

**An Examination of Television Advertisements During the Presidential  
Election of 2004**

**Part One:**

**The Swift Boat Ads in Comparative Context: An Empirical Examination of  
Advertisement Effectiveness**

**And**

**Part Two:**

**Handling The Truth: An Evaluation of Voter Capability to Discern Political  
Advertisement Accuracy**

**By**

**Christopher P. Borick  
Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion**

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**PRELIMINARY REPORT – PLEASE DO NOT CITE.**

## **Part One:**

### **The Swift Boat Ads in Comparative Context: An Empirical Examination of Advertisement Effectiveness**

During the 2004 presidential election campaign few events drew as much attention as the advertisement campaign by a group known as Swift Vets for Truth. During late summer this group began airing a series of television spots that questioned the validity of John Kerry's military record from the Vietnam War. These ads, while airing in only limited battleground markets, began to dominate the nightly cable news programs, and were thus aired to national audiences on a regular basis for an extended period of time. Most importantly, the appearance of these television ads corresponded with a noticeable drop in Senator Kerry's position in the polls, and led to his campaign putting resources into an effort to refute the charges levied against him. For many pundits, this chapter of the campaign became the so called "turning point" of the election, helping to propel President Bush to reelection. Yet while the airing of the ads and Kerry's drop in the polls are intuitively related, what evidence is there that the television spots actually caused the drop in support for Kerry's presidential bid? In this paper we seek to examine this question through the presentation of the results of a series of empirical tests run during the campaign.

More specifically, during the campaign season we conducted regular tests on samples of American voters where individuals were asked to view and rate television ads in a pretest-posttest web-based format. From May until September, samples of voters viewed 19 advertisements from the presidential campaigns or 527 groups in a multi-staged design. First, voters were asked to complete a survey instrument in which they identified their current preference in the presidential election. Second, they watched a

campaign commercial three times, rating the ads continuously (through automated devices) in terms of aspects such as interest and believability. Finally, the voters were asked to complete the survey instrument once again in order to gauge any differences from their original positions. From these tests, we find evidence of the effectiveness of the Swift Boat advertisements in relation to other ads aired throughout the early stages of the campaigns.

### **SECTION ONE: Background on The Swift Boat Advertisements**

In August of 2004 a group of Vietnam Veterans known as the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (SBVT) initiated a series of advertisements questioning the legitimacy of John Kerry's war record and criticizing his anti-war activities following his military service.

The group was formed in 2004 as a 527 organization, with its first advertisement initially airing on August 5, 2004 in the battleground states of Ohio, Wisconsin and West Virginia. This advertisement "Any Questions" included veterans who served on swift boats at the same time as Kerry making statements that the Democratic nominee had lied about his war record and could not be trusted. The total ad buy was a relatively small \$550,000 (opensecrets.org), but the advertisement quickly became the main topic of coverage on nightly cable news shows<sup>1</sup>. This attention also helped fuel substantial internet traffic arriving at the Swift Boat vet's web-site, with Nielsen/Net Ratings reporting that just under one million people (966,000) visiting Swiftvets.com during the

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<sup>1</sup> Ansolabehere and Iyengar provide evidence that the "ripple effect" of ads being picked up as news stories is fairly common in contemporary American Elections. A good overview is found in, Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate* (NY: The Free Press, 1995), 109-110

week ending August 8, 2004. This number of visits was only about 34,000 less than the Kerry campaign's official site received during the same time frame.

The Swift Boat Vets issued their second advertisement "Sellout" on August 24 2004, with an ad buy of \$800,000. This advertisement once again aired in three battleground states (Iowa, Ohio and Wisconsin) with additional airings on cable networks nationwide. As opposed to the first advertisement, the "Sellout" advertisement did not focus on Kerry's honesty, but instead targeted his post-Vietnam denouncement of the war and America's military record. With clips of Kerry's testimony before Congress, the ad charged that Kerry "dishonored his country, but more importantly, the people he served with. He just sold them out."(Swiftvets.com).

As the attention surrounding the Swift Boat advertisements mounted, the Kerry campaign began to initiate an effort to refute the charges being levied against the Senator. Among the cornerstones of the initiative was the release of a TV spot featuring Swift Boat veteran Jim Rassmann's rejection of the Swift Boat Vets claims regarding Kerry's record. In particular, Rassmann acknowledged that Kerry saved him from a river under direct enemy fire. This advertisement was issued throughout key swing states and on national cable news.

At the end of August the Swift Vets issued a third advertisement in an Internet only format that challenged the honesty of Kerry's claim that he had been in Cambodia during his tour of duty, once again using first person narratives about Kerry's lack of credibility.

As the ads and counter ads played out, many national polls began to show a drop in Kerry's numbers. For example, The Los Angeles Times Poll showed a surge in support

for Bush during August, placing him ahead of Kerry in a head to head comparison. In their analysis of the poll results The Times claimed that the Swift Vet's ads had taken their toll. The following quote neatly summarizes this position:

“Although a solid majority of Americans say they believe Kerry served honorably in Vietnam, the poll showed that the fierce attacks on the senator from a group of Vietnam veterans criticizing both his performance in combat and anti-war protests at home have left some marks: Kerry suffered small but consistent erosion compared to July on questions relating to his Vietnam experience, his honesty and his fitness to serve as commander in chief. The Bush campaign is running like a well oiled machine and has been nearly flawless for over three weeks now. They've set traps for Kerry, and the challenger has taken the bait. And now that the SwiftVets have begun their assault on Kerry he seems clueless on how to respond. His entire campaign is struggling just to answer the SwiftVet charges. And while Kerry is distracted with that problem, the president has been using the power of the incumbency to highlight his record.”

