

Detecting the Effects of Deceptive Presidential Advertisements in the Spring of 2004

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Long before the political conventions of 2004, the Kerry and Bush campaigns and their surrogates were laying the groundwork for the fall campaign with heavy ad buys. Some of the assertions made on each side were misleading. Here we explore three misleading claims made on each side in the weeks following the effective end of the 2004 primary season and ask, Did they work? If so, with whom? Results from the National Annenberg Election Survey show that some of these misleading claims about George W. Bush and John Kerry were believed by a majority of citizens. Democrats were more likely to believe deceptive claims about Bush, whereas Republicans were more likely to embrace deceptive claims about Kerry. The claim that "George W. Bush favors sending American jobs overseas" gained traction in battleground states, even when demographic variables and party identification were taken into consideration.

Keywords: *political advertising; presidential ads; deception; general election; party identification*

Once upon a time, the timeline of campaigns included a primary period, a convention period, and a general election. Once debates became a standard feature of general elections, a change effectively put in place in 1976, a predebate and postdebate period also came to fascinate scholars and preoccupy consultants. In 2004, an additional stage was added. It began with the effective end of the contested Democratic primaries. It meant that long before the political conventions of 2004, the Kerry and Bush campaigns and their surrogates were on the air with heavy ad buys articulating some of the themes that would carry them through the general election. Some of the assertions made on each side were misleading. Here we explore three misleading claims made on

each side in the weeks following the effective end of the 2004 primary season and ask, Did they work? If so, with whom?

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, we demonstrate the prevalence of six misleading claims made in televised advertising in the battleground states¹ in the period immediately after the effective end of the primaries. Second, using data from the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES), we assess the level of believability of the claims among those living in battleground states, where there was wide advertising exposure, and among those not living in the battleground states, where there was limited (national cable and carryover to bordering nonbattleground states) to no exposure. Results from the NAES show that some deceptive claims about George W. Bush and John Kerry were believed by a majority of citizens. Democrats were more likely to believe misleading information about Bush, whereas Republicans were more likely to accept deceptive claims about Kerry. The Democratic assertion that “George W. Bush favors sending American jobs overseas” gained traction in battleground states, even when demographic variables and party identification were taken into consideration.

Overview

Although, in theory, the process remained open with 17 primaries not yet decided, by March 3, 2004, the day after Super Tuesday, Senator John Kerry had, for all intents and purposes, locked up the nomination of his party. The event that signaled the end of the Democratic primary season was Senator John Edwards’s announcement that he was ending his bid for the presidency. Edwards had been the last serious contender remaining challenging Kerry in the race. The second signal that the general election had begun occurred within hours of Edwards’s withdrawal: The Republicans began an advertising blitz.

The first ads the Bush campaign released portrayed the president as an optimistic, steady leader helping the nation “turn the corner” in tough times (Kurtz & Balz, 2004). A little more than 1 week later, on March 11, the Bush campaign ads turned to attack with an ad called “100 Days” that claimed that John Kerry wanted to raise taxes by US\$900 billion (FactCheck.org, 2004b). A day later on March 12, the Kerry campaign responded to that claim with its own ad called “Misleading America,” denying that Senator Kerry had ever called for a US\$900 billion tax increase and counterattacking by stating that Kerry will “crack down on the export of American jobs overseas” (Koons, 2004b). The notion that President George W. Bush favored sending American jobs overseas had been a staple of Democratic attacks during the primaries (FactCheck.org, 2003). On April 2, the Kerry campaign’s ad “10 Million Jobs” made the claim explicitly in 17 battleground states and on national cable television (Kinnard, 2004b).

For our research, we have chosen six false claims the presidential campaigns or 527s made frequently in their television advertising from March through April 2004. Three are drawn from Republican ads and three from Democratic ads. Because the Kerry campaign had little money in the March to early May period, the attack message was carried by Democratic 527s during that time; thus, we have drawn the Democratic claims from both the Kerry ads and from those of the Media Fund,

MoveOn.org, and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO).

