012) describes the design as one of the more nuanced examples of wartime propaganda, emphasizing emotional resonance over overt coercion. While some contemporary viewers interpreted its message as manipulative, the poster shows how posters used family roles and gender expectations to push men toward enlistment. This case highlights the effectiveness of culturally and emotionally framed visual storytelling in shaping political persuasion.



Figure 4: *Women of Britain Say “Go!”*. (Kealey, 1915)

Bogotá Mayoral Election Posters (2019, Colombia)

Nadal, Bello Viruega, and Pardo (2021) studied how people reacted to posters during Bogotá’s 2019 mayoral election [Figure 5]. They found that design choices like color, layout, and showing the candidate’s face made posters more eye-catching and created stronger emotional reactions. Even though these features did not directly change votes, they shaped how people noticed and discussed political messages in a city crowded with advertisements.



Figure 5: “Bogotá Mayoral Election Posters”. (Nadal et al., 2021)

Image-Based Referendum Posters on Social Media (Taiwan, 2023)

In Taiwan’s referendum, Wang et al. (2023) looked at over 2,000 political images posted on Facebook and found that color mattered a lot. Some groups used party colors to show identity, while others chose contrasting shades to highlight differences. The study showed that online posters used color the same way as printed ones. Party colors made the messages stand out and easier to recall, and social media helped spread them to more people.

Political Posters from the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election (Multimodal Analysis)

In the 2020 U.S. presidential race, posters also reflected the character of each campaign. Biden’s designs used blue tones and slogans such as “*Build Back Better*” to promote unity. Trump’s posters leaned on red and white with slogans like “*Keep America Great*” to project strength and tradition. These examples show how slogans and colors express campaign strategies and shape political identity. Posters that blend images, words, and colors can create strong impressions influence how people view politics.

Visual Language and Emotional Impact

Posters usually make their first impact through visuals, before people notice the words. Colors, images, and layout catch the eye, and a strong design can send a message almost instantly. In Bogotá’s 2019 mayoral election, for example, posters that used warm colors and explicit photos of the candidate immediately attracted attention (Nadal et al., 2021). Eye-tracking showed that voters looked first at faces and colors, and these impressions shaped how they felt about candidates even before they considered policies.

Color is one of the main things people notice in posters. In Taiwan’s referendum, Wang et al. (2023) showed that parties used colors to show who they were and to bring supporters together. Blue was linked with trust, while green was used to suggest unity. Competing groups sometimes picked opposite colors to make the differences stand out even more. These examples show that simple design choices like color can powerfully shape how people view political figures and issues.

Symbols also matter a lot. Campaigns often use flags, patriotic words, or heroic figures to stir pride and push people to get involved. Alfred Leet’s 1914 British recruitment poster, in which Lord Kitchener points directly at the viewer with the slogan “Your country needs you,” is a classic example. Its direct gaze and bold style reflected a sense of personal responsibility, leading to a significant increase in recruitment (Szurmiński, 2022). Similarly, Shepard Fairey’s “Hope” poster for Barack Obama’s 2008 election campaign captured complex political ideals in a simple, inspirational image. The striking color palette of red, beige, and blue conveyed unity and progress, demonstrating how symbolic imagery and color can combine to create emotionally powerful and persuasive messages (Fisher, 2012).

These examples show that designers often build posters to spark emotions first. Posters usually work best when they touch people’s feelings before they make logical arguments—allowing their messages to seep into the public consciousness. By generating immediate emotional responses, posters become powerful tools of persuasion and foster a sense of shared identity.

Text, Identity, and Persuasion

Pictures grab people first, but the words give a poster its lasting effect. Slogans and short phrases help frame the message and make it easier to remember. A good example is Shepard Fairey’s *Hope* poster. Using just one word, “hope,” the poster linked Obama’s campaign with a broad and positive feeling (Fisher, 2012). Because it was so

simple, the message went beyond day-to-day politics and became a general symbol of change. Here, the slogan and design worked together to create one of the most memorable campaign posters of recent times.