While the timing between the issuing of the “Any Questions” advertisement and Kerry's fall in the polls appears to be logically related, there is limited evidence to make the direct connection. The corresponding drop in polling numbers for factors like Kerry's honesty and fitness to serve as commander-in-chief tighten the connection between the Swift Vets ads and Kerry's loss of ground in the head-to-head numbers. Yet actual evidence that the ad itself was damaging Kerry was harder to find/ In this next section we explore some of the difficulties in identifying the impact of political ads on voter attitudes and behavior.

## **SECTION TWO: The Literature on the Effectiveness of Political Advertisements**

It has become conventional wisdom among elected officials and campaign professionals that political advertisements are a key element of a successful election bid. This wisdom holds most true for elections at the national and state level, where it is

assumed that advertisements, and particularly television spots, are necessary to reach large populations of voters. Not surprisingly, increasingly large sums of money are spent on political advertisements each year. Ansolabehere, Behr and Iyengar (1991), found that as television became an option for campaign ads, spending grew from \$140 million in 1952 to nearly \$2 billion in 1988. According to the Alliance for Better Campaigns (2004), \$1.6 billion dollars was spent on television ads by candidates, political parties and independent groups during the last election. This amount is almost double the previous record of \$771 million established during the 2000 election campaign. This increase in the amount of financial resources spent on ads is most noticeable in the race for the White House, where approximately \$500 million was spent on TV ads by the campaigns, parties and outside groups.

Not only has the amount of money spent on television commercials increased, but also the share of campaign expenditures devoted to TV spots has skyrocketed. In 1952 less than 5 percent of campaign expenditures were spent on television advertisements. By the 1988, election 20 percent of campaign expenditures was being devoted to the purchase of airtime (Ansolabehere, Behr and Iyengar, 1991), with the share of 2004 campaign spending likely in the 40 to 50% range (Opensecrets.org, 2004)

While much is known about the level of effort that campaigns put into political ads, there is less known about the effectiveness of advertisements in altering voter preferences. One major reason for the limited understanding of advertisement effectiveness is the ability to isolate and test the impact of ads on voters. In the course of a campaign voter preferences are shaped by many different factors, thus measuring the effect of a single item (i.e. a political advertisement) can be quite daunting. This daunting

task is in no small part contributed to by limitations to one of the most common tools employed in measuring voter attitudes and behaviors -- public opinion surveys. In particular, self-reported measures of exposure to political advertisements are often prone to error, thus restricting the ability to make causal inferences. Put more simply, if a respondent to a survey can't accurately recall if they saw a particular advertisement, there is little confidence in isolating the ads impact on the respondent's preferences in an election. Given strong evidence of unreliable measures of exposure to ads in works by Hovland (1959), Pierce and Lovrich (1982), Bradburn, Rips and Shevell, (1987), Bartels (1993) and Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1999), one can understand the difficulty in measuring the effectiveness of political ads through survey research.

To overcome the limitations of survey research in isolating the effect of political advertisements, many researchers have turned to more experimental designs where the exposure to ads are more controlled. In particular numerous studies by Ansolabehere and Iyengar argue that campaign advertising can be effective in shaping individual preferences. Using experiments they find evidence that political advertising can be persuasive, allowing "voters to develop differentiated images of the candidates, images that play an important role in shaping voting choices" (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995). The experimental approach to the study of ad effectiveness offers the researcher the ability to disentangle factors such as exposure to political messages and partisan attitudes through the introduction of experimental controls. Yet while offering increased ability to isolate the effect of political stimuli, experimental approaches to measuring advertisement effectiveness are constrained by a number of factors.

First, the samples used for experimental designs can often be challenged on their failure to adequately represent the characteristics to the wider voting population. Faced with high logistical hurdles, researchers are often limited to running experiments on easily available groups such as college students (I plead guilty). Thus even if one is to isolate the effect of a stimuli on participants in the experiment, broader inferences to the overall population may be problematic.

Second, the very essence of an experimental setting may limit the ability of a researcher to generalize findings. In particular, there is a concern that the laboratory setting where stimuli can be controlled is significantly different from the setting where individuals usually encounter political ads. While efforts to replicate conventional “home” setting in experiments by Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1996) are quite impressive, concerns remain about the realism of experimental environments.

### **SECTION THREE: Project Goals:**

In this study we seek to provide a degree of insight into the effectiveness of the Swiftboat advertisements in diminishing support for John Kerry’s presidential bid. First, we start by recognizing the constraints of our methods. As with any form of Internet research there are substantial limitations in the ability to draw inferences about large populations such as the American electorate. Therefore we make no claims that our study accurately predicts the specific impact on voter behavior. Instead we simply seek to see how a group of voters that broadly reflects the key characteristics of the voting population reacts to political advertisement through pre and post-test observations. In



essence we hope to fill a gap in the current approaches to studying advertisement effectiveness

Today, media outlets regularly employ focus groups to review advertisements and report on the reaction of a small pool of voters (Memott, 2004). As with any focus groups, the detail drawn from respondents may be insightful, but not generalizable. Similarly, standard RDD surveys of voter impressions of advertisements may produce generalizable findings, but are limited by voter access to the ads and their ability to recall details (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1999). While our approach to evaluating advertisement effectiveness possesses its own limitations, we believe that it does address some of the weaknesses of the standard approaches to studying ads.

First, because of the use of a web-based format we are able to reach a fairly large group of respondents with an instrument that provides for access to the actual advertisements. Secondly, the collection of respondent data takes place in the same time frame that the advertisement is airing. This is crucial if we are to capture the impact of the advertisement while controlling for other possible external factors that may be concurrently acting upon the respondent. Finally, through the use of computer based implementation of the survey we can utilize technology to track voter reactions to advertisements on a second by second basis.