For assessment of accuracy, we relied on The Annenberg Public Policy Center's FactCheck.org—a source cited repeatedly by the Kerry and Bush campaigns in the primaries and general election. The goal of FactCheck.org is to apply the best practices of both journalism and scholarship and to increase public knowledge and understanding (FactCheck.org, 2004a).

The Claims

The Bush-Cheney '04 campaign made the following deceptive claims in its television advertising during the months of March and April 2004. The advertising spots in which they appeared are noted beneath each claim:

CLAIM 1: John Kerry wants to raise taxes by US\$900 billion.

- “100 Days” began airing March 11, 2004
- “Differences” began airing March 26, 2004
- “Troubling” began airing April 3, 2004

CLAIM 2: John Kerry voted for higher taxes 350 times.

- “Troubling” began airing April 3, 2004

CLAIM 3: John Kerry wants to raise gasoline taxes by 50 cents a gallon.

- “Differences” began airing March 26, 2004
- “Wacky” began airing March 30, 2004
- “Troubling” began airing April 3, 2004

We focused on three misleading claims from the Kerry campaign, and the anti-Bush 527 groups, the Media Fund, MoveOn.org, and the AFL-CIO.

CLAIM 1: George W. Bush favors sending American jobs overseas.

- “Worker” MoveOn.org began airing March 4, 2004
- “10 Million Jobs” Kerry campaign began airing April 2, 2004
- “Dig” AFL-CIO began airing April 13, 2004²

CLAIM 2: Three million American jobs have been lost while George W. Bush was president.

- “Worker” MoveOn.org began airing March 4, 2004
- “Jobs” the Media Fund began airing March 17, 2004
- “State” AFL-CIO began airing April 1, 2004³
- “General” Kerry campaign began airing April 19, 2004⁴

CLAIM 3: George W. Bush raided social security to pay for tax cuts for millionaires?

- “Tax Cuts” the Media Fund began airing March 26, 2004

Before assessing the effectiveness of these advertised deceptions, we will briefly summarize FactCheck.org's analysis of each.

Bush-Cheney '04 Claims Against Kerry

“John Kerry wants to raise taxes by 900 billion dollars.” In the Bush-Cheney '04 ad titled “100 Days,” the announcer states that “a President sets his agenda for America in the first 100 days. John Kerry’s plan: To pay for new government spending, raise taxes by at least \$900 billion” (Koons, 2004a). Kerry denied this charge in a number of venues, including a televised response ad titled “Misleading America.” FactCheck.org found that neither Bush-Cheney '04 nor the Kerry campaigns were right on this issue. Kerry proposed a health care plan that would have cost an estimated US\$895 billion and provided health insurance to more than 26 million Americans who do not currently have it. However Kerry would have achieved economies by reducing costs and increasing savings in the process of changing the health delivery system. The only tax “plan” Kerry had proposed would have repealed Bush’s tax cuts for those making US\$200,000 a year or more, while giving some additional tax breaks to those further down the income scale. However, Kerry never really explained how he would pay for the new expenditures (FactCheck.org, 2004b, 2004f). The Bush campaign assumes that to pay for it, Kerry “wants to” raise taxes. But there are other options. For example, Bush instituted a large social program, the prescription drug benefit, without raising taxes.

“John Kerry voted for higher taxes 350 times.” A Bush-Cheney '04 ad titled “Troubling,” which aired beginning on April 3, 2004, makes the claim that Kerry voted for higher taxes 350 times during his 20-year Senate career. Before the ad aired, spokespeople for the Bush-Cheney '04 campaign offered this assertion on cable news programs as early as March 11; the president himself levied the attack against Kerry in a March 20 rally in Florida (FactCheck.org, 2004c).

FactCheck.org called this claim misleading because the list the Bush campaign used to support the claim includes occasions when Kerry voted to keep taxes at existing levels or supported lower tax cuts than Republicans preferred. The counting process was flawed as well. To get to the number 350, the Republicans counted every tax increase included in omnibus legislation as well as all preliminary votes on a measure.