Similarly, Al-Azzawi and Saleh (2024) highlighted the contrasting use of text in the 2020 US presidential election. Joe Biden's posters featured slogans such as "Build Back Better" and "Together We Can," which encouraged unity and inclusion, supported by muted blue tones and diverse imagery. Donald Trump's campaign, by contrast, used patriotic slogans like "*Keep America Great*" along with intense red and white visuals to suggest strength and tradition. These cases show how short slogans paired with images can spread an idea and spark emotional reactions.

How people respond to posters often depends on culture and context. In Bogotá, Nadal et al. (2021) found that using local words and dialects made posters more relatable. In Taiwan, Wang et al. (2023) showed that short, emotional slogans with strong images worked best on social media. In fast-moving online spaces, these simple messages were especially effective, showing that the style of the message has to fit the place where it is shared.

Posters can also give people a sense of belonging. Farkas (2023) notes that campaigns sometimes design posters to inform and build group identity. With the right mix of slogans and visuals, posters can create an "us versus them" feeling that brings supporters together while marking them off from opponents. A clear example is Shepard Fairey's *We the People* series from the 2016 U.S. election, which featured diverse American faces with lines like "*Bigger Than Fear*." These posters celebrated inclusion and stood against divisive rhetoric.

Posters also continue to work well on social media. Many campaigns now design posters for platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, using short messages and bold visuals that spread quickly. Wang et al. (2023) found that during Taiwan's referendum, the most effective designs were the ones easy to resize and share online. Mixing printed and digital posters helped campaigns spread the same message across different spaces.

Table 1: Strategies and Impacts of Political Posters

Theme	Key Strategies	Examples	Impact
Visual & Language	Use of colors, central portraits	Bogotá's elections: 2019 warm	Shapes; opinions; subconsciously
Emotional Impact	and balanced layouts to attract attention	tones & centered portraits (Nadal et al., 2021). Taiwan referendum: party colors used for identity (Wang et al., 2023).	builds emotional loyalty.
Symbolism in Design	Use of national symbols and iconic imagery to evoke pride and identity	Kitchener's "Your Country Needs You" (1914). Obama's "Hope" poster (2008).	Inspires urgency; creates timeless political symbols.
Text, Identity & Persuasion	Short slogans frame ideology and strengthen relatability	Obama's "Hope" slogan. Biden's "Build Back Better" vs. Trump's "Keep America Great".	Embeds ideology; reinforces values and audience alignment.
Cultural & Social Contexts	Localized slogans and emotional phrases improve relatability and virality.	Bogotá posters used regional slogans. Taiwan campaigns paired text with symbolic visuals.	Enhances persuasion; boosts online shareability.
Collective Identity	Creates "us vs. them" narratives and unites supporters	Fairey's "We the People" series (2016).	Strengthens solidarity and group belonging.
Digital Adaptation	Optimizing posters for social media formats to expand reach	Taiwan referendum posters repurposed for Facebook, Instagram, Twitter.	Extends influence; increases campaign visibility.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The future of political posters will depend on how campaigns use new technology. As more politics moves online, posters are already being made with social media in mind, so they can spread fast and reach more people. Some new ideas include adding QR codes or interactive designs that link paper posters to online content. Social media also means posters can be reshared many times, giving them more influence.

At the same time, new tools bring problems. Posters can be altered or used to spread false information. Because of this, designers will have to think about responsibility as well as creativity. The challenge is to make posters that look appealing and fresh, but also stay honest and fair to the public.

CONCLUSION

Political posters have never been just decoration. They can influence how people think, how they vote, and even how they feel about being part of a group. From wartime propaganda to today's campaigns, posters have consistently shown that simple mixes of words and images can get attention and spark emotion—colors, short phrases, and layout matter a lot in shaping how people react at first glance. Shepard Fairey's *Hope* poster is one example, where one word and a bold design became a sign of optimism.

At present, posters are not limited to print. They also spread across social media, which makes them reach people faster and reach more people. However, this reach also raises problems since posters can be changed or used in misleading ways. For that reason, designers should try to keep their work creative but also fair and responsible. Political posters are not just about elections. They can unite people, give groups a shared identity, and even push for social change. With strong visuals and short text, they can still inspire action and remain important offline and online.

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