Given the strengths and weaknesses that are present in our methodological approach we seek to accomplish the following:

- 1. To measure voter reaction to political advertisements in the 2004 Presidential election campaign through a quasi-experimental design.**
- 2. To capture voter reactions to political advertisements during the time frame that they are being originally run.**

### **3. To measure the effect of political advertisements on changing voter preferences.**

#### **SECTION FOUR : Methods**

As mentioned earlier, we employ a web-based design for the study of advertisement effectiveness. Interviews were conducted using a self-administered, online questionnaire, using HCD Research's proprietary, web-assisted interviewing software. The HCD interviewing system permits online data entry of interviews by the respondents. In addition the software allows for the tracking of individual reactions to the survey.

Respondents for the political advertisement surveys were drawn from a nationally compiled database emanating from 500 websites providing opt in or double opt in from individuals interested in participating in research and who had opted in for research within 30 days of receiving the Muhlenberg/HCD study. The participants were not given an incentive to participate in the survey. As noted in the previous section, any Internet survey will fail to reach a significant portion of the voting population because of: (1) limited access to on-line service and (2) sampling frames for e-mail addresses that are not inclusive of all households. A third limitation that is more specific to studies using video clips is the limited access that internet users have to high speed Internet services. While dial-up services could accommodate the visuals that we tested, the slow speed of loading the ads may act as a substantial deterrent to completion of the survey instrument.

With these limitations recognized, the samples we used in our studies do maintain characteristics that reflect the broader voting population, thus providing a generally representative group of voters to test the advertisement on (A full description of the

sample demographics and attributes follows in the next section). Sample size and response rates are provided in Table One:

**TABLE ONE**  
**SAMPLE SIZE AND RESPONSE RATES BY ADVERTISEMENTS**

<b>ADVERTISEMENT</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>Response Rate</b>
Ten Million	170	17%
Troubling	170	17%
Risk	189	19%
Weapons	189	19%
Optimist	426	17%
Patriot Act	426	17%
Country	438	18%
Pessimist	441	18%
Pilot	488	20%
First Choice	488	20%
Three Minutes	395	16%
Priorities	398	16%
Who is this Man	594	20%
Family Priorities	593	20%
Strength	637	21%
<b>Any Questions</b>	<b>638</b>	<b>21%</b>
Rassman	1106	22%
Sellout (Swift Two)	1956	20%
Shame (Swift Three)	1137	22%

To maintain the integrity of the sample a number of procedures are utilized. First we employ password protection to limit access to the survey instrument.. Each invitation contains a password that is uniquely assigned to that email address. A respondent must enter the password at the beginning of the survey to gain access into the survey. This process ensures that a respondent completes the survey only one time. To increase the number of respondents in the survey and to improve overall response rates, respondents were presented with a summary of select survey responses.

## SECTION FIVE: Sample Characteristics

While our sample is clearly not a random representation of the nation's voting public, the characteristics of survey respondents share a number of similarities with America's electorate. First, it was important to discern if the individuals in our sample shared similar demographic and attitudinal qualities of the broader voting population. Table Two below identifies a number of key demographic qualities of our sample of voters in comparison with a profile of voters in the 2004 election gathered from national exit polling.

**TABLE TWO**

### **A Comparison of Sample and National Voter Demographics**

<b>Demographic</b>		<b>CNN Exit Poll (n = 13,660)</b>	<b>Muhlenberg College Ad Surveys (n= 10,391)</b>
Age			
	18-29	17%	22%
	30-44	29%	35%
	45-59	30%	34%
	60 and Over	24%	9%
Race			
	White	77%	82%
	African American	11%	7%
	Latino/Hispanic	8%	4%
	Asian	2%	4%
	Other	2%	4%

**TABLE TWO CONTINUED**

**A Comparison of Sample and National Voter Demographics**

<b>Demographic</b>		<b>CNN Exit Poll (n = 13,660)</b>	<b>Muhlenberg College Ad Surveys (n= 10,391)</b>
<b>Religion</b>			
	Protestant	54%	49%
	Catholic	27%	20%
	Jewish	3%	3%
	Other	7%	14%
	None	10%	14%
<b>Attend Religious</b>			
	At Least Once a Week	42%	28%
	Monthly	14%	17%
	A Few Times a Year	28%	35%
	Never	15%	20%
<b>Gender</b>			
	Male	54%	61%
	Female	46%	39%

Perhaps the greatest concern with online samples is the exclusion of certain populations from inclusion in a study, Most notably, online users tend to be younger than the population in general, and more particularly , younger than voters in the United States. As can be seen in Table One, our sample is indeed younger than the voting population, with a particular under-sampling of individual 60 or older. Our sample also contains a greater percentage of women than the broader voting population, along with under representing minority groups.

While acknowledging that our sample varies considerably from the voting population, there are some indicators that it generally reflects a number of key political attributes of American voters during the 2004 election season. First, in terms of party identification, our Internet derived sample closely approximates the partisan affiliation of the general voting population. The sample in our study, while over representing liberals, is also generally reflective of the distribution of ideological perspectives among voters. The full distribution is detailed in Table Three below:

**TABLE THREE**

**A Comparison of Political Characteristics Between the Survey Sample and Overall Voting Population**

Demographic		CNN Exit Poll (n = 13,660)	Muhlenberg College Ad Surveys (n= 10,391)
Party			
	Democrats	37%	33%
	Independents	26%	34%
	Republicans	37%	33%
Ideology			
	Liberal	21%	27%
	Moderate	45%	39%
	Conservative	34%	34%

Finally, our sample appears to compare tightly in terms of voter preferences in the 2004 presidential campaign. More specifically, we compare the candidate preferences of survey respondents with results from major national polls taken throughout the election season of 2004. As can be seen in Table Four, the results of our study are fairly similar

to the results of national surveys taken at similar points in time. The differences in the percentage of undecided voters is likely attributable to differences in handling of leaners.