“John Kerry wants to raise gasoline taxes by 50 cents a gallon.” Bush-Cheney '04 ran three different ads in March and April that made the claim that Kerry wanted to raise gasoline taxes by 50 cents per gallon (“Differences,” “Wacky,” and “Troubling”). FactCheck.org (2004d) stated that Kerry raised this idea more than a decade ago and had not done so since. And even if Kerry did favor the idea, it also was not clear that Bush’s advisors thought that that was a bad position. FactCheck.org noted,

More recently, the man who later became Bush’s own chief economist said higher gasoline taxes would lead to “less traffic congestion, safer roads, and reduced risk of global warming” and that raising gasoline taxes 50 cents to pay for a cut in income tax rates “may be the closest thing to a free lunch that economics has to offer.” (para. 1)

Kerry Campaign and 527s' Claims Against Bush

“George W. Bush favors sending American jobs overseas.” In the Kerry ad titled “10 Million Jobs,” the announcer says, “While jobs are leaving our country in record numbers, George Bush says sending jobs overseas ‘makes sense’ for America. His top economic advisors say ‘moving American jobs to low cost countries’ is a plus for the U.S.” (FactCheck.org, 2004e). According to FactCheck.org (2004e), Bush never said those words. However, in a news release defending the ad (JohnKerry.com, 2004), the Kerry campaign said the words came from a report that Bush had signed. This, too, was false. The document in question is from Bush’s Council of Economic Advisers. What Bush signed was a message accompanying the annual report of the Council of Economic Advisers. It was the Council of Economic Advisers’ report, not Bush’s message, which asserted that it made sense for the United States to buy goods from other countries that produced them more cheaply than the United States could (FactCheck.org, 2004e).

“Three million American jobs have been lost while George W. Bush was president.” This claim was made in speeches as well as in advertising by both the Kerry campaign (“General”) and by the 527 group the Media Fund (“Jobs”). In “General,” the announcer says, “Under George Bush, three million Americans have lost their jobs.” The “General” was shown in only two battleground states (Washington and Wisconsin) and three nonbattleground states (New Jersey, New York, and California) mainly as a tool for online fund-raising (Kinnard, 2004c). The claim achieved greater currency in the Media Fund’s “Jobs” ad, which noted that “Bush’s policies encouraged the loss of nearly three million jobs.”

During the 2004 primary campaign, which began in the fall of 2003, various Democratic presidential candidates made this claim, including Richard Gephardt in his “Jobs” ad, which ran in Iowa in October 2003 (FactCheck.org, 2003). The problem with the number is that even at the depths of the downturn, it exaggerated job loss. At one point during 2003, there were 2.7 million fewer payroll jobs than there were when Bush took office (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004). At the time of the Kerry campaign, the Media Fund, MoveOn.org, and AFL-CIO advertising, the job loss was cut to less than 2 million (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004).

“George W. Bush raided Social Security to pay for tax cuts for millionaires?” The Media Fund made this assertion in an ad titled “Tax Cuts.” According to the Media Fund, the charge is justified because tax cuts reducing millionaires’ taxes caused the federal budget deficits that followed the projected surpluses of the final years of the Clinton administration. The Media Fund said deficits threaten the federal government’s ability to pay its social security obligations (Kinnard, 2004a). However, deficit or not, the revenue stream from payroll taxes remains sufficient to pay current social security benefits. Moreover, deficits are also caused by spending on items ranging

from homeland security and defense to highways and education. The recession also cut significantly into projections of a surplus. In addition, although per capita, millionaires received a higher dollar benefit from the Bush tax cuts than did those who earn less and, hence, pay less income taxes, the Bush tax cuts benefited everyone who paid income taxes, not just millionaires.