**TABLE FOUR**  
**A Comparison of Voter Preferences**

	Kerry	Bush	Other/Neither Undecided/NS
Muhlenberg Web (June 2-4)	39%	46%	16%
<i>Fox News</i> (June 8-9)	42%	42%	16%
Muhlenberg Web (June 15-16)	42%	42%	16%
<i>Democracy Corps</i> (June 12-14)	45%	45%	10%
Muhlenberg Web (June 25-26)	40%	45%	15%
<i>Fox News</i> (June 22-23)	40%	47%	13%
Muhlenberg Web (July 6-7)	43%	41%	16%
<i>ABC News</i> (July 8-11)	46%	46%	10%
Muhlenberg Web (July 12-13)	43%	41%	16%
<i>CBS News</i> (July 11-15)	49%	44%	7%
Muhlenberg Web (July 19-20)	40%	43%	17%
<i>ABC News</i> (July 22-25)	46%	48%	6%
Muhlenberg Web (Aug. 6-7)	38%	43%	19%
CNN/Gallup (Aug 9-11)	45%	46%	9%
Muhlenberg Web (Aug 17-19)	39%	44%	17%
<i>CBS News</i> (Aug 15-18)	46%	45%	9%
Muhlenberg Web (Aug 21 -23)	41%	43%	16%
<i>NBC News</i> ( Aug 23-25)	45%	47%	8%
Muhlenberg Web (Nov 1-2)	47%	51%	3%
Final Election Results	48%	51%	---

## **SECTION SIX: Survey Results**

Our research design contains an emphasis on pre-test/post-test surveys of on-line respondents. Most importantly, respondents are asked to express their voting preferences in the 2004 election before viewing a political advertisement, and then asked to express their preference again after viewing the ad. We begin our analysis by examining reaction to the first Swift Boat Vets advertisement “Any Questions.” In Table Five we present the pre-test/post-test results among voters originally expressing a preference for John Kerry in the presidential race.

**TABLE FIVE**

**Advertisement – Swift Boat Vets #1 “Any Questions”**

**Pre-test/Post-test Intent to Vote for John Kerry by  
Party Affiliation**

	<b>Definitely</b>		<b>Most Likely</b>		<b>Leaning</b>		<b>Not Sure</b>	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Democrats (n= 138)	78%	74%	19%	16%	4%	8%	0%	1%
Republican (n = 11)	36%	36%	27%	9%	36%	45%	0%	9%
<b>Independent (n = 62)</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>28%</b>
Other Party (n =15)	53%	40%	19%	7%	18%	20%	0%	33%
Overall (n = 226)	62%	57%	25%	20%	11%	11%	1%	12%

As can be seen in Table Four, there are some notable differences in the pre-test and post-test responses, particularly among independents who had expressed a preference to vote for John Kerry before the commercial. Among independents originally expressing an intent to vote for Kerry there is a substantial drop among individuals indicating they are definitely or most likely supporting the Democratic candidate. Conversely, over one quarter of independents who were at least leaning towards Kerry before seeing the Swift Boat advertisement were not sure of their support after viewing “Any Questions.”

While it appears that the first “Swift Boat” ad had a negative impact on support for John Kerry among independent voters, it does not seem to have any significant impact upon support for George Bush. As can be seen in Table Six there is no change between the pre-test and post-test results, thus indicating that the Swift Boat Ad neither increased or decreased support for the President in terms of his bid for re-election.



**TABLE SIX**

**Advertisement – Swift Boat Vets #1 “Any Questions”**

**Pre-test/Post-test Intent to Vote for George Bush  
Party Affiliation**

	Definitely		Most Likely		Leaning		Not Sure	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Democrats (n= 14)	43%	64%	43%	21%	7%	7%	7%	7%
Republican (n = 11)	88%	89%	11%	9%	<1	1%	<1%	0%
<b>Independent (n = 62)</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>5%</b>
Other Party (n =15)	50%	58%	25%	25%	17%	8%	8%	8%
Overall (n=279)	77%	79%	18%	15%	3%	4%	2%	2%

Looking more closely at how the ad may have shifted the intensity of support for Kerry, Table Seven examines the difference between preferences before and after viewing the commercial. The areas in the shaded portion of the Table represent a weakening of support from the initial position. For example, after viewing the advertisement, 16% of voters who categorized their support for Kerry as definite before they saw the commercial, now were less confident. The reduction in intensity of support was even more pronounced among individuals who said they were most likely to vote for Kerry, with 39% less confident of their vote after seeing the Swift Boat ad. Even if offset against the 15% of voters moving to the most likely category, the net loss in intensity of support was 24%.

**TABLE SEVEN**

**Advertisement – Swift Boat Vets #1 “Any Questions”**

**Pre-test/Post-test Intensity of Support for John Kerry**

	Definitely- Post	Most Likely-Post	Leaning - Post	Not Sure-Post
Definitely- Pre (n= 146)	84%	4%	10%	2%
Most Likely – Pre (n = 59)	15%	46%	15%	24%
Leaning – Pre (n = 27)	0%	22%	48%	30%
Not Sure – Pre (n = 3)	0%	0%	0%	100%

While decreasing the intensity of support for Kerry among voters, the ad appears to have more marginal effect on the intensity of support for Bush. For example, while there was a 24% net decrease in the strength of support among individuals who originally said they were most likely to support Kerry, there was no net change among individuals who said they were most likely to support Bush. These results can be seen in Table Eight below.

**TABLE EIGHT**

**Advertisement – Swift Boat Vets #1 “Any Questions”**

**Pre-test/Post-test Intent to Vote for George Bush by  
Party Affiliation**

	Definitely- Post	Most Likely-Post	Leaning - Post	Not Sure-Post
Definitely- Pre (n= 214)	98%	1%	0%	1%
Most Likely – Pre (n = 51)	16%	69%	12%	4%
Leaning – Pre (n = 8)	25%	38%	38%	0%
Not Sure – Pre (n = 6)	17%	17%	33%	33%

To gain some perspective on the changes observed among individuals watching the Swift Boat advertisement, it’s valuable to look at voter reaction to a Kerry campaign advertisement running concurrently with the first Swift Boat ad. During early August, the Kerry Campaign began running a commercial entitled “Strength” which concentrated

on the Democratic nominee’s acceptance speech at his party’s convention. The clips from the speech focus on Kerry’s pledge to protect the country as its president, just as he protected the nation while serving in Vietnam. As can be seen in Table Nine, the “Strength” advertisement has very little impact on the pre-test/post-test measures of support for Kerry. Most importantly, in comparison to the significant movement observed in the “Any Questions” results, the Kerry advertisement appears to be quite unsuccessful in moving voters.

**TABLE NINE**

**Advertisement – Kerry Campaign “Strength”**

**Pre-test/Post-test Intent to Vote for John Kerry by Party Affiliation**

	<b>Definitely</b>		<b>Most Likely</b>		<b>Leaning</b>		<b>Not Sure</b>	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Democrats (n= 177)	72%	74%	21%	23%	6%	3%	0%	0%
Republican (n = 11)	42%	42%	33%	42%	25%	17%	0%	0%
<b>Independent (n = 62)</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>
Other Party (n =15)	66%	66%	33%	17%	0%	17%	0%	0%
Overall (n = 265)	69%	70%	23%	23%	8%	7%	0%	0%

Table Ten adds further evidence of the relative ineffectiveness of the “Strength” advertisement, with minimal increases (net gain of 7%) of intensity of support among individuals in the most likely category.

**TABLE TEN**

**Advertisement – Kerry Campaign “Strength”**

**Pre-test/Post-test Certainty of Vote For Kerry**

	<b>Definitely- Post</b>	<b>Most Likely-Post</b>	<b>Leaning - Post</b>
Definitely- Pre (n= 165)	95%	1%	4%
Most Likely – Pre (n = 55)	13%	82%	6%
Leaning – Pre (n = 20)	10%	25%	65%

While the Swift Boat advertisement appears to be more effective than the Kerry ad running at the same time, it is important to see how it performs against additional advertisements run before and after it aired.. In Table Eleven we present a comparison of pre-test/post-test results for independent voters viewing ads in the weeks before and after the first Swift Boat commercial ran. More specifically, we show results for the “Any Questions” and “Strength” ads in comparison to the second and third Swift Boat ads (“Sellout” and “Shame”), the Kerry counter ad ‘Rassmann’, and two pre-Swift Boat ads from the Kerry (“Who is this Man?”) and Bush (“Family Priorities”) campaigns.

**TABLE ELEVEN**

**Pre-test/Post-test Results for Independents Viewing Select Political Advertisements**

	Definitely		Most Likely		Leaning		Not Sure	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
<b>“Sellout” (n = 195) Effect on Kerry</b>	66%	68%	28%	24%	5%	6%	2%	2%
<b>“Sellout” (n = 174) Effect on Bush</b>	66%	68%	28%	24%	5%	6%	2%	2%
<b>“Rassmann” (n = 101) Effect on Kerry</b>	54%	59%	33%	31%	13%	10%	0%	1%
<b>“Rassmann” (n = 108) Effect on Bush</b>	70%	68%	19%	19%	8%	11%	3%	2%
<b>“AnyQuestions” – Effect on Kerry (n = 62)</b>	42% *	29% *	37% *	10% *	21% *	34% *	0% *	28% *
<b>AnyQuestions” – Effect on Bush (n = 66)</b>	58%	58%	32%	30%	6%	8%	5%	5%
<b>“Strength” (n = 62) effect on Kerry</b>	66%	60%	21%	23%	13%	17%	0%	0%
<b>Strength” (n = 60) effect on Bush</b>	51%	53%	30%	27%	15%	13%	3%	7%
<b>“Who is this Man” (n = 52) Effect on Kerry</b>	63%	60%	27%	31%	10%	8%	0%	2%
<b>Who is this Man” (n = 75) Effect on Bush</b>	60%	56%	32%	31%	7%	12%	1%	1%
<b>“Family Priorities” (n= 51) Effect on Kerry</b>	40%	43%	40%	33%	19%	14%	1%	10%
<b>Family Priorities” (n= 78) Effect on Bush</b>	59%	59%	32%	33%	9%	5%	0%	3%
<b>“Shame” (n=103) Effect on Kerry</b>	59%	59%	28%	26%	11%	13%	2%	2%
<b>“Shame” (n=132) Effect on Bush</b>	60%	60%	31%	30%	7%	7%	2%	3%

Pro Bush Ad

\* signifies greatest change between pre-test and post-test results in each category.

The results in Table Eleven provide evidence that among its immediate predecessors and successors, the “Any Questions” advertisement resulted in the greatest

level of movement between pre-tests and post-tests. Only one other advertisement was able to move double-digit levels of independent voters from a pro-candidate position to an unsure position. That ad was the Bush campaign's "Family Priorities" commercial that resulted in 10% of independent Kerry voters switching from a leaning or stronger position to an unsure position. However, that 10% mark is considerably less than the 28% increase in unsure voters after watching the first Swift Boat advertisement. In fact the strong consistency between all other pre-test/post-test results provides an added degree of support to the argument that the "Any Questions" advertisement may have been quite effective in eroding support for Kerry during August of 2004.

#### **SECTION SEVEN: The Follow-Up Advertisements**

As was noted earlier in the paper, the first Swift Boat advertisement was followed by additional ads from the Swift Boat Vets and counter advertisements from the Kerry campaign. In this section of the paper we examine the effectiveness of these ads in shifting support among members of our sample.