Method

To assess the likely exposure voters would have had to these claims, we turned to data provided by TNS Media Intelligence/Campaign Media Analysis Group. These data made it possible to determine the number of times each ad aired. Campaign Media Analysis Group campaign advertising data represent the largest and most comprehensive tracker of political advertising. Campaign Media Analysis Group electronically tracks each and every political advertisement in the top 100 media markets in the United States.

First we coded each of the 100 markets as either battleground or nonbattleground. Markets that crossed into both types of states were coded as battleground markets; these included Paducah, Kentucky—Cape Girardeau, Missouri; Mobile, Alabama—Pensacola, Florida; and Burlington, Vermont—New Hampshire. We then identified each of the political spots that made these claims by downloading ad transcripts from NationalJournal.com's *Ad Spotlight* page and FactCheck.org. Next we ran a frequency using Campaign Media Analysis Group data in each market for these ads.

To assess whether the public believed the claims, we relied on data from the NAES. The Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania conducted the NAES, a yearlong rolling cross-sectional (RCS) survey on political attitudes and behavior in the United States (see Romer, Kenski, Waldman, Adasiewicz, & Jamieson, 2004, for an explanation of the RCS design). The RCS survey began October 7, 2003, and ended November 16, 2004. Telephone interviews were conducted with adults in the United States each day. Households throughout the nation were randomly selected using random-digit dialing. A set number of replicates, random subsamples of the sampled telephone numbers, were released for interviewing each night to maximize the representativeness of each daily cross-section. The response rate (RR1) for the RCS national sample was 22%.

For the current study, a slice of the national RCS was taken from April 19 to May 2 for analysis. During this time period, 1,487 citizens were asked about advertising claims about the presidential candidates. The data were weighted to take into account household size and number of telephone lines into the residence and to adjust for variation in the sample relating to geographic region, sex, race, age, and education.

Dependent Variables

This study investigates the extent to which U.S. citizens believed claims lodged against Bush and Kerry. Respondents were asked to judge the truthfulness of the randomly rotated claims. The claims began with the preface, "I'm going to read you some

things people have said about John Kerry or George W. Bush. For each one, please tell me whether you think that it is definitely true, probably true, probably not true, or definitely not true.” Regarding Bush, respondents were asked about the truthfulness of three claims:

1. “George W. Bush favors sending American jobs overseas.”
2. “Three million American jobs have been lost while George W. Bush was president.”
3. “George W. Bush raided social security to pay for tax cuts for millionaires.”

For Kerry, respondents were asked to evaluate three claims:

1. “John Kerry wants to raise taxes by \$900 billion dollars.”
2. “John Kerry voted for higher taxes 350 times.”
3. “John Kerry wants to raise gasoline taxes by 50 cents a gallon.”

Independent Variables

To assess the impact of political advertising on claim believability, we split states into two categories: battleground and nonbattleground states. We defined *battleground states* as the states that the campaigns considered closely contested at the time, where the campaigns had shown television commercials. The Kerry campaign and the pro-Democratic groups the Media Fund, MoveOn.org, and the AFL-CIO, which also ran ads during this time, considered the following 17 states as battleground states: Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. The Bush-Cheney '04 campaign placed their first ads in the above states as well as 1 more: Delaware (Koons, 2004a). Among all citizens in our sample, 37.2% lived in battleground states.

We also examined self-reported party identification and six demographic variables. Respondents were asked, “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?” Of respondents, 29.1% described themselves as Republican, 33.7% said Democrat, 25.5% said Independent, 6.3% named some other party identification, and 5.4% did not know or refused to give an answer. For multivariate analyses, dummy variables were created for being a Democrat (1 = Democrat, 0 = Republican, Independent, or Other) and being a Republican (1 = Republican, 0 = Democrat, Independent, or Other).

The following variables were also taken into consideration: gender (1 = female, 0 = male), age (in years), Hispanic (1 = yes, 0 = no), Black (1 = yes, 0 = no), education (in years), and household income (in thousands). Don't know and refused responses were treated as missing. More than half of the respondents (52.1%) were female. On average, respondents were 45.9 years old ($Mdn = 44$, $SD = 17.3$). Of respondents, 9.7% were Hispanic and 11.5% said they were Black. The average number of years of education was 13.5 ($Mdn = 14$, $SD = 2.5$). The average household income in thousands was US\$58 ($Mdn = 42.5$, $SD = 46$).