First, the Swift Boat Vets issued their second anti-Kerry advertisement in the middle of August, with a new focus on Kerry's post military service criticism of the war. In the advertisement "Sellout," Kerry is assailed for comments that undercut the efforts of American troops in the field. While similar to the tone and design of the "Any Question" commercial, "Sellout" did not seem to have the same impact on weakening support for Kerry. In particular, while the first Swift Boat ad appeared to have traction in terms of weakening independent support for Kerry, the second ad did not move voters in any significant manner. Table Twelve below demonstrates this minimal impact.

**TABLE TWELVE**

**Advertisement – Swift Boat Vets #2 “Sellout”**

**Pre-test/Post-test Intent to Vote for John Kerry by Party Affiliation**

	Definitely		Most Likely		Leaning		Not Sure	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Democrats (n= 557)	83%	82%	13%	13%	4%	3%	<1%	3%
Republican (n = 27)	55%	55%	19%	19%	26%	19%	0%	7%
<b>Independent (n = 195)</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>9%</b>
Other Party (n =20)	40%	50%	35%	15%	25%	15%	0%	20%

The “Sellout” advertisement also fails to substantially move Kerry voters to less confident levels of support. Only 4% of individuals who initially said they were definitely voting for the Massachusetts Senator were less sure after seeing the “Sellout” advertisement. Among respondents who indicated that they were most likely going to vote for Kerry in the pre-test there was actually a net increase in intensity of support, with 15% less sure of their support and 18% more sure. The full comparison of pre and post test intensity of support is found in Table Thirteen.

**TABLE THIRTEEN**

**Advertisement – Swift Boat Vets #2 “Sellout”**

**Pre-test/Post-test Intent to Vote for John Kerry**

	Definitely- Post	Most Likely-Post	Leaning - Post	Not Sure-Post
Definitely- Pre (n= 611)	96%	1%	3%	1%
Most Likely – Pre (n = 133)	18%	68%	8%	7%
Leaning – Pre (n = 53)	2%	17%	57%	25%
Not Sure – Pre (n = 13)	8%	0%	8%	85%

The ‘Sellout’ ad also seems to make no significant impact on support for President Bush. In particular, among independent voters pre-test and post-test results were almost

identical. Thus, the advertisement does not appear to either help Bush or harm Kerry, and therefore lacks the impact of the “Any Questions” advertisement.

**TABLE FOURTEEN**

**Advertisement – Swift Boat Vets #2 “Sellout”**

**Pre-test/Post-test Intent to Vote for George Bush by Party Affiliation**

	Definitely		Most Likely		Leaning		Not Sure	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Democrats (n= 52)	69%	73%	19%	15%	12%	8%	0%	4%
Republican (n = 587)	90%	90%	8%	8%	2%	1%	<1%	1%
<b>Independent (n = 174)</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>2%</b>
Other Party (n =19)	74%	84%	16%	16%	10%	0%	0%	0%

While the Swift Boat Vets followed up their first advertisement with the “Sellout” commercial, the Kerry campaign countered the Swift Boat claims with the introduction of their “Rassmann” advertisement. In this advertisement, Vietnam Vet Jim Rassmann describes the efforts of John Kerry to pull him from a river while under enemy fire. Rassman’s account of his experience contradicts many of the claims of the Swift Vets in their “Any Questions” commercial, and thus was aimed to undermine their credibility with the public. However, the results of our examination show that the “Rassmann” advertisement did not have a significant impact on either strengthening support for Kerry, or diminishing support for Bush among members of our sample. First, Table Fifteen shows the results of the pre and post-tests in terms of changing intensity of support for Kerry. As can be observed the ad manages to hold onto individuals who said they were definitely voting for Kerry, but does not provide for a strong increase in the intensity of support for Kerry among individuals who were less confident of their position.



**TABLE FIFTEEN**

**Advertisement – Kerry Ad “Rassmann”**

**Pre-test/Post-test Intent to Vote for John Kerry**

	Definitely- Post	Most Likely-Post	Leaning - Post	Not Sure-Post
Definitely- Pre (n= 332)	98%	2%	0%	<1%
Most Likely – Pre (n = 95)	19%	73%	7%	1%
Leaning – Pre (n = 30)	3%	23%	67%	25%
Not Sure – Pre (n = 4)	0%	25%	25%	50%

While not strengthening the intensity of support among Kerry voters, the “Rassmann” ad’s effect on support for Bush may have been even more important to the Kerry campaign. However, the results of our advertisement test show extremely limited movement in our sample between the pre and post tests. More specifically, in the important independent group, there was practically no change in intended support for President Bush. Tables Sixteen and Seventeen below illustrates this negligible effect.

**TABLE SIXTEEN**

**Advertisement – Kerry Ad “Rassmann”**

**Pre-test/Post-test Intent to Vote for George Bush**

	Definitely		Most Likely		Leaning		Not Sure	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Democrats (n= 34)	56%	47%	26%	35%	18%	9%	0%	9%
Republican (n = 306)	87%	86%	11%	10%	<1%	2%	<1%	1%
<b>Independent (n = 108)</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>2%</b>
Other Party (n =8)	75%	75%	0%	0%	13%	13%	13%	13%

**TABLE SEVENTEEN**

**Advertisement – Kerry Ad“Rassmann”**

**Pre-test/Post-test Intent to Vote for George Bush**

	Definitely- Post	Most Likely-Post	Leaning - Post	Not Sure-Post
Definitely- Pre (n= 368)	96%	3%	1%	1%
Most Likely – Pre (n = 66)	11%	74%	11%	5%
Leaning – Pre (n = 18)	0%	29%	61%	11%
Not Sure – Pre (n = 5)	0%	20%	40%	40%

Overall both the Swift Boat Vets follow-up advertisement and the Kerry campaign counter advertisement appear to pale in comparison to the effects of the first Swift Boat commercial. At this point we turn our attention back to the original “Any Questions” advertisement to try and understand elements of its effectiveness. Once again, we make comparison to other ads we tested during the summer of 2004. In all, 19 separate advertisements were tested from May to the end of August. In addition to the pre-test/post-test examinations of voter preferences, we asked our sample a battery of questions on various aspects of the advertisements. One of the aspects we inquired about was the ability of the advertisement to catch the respondent’s attention. In Table Eighteen we present respondent levels of agreement that the advertisement was attention getting.