Table 1
Prevalence of Claims in Battleground States

Claim	Frequency of Airings in Battleground States	Frequency of Airings on National Cable Stations
Bush favors sending American jobs overseas	29,896	0
Kerry wants to raise taxes by US\$900 billion	16,925	593
Kerry wants to raise gasoline taxes by 50 cents per gallon	16,661	842
Three million American jobs have been lost while Bush was president	11,118	0
Kerry voted for higher taxes 350 times	5,672	239
Bush raided social security to pay for tax cuts for millionaires	4,646	0

Analytical Procedures

Frequencies were calculated for each of the advertising claims. Then, the responses about the perceived truthfulness of claims were cross-tabulated by battleground state status and party identification. Because independent variables may share variation in their associations with the dependent variable under consideration, a multivariate model was needed to determine the unique contribution each independent variable made on believing the candidate claims. The dependent variables were recoded into two categories believing a claim true (either definitely true or probably true = 1) or not true (either definitely not true or probably not true = 0). Don't know and refused responses were treated as missing. The recoded dependent variables were predicted with logistic regression models, which included the battleground state variable, party identification, and the six demographic variables.

Results

Prevalence of the Claims in the Battleground States

Table 1 shows that the claim made by the Kerry side that Bush favors sending American jobs overseas was aired most frequently—29,896 times in the battleground states. Two anti-Kerry claims were shown in roughly similar numbers. The claim that Kerry wants to raise taxes by US\$900 billion was made 16,925 times in ads in the battleground states and an additional 593 times on national cable. The claim that Kerry wants to raise gasoline taxes by 50 cents per gallon was made 16,661 times in the battleground states and 842 times on cable. There were 11,118 airings of the anti-Bush claim that 3 million American jobs have been lost while Bush was president. The two least prevalent claims were the Bush campaign assertion that Kerry voted for higher taxes 350 times (5,672 airings and 239 on cable), and the Media Fund claim that Bush raided social security to pay for tax cuts for millionaires (4,646 airings).

Believability of claims. The frequencies and cross-tabulations of the perceived truthfulness of the claims are presented in Table 2. A majority of citizens believed two of the deceptive claims about Bush and one of the deceptive claims about Kerry. As shown in Table 2, 51.8% of respondents said that the claim “George W. Bush favors sending American jobs overseas” and 69.3% said that the claim “Three million American jobs have been lost while George W. Bush was president” were either probably or definitely true. When it came to Kerry, 52.9% of citizens believed that “John Kerry voted for higher taxes 350 times.”

When the perceived truthfulness of these six claims was examined within battleground and nonbattleground states, only one highly significant statistical difference appeared. Citizens living in battleground states were more likely to believe that “George W. Bush favors sending American jobs overseas,” with 59.5% of respondents living in battleground states reporting that this claim was either probably or definitely true compared to 47.6% of those living in nonbattleground states—a difference of 11.9%. The chi-square test revealed that the association was significant with $\chi^2 = 25.604$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$. This is consistent with the high frequency in which this claim was made in the battleground states with almost 30,000 airings of the spot.

Differences between battleground and nonbattleground states on the claim that “John Kerry wants to raise gasoline taxes by 50 cents a gallon” were marginally significant ($\chi^2 = 8.637$, $df = 4$, $p = .071$). Although 45.5% of respondents living in battleground states believed that Kerry wanted to raise gasoline taxes, a smaller 38.1% of those living in nonbattleground states believed this was probably or definitely true—a difference of 7.4%. This claim was frequently made in battleground states (16,661). On the other four advertising claims, the cross-tabulations did not reveal significant differences between battleground and nonbattleground states.

The perceived truthfulness of the claims was also cross-tabulated by party identification (restricted to Republicans, Democrats, and Independents). The chi-square tests were highly significant for all six claims ($p < .001$). As revealed in Table 2, when a claim about Bush was unfavorable, Democrats were more likely to believe it than either Republicans or Independents. When a claim was unfavorable about Kerry, Republicans were more likely to believe it than either Independents or Democrats. For example, although 57.2% of Democrats and 43.5% of Independents said the claim “George W. Bush raided social security to pay for tax cuts for millionaires” was probably or definitely true, only 17.0% of Republicans perceived this claim as truthful. When asked about the truthfulness of the claim that “John Kerry voted for higher taxes 350 times,” 62.1% of Republicans and 55.3% of Independents said this was true compared to 45.0% of Democrats. In all cases, the percentage of Independents believing a claim true resided somewhere between the Republican and Democratic responses.

To further explore the significance of battleground state status and party identification in predicting the perceived truthfulness of the advertising claims, logistic regressions were run, the results of which are shown in Table 3. Even when taking into account party identification and the six demographic variables, the odds of one believing the claim that Bush favored “sending American jobs overseas” were 82.8% higher

Table 2
Perceived Truthfulness of Advertising Claims by
Battleground/Nonbattleground States and Party Identification (in percentages)

	Total	Battleground	Nonbattleground	Republican	Democratic	Independent
“George W. Bush favors sending American jobs overseas.”						
Definitely true	19.4	23.9	16.9	9.2	28.2	20.4
Probably true	32.4	35.6	30.7	26.8	36.3	33.9
Probably not true	27.9	25.2	29.3	35.6	22.3	28.2
Definitely not true	10.3	6.7	12.4	19.5	3.5	10.1
Don't know/Refused	9.9	8.7	10.6	8.9	9.7	7.5
“Three million American jobs have been lost while George W. Bush was president.”						
Definitely true	27.0	30.6	25.0	10.1	41.8	26.6
Probably true	42.3	40.6	43.3	42.1	40.9	44.4
Probably not true	18.6	17.6	19.1	30.1	9.5	18.9
Definitely not true	3.7	3.3	3.9	7.4	1.6	3.1
Don't know/Refused	8.4	8.0	8.7	10.3	6.2	7.0
“George W. Bush raided social security to pay for tax cuts for millionaires.”						
Definitely true	9.7	9.6	9.7	2.1	17.9	7.8
Probably true	30.2	33.3	28.4	14.9	39.3	35.7
Probably not true	34.3	32.4	35.3	44.7	25.3	34.6
Definitely not true	13.2	12.4	13.6	26.8	4.5	10.9
Don't know/Refused	12.7	12.2	12.9	11.5	13.0	11.1

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

	Total	Battleground	Nonbattleground	Republican	Democratic	Independent
"John Kerry wants to raise taxes by \$900 billion dollars."						
Definitely true	5.4	6.5	4.9	9.4	1.6	6.7
Probably true	28.3	28.7	28.1	35.5	22.7	28.4
Probably not true	36.6	36.1	36.9	32.0	44.5	35.1
Definitely not true	12.7	12.8	12.6	6.7	16.1	14.0
Don't know/Refused	17.0	15.9	17.6	16.4	15.1	15.8
"John Kerry voted for higher taxes 350 times."						
Definitely true	9.9	11.1	9.3	16.7	5.1	8.8
Probably true	43.0	45.8	41.4	45.4	39.9	46.5
Probably not true	24.3	21.8	25.6	18.6	31.3	24.0
Definitely not true	5.6	5.9	5.5	2.5	8.2	4.4
Don't know/Refused	17.2	15.3	18.2	16.7	15.6	16.3
"John Kerry wants to raise gasoline taxes by 50 cents a gallon."						
Definitely true	9.1	9.6	8.8	12.2	4.9	10.8
Probably true	31.7	35.9	29.3	38.5	23.0	35.3
Probably not true	32.1	30.3	33.1	26.6	37.7	32.5
Definitely not true	11.6	10.7	12.1	6.7	18.1	8.5
Don't know/Refused	15.6	13.5	16.7	16.1	16.3	12.9

for those living in battleground states than for those living in nonbattleground states. This was the only claim for which the battleground state variable was statistically significant.