**TABLE EIGHTEEN**

**Level of Agreement that Advertisement was Attention Getting**

<b>ADVERTISEMENT</b>	<b>Total Level of Agreement that Ad was Attention Getting</b>	<b>Strongly Agreed that the Ad was Attention Getting</b>
Ten Million (n = 170)	53%	16%
Troubling (n= 170)	64%	14%
Risk (n = 189)	40%	9%
Weapons (n=189)	66%	25%
Optimist (n = 426)	55%	8%
Patriot Act (n = 426)	65%	11%
Country (n=438)	64%	13%
Pessimist (n= 441)	53%	10%
Pilot (n= 488)	61%	10%
<b>First Choice ( n = 488)</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>32%</b>
Three Minutes (n = 395)	56%	10%
Priorities (n = 398)	65%	20%
Who is this Man (n = 594)	43%	7%
Family Priorities (n = 593)	67%	17%
Strength (n = 637)	54%	11%
<b>Any Questions (n= 638)</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>34%</b>
Rassman (n = 1106)	59%	15%
Sellout (Swift Two) (n = 1956)	58%	15%
Shame (Swift Three) (n= 1137)	54%	15%
<b>AVERAGE OF ALL ADS</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>15%</b>

As can be seen in Table Seventeen the “Any Questions” advertisement received the second highest level (73%) of agreement regarding its attention getting qualities. Only the Bush campaign ad “First Choice” which featured John McCain endorsing the president, had a higher score than Swift Boat One. In terms of the percentage of respondents that strongly agreed the advertisement was attention getting, “Any Questions” scored highest (34%) among the 19 commercials tested. For an advertisement to be successful it is necessary that it keep the viewer interested in the message. Among

the advertisements we examined, “Any Questions” was clearly among the best in this important attribute of an advertisement.

While getting attention is important, an advertisement should also be persuasive in terms of its message. In our study we ask respondents their perceptions of the political advertisement’s persuasive qualities. The results of this question are presented in Table Nineteen below.

**TABLE NINETEEN**

**Level of Agreement that Advertisement was Persuasive**

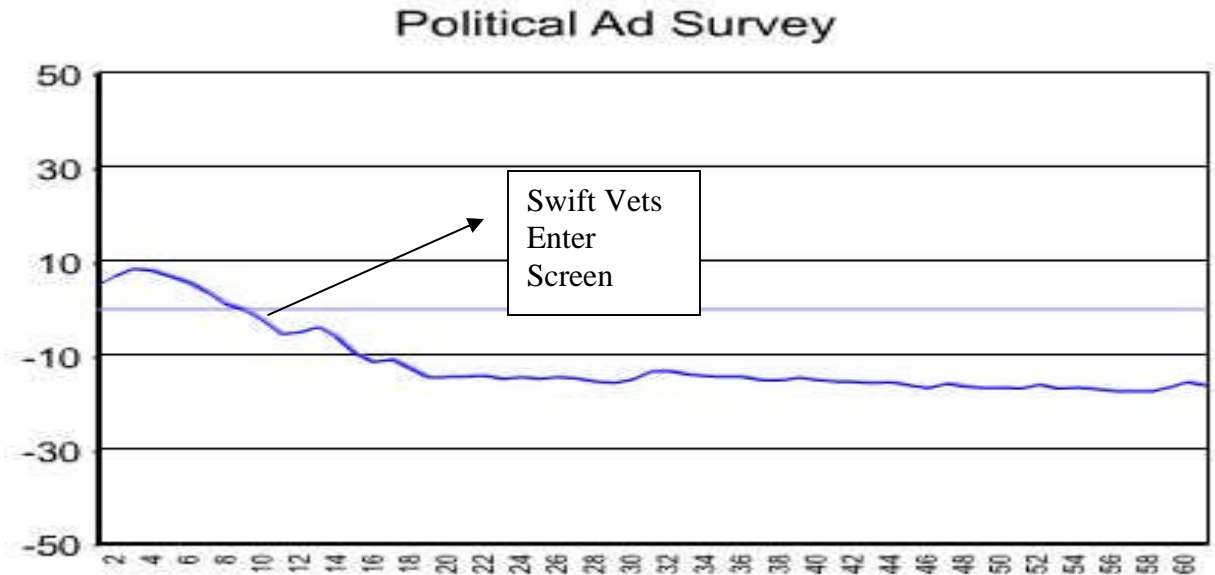
<b>ADVERTISEMENT</b>	<b>Total Agreement that Ad was Persuasive</b>	<b>Strongly Agreed that the Ad was Persuasive</b>
Ten Million	51%	13%
Troubling	47%	12%
Risk	40%	7%
Weapons	51%	17%
<b>Optimist</b>	<b>65%</b>	11%
Patriot Act	47%	9%
Country	58%	15%
Pessimist	51%	13%
Pilot	54%	9%
First Choice	51%	10%
Three Minutes	52%	11%
Priorities	56%	19%
Who is this Man	43%	9%
Family Priorities	50%	17%
Strength	48%	12%
<b>Any Questions (Swift One)</b>	56%	<b>23%</b>
Rassman	49%	15%
Sellout (Swift Two)	49%	15%
Shame (Swift Three)	41%	13%
<b>AVERAGE OF ALL ADS</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>13%</b>

Once again we note that the “Any Questions” ad performed relatively well in terms of a key aspect of advertisement effectiveness. The ad had the third highest level of overall agreement, and the highest level of strong agreement in terms of the message’s

persuasive qualities. In combination with its ability to gain attention, the ad's strong persuasive aspects helped to place it in a positive position relative to other ads we studied.