Also shown in Table 3 is the robust relationship between party identification and believing the various claims. In all six models, the Republican and Democrat dummy variables were statistically significant. Republicans were more likely to believe negative claims about Kerry and less likely to believe negative claims about Bush. Democrats were more likely to believe negative claims about Bush and less likely to believe negative claims about Kerry.

Ethnicity and household income were not significant predictors in any of the models. Gender was significant in only one model, where women were more likely to believe that Bush favored “sending American jobs overseas” than were men. Age was significant in one model, with older respondents being less likely to believe that Bush had “raided social security to pay for tax cuts for millionaires.” Education was significant in two models, with more highly educated respondents less likely to believe that Bush favored “sending American jobs overseas” and Kerry wanting to “raise gasoline taxes by 50 cents a gallon.” Race, however, was significant in five of the six models. Blacks were more likely than other groups to believe the three negative claims about Bush and less likely to believe two of the negative claims about Kerry.

Discussion

Through the course of a presidential campaign, many claims are lodged against and by the candidates. Unfortunately for the system, some of the claims are misleading. Findings from the NAES show that in the spring of 2004, some deceptive claims were believed by a majority of the public. A little more than half of Americans believed that “George W. Bush favors sending American jobs overseas” and “John Kerry voted for higher taxes 350 times” were truthful statements. More than 69% believed that “Three million American jobs have been lost while George W. Bush was president.”

Although residing in a battleground state, where most misleading political ads were aired, increased one’s likelihood of believing that “George W. Bush favors sending American jobs overseas,” party identification was the most consistent predictor of believing the claims. Republicans were inclined to believe misleading claims about Kerry, whereas Democrats tended to believe misleading claims about Bush.

As with all studies, limitations should be noted. Measuring exposure to advertising can be a tricky endeavor. In recent decades, the media have become increasingly fragmented (Turow, 1997), making it difficult to target large bodies of people, such as voters. Consequently, political campaigns make careful decisions about when and where they advertise. In this study, we used a rather gross measure for the likelihood of being exposed to the series of deceptive claims: living in a battleground state. This measure was selected because presidential elections are won or lost by electoral votes from the states, not by the national totals from individual voters. Consequently, the campaigns

Table 3
Logistic Regression Predicting Perceived Truthfulness of Advertising Claims

	"George W. Bush favors sending American jobs overseas."		"Three million American jobs have been lost while George W. Bush was president."		"George W. Bush raided social security to pay for tax cuts for millionaires."		"John Kerry wants to raise taxes by \$900 billion dollars."		"John Kerry voted for higher taxes 350 times."		"John Kerry wants to raise gasoline taxes by 50 cents a gallon."	
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Exp(<i>B</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Exp(<i>B</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Exp(<i>B</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Exp(<i>B</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Exp(<i>B</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Exp(<i>B</i>)
Intercept	1.151* (.492)	3.163	.619 (.551)	1.857	.709 (.520)	2.032	.210 (.498)	1.234	.480 (.505)	1.617	1.352** (.491)	3.864
Battleground state	.603*** (.136)	1.828	.081 (.151)	1.085	.257 (.142)	1.292	-.066 (.136)	.936	.160 (.139)	1.174	.160 (.133)	1.174
Female	.466*** (.130)	1.594	-.033 (.146)	.967	.144 (.138)	1.155	-.405 (.132)	.667	-.134 (.135)	.875	-.228 (.129)	.796
Age	-.001 (.004)	.999	-.007 (.005)	.993	-.011** (.004)	.989	.002 (.004)	1.002	-.002 (.004)	.998	.003 (.004)	1.003
Hispanic	-.179 (.290)	.836	-.151 (.311)	.860	-.391 (.303)	.676	-.008 (.288)	.992	-.342 (.281)	.710	-.315 (.290)	.730
Black	.806** (.251)	2.238	.806* (.351)	2.239	.836** (.247)	2.306	-.448 (.248)	.639	-.562* (.218)	.570	-.496* (.234)	.609
Education	-.084** (.030)	.920	.057 (.034)	1.058	-.023 (.032)	.977	-.034 (.031)	.966	.015 (.031)	1.015	-.104*** (.030)	.901
Income	-.001 (.001)	.999	.001 (.002)	1.001	-.003 (.002)	.997	.002 (.001)	1.002	.001 (.001)	1.001	.001 (.001)	1.001
Republican	-.851*** (.155)	.427	-.780*** (.165)	.459	-1.344*** (.175)	.261	.490*** (.156)	1.632	.592*** (.171)	1.807	.363* (.154)	1.437
Democrat	.570*** (.159)	1.768	.788*** (.201)	2.198	.752*** (.157)	2.121	-.558*** (.164)	.572	-.346* (.159)	.708	-.625*** (.159)	.535
<i>n</i>	1162	1161	1112	1112	1064	1064	1056	1076	1076	1076	1076	1076
Percentage correct	66.1	75.6	68.1	68.1	62.8	62.8	65.2	65.2	65.2	65.2	59.6	59.6
Cox & Snell <i>R</i> ²	.135	.084	.186	.186	.065	.065	.051	.051	.051	.051	.067	.067
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> ²	.181	.126	.249	.249	.087	.087	.070	.070	.070	.070	.089	.089

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

and media discuss “states” as the campaign objectives. Although the battleground state variable gives us a good sense of which citizens were most likely to be targeted with political advertising, it does not mean that those individuals living in nonbattleground states had no chance of exposure. It is possible that citizens living in nonbattleground states could have seen the claims from national cable advertising. Also, when television advertising is purchased, it is often done through television stations in a circumscribed media market. These media market boundaries, however, do not necessarily recognize state borders. For example, when an advertiser places an advertisement in the Philadelphia media market, this message will cross state boundaries and be seen by New Jersey residents as well. Although the battleground exposure measure is not perfect, it does convey a sense of exposure strength. It is most likely the case that individuals living in nonbattleground states were not exposed to the claims with the same frequency or intensity as those individuals living in battleground states.

Also, as we noted earlier, some of the examined claims were repeatedly made in the primaries. As such, they could be found in primary debates carried on national cable. Because these were central messages of key groups and occasionally of the candidates themselves, they also may have moved into public acceptance through national news, talk radio, cable talk shows, or through more targeted but not battleground-specific forms of communication such as direct mail or Internet communication. And as ad controversies flair, the content of ads is often carried in national news outside as well as within the battleground. For these reasons, we assume that it is not the presence or absence of exposure to the claim that should predict its effect but rather, the extent of exposure. A statement should be more widely believed if it is widely circulated in ads and not rebutted at a comparable level by the other side or not critiqued effectively and repeatedly by credible newslike sources.

Notes

1. The Kerry campaign and the pro-Democratic groups the Media Fund, MoveOn.org, and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, which also ran ads during this time, considered the following 17 states as battleground states: Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. The Bush-Cheney '04 campaign placed their first ads in the above states as well as 1 more: Delaware.

2. According to TNS Media Intelligence/Campaign Media Analysis Group data, “Dig” aired in only eight battleground states and no nonbattleground states: Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Mexico, Wisconsin, and Washington.

3. According to TNS Media Intelligence/Campaign Media Analysis Group data, “State” aired in only 11 battleground states and no nonbattleground states: Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Wisconsin, and Washington.

4. The “General” ad produced by the Kerry campaign was shown only on cable outlets in five states—two battleground, Washington and Wisconsin, and three nonbattleground, New Jersey, New York, and California. The purpose of the limited release was to target online campaign contributions from these areas (Kinnard, 2004c).

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