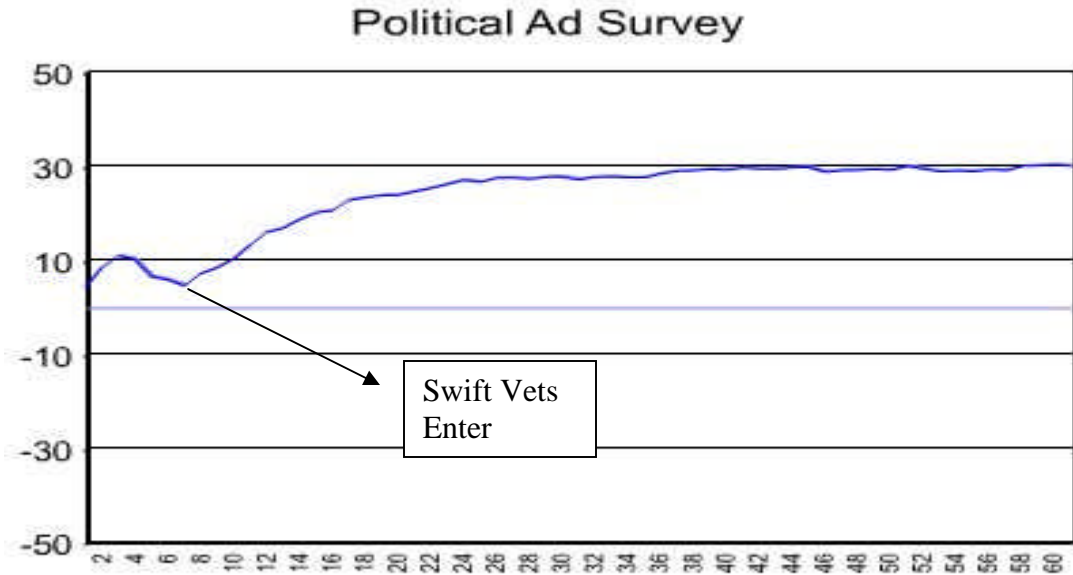
Finally, how did the Swift Vets initial offering measure in terms of believability? Our study respondents were asked to view the advertisement three times. The first time they view the advertisement without any questions being asked of them. During the second viewing the respondents are asked to rate their interest in the advertisement by moving their mouse in a direction signifying either increased or decreased interest. During the third viewing, respondents rate the believability of the ad through the same process of moving their mouse. As one might expect, Democrats had an increasingly negative view of the ad's believability as images of John Edwards faded to a series of anti-Kerry remarks from the Swift Vets. Figure One below shows the running scores for advertisement believability among Democratic respondents.

**FIGURE ONE**  
**DEMOCRATIC VOTER RATING OF BELIEVABILITY**  
**SWIFT BOAT VETS “ANY QUESTIONS” AD**



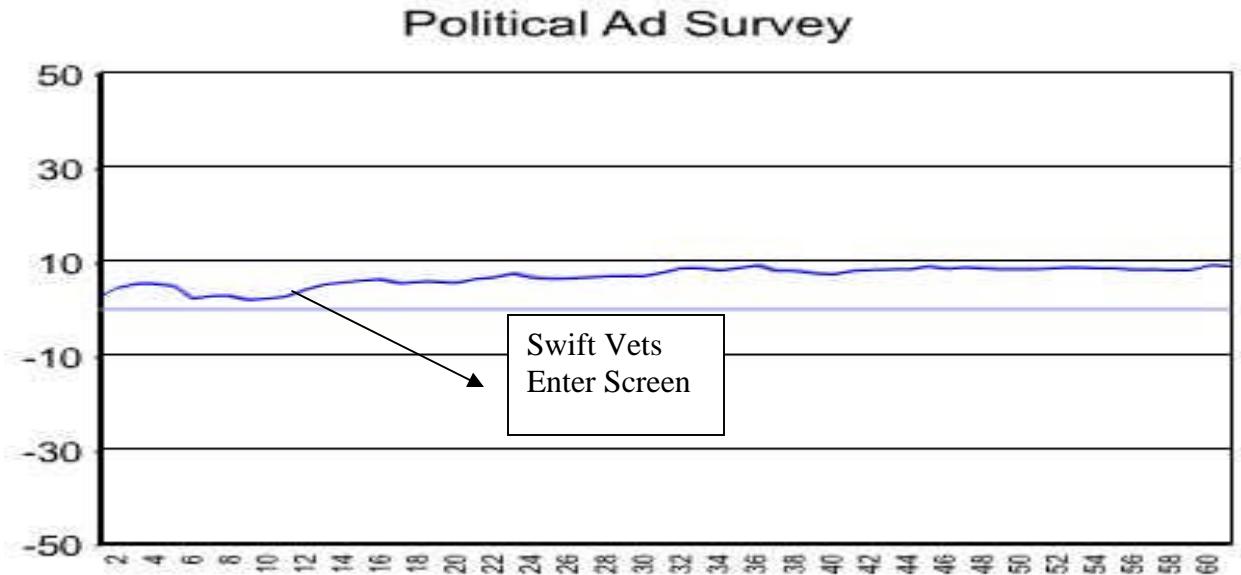
The reaction of Republicans to “Any Questions” is also not unexpected, as the initial decline in believability during Edward’s air time is replaced by high ratings of believability as the series of Swift Vet’s testimonials occurs. This trend is displayed in Figure Two below.

**FIGURE TWO**  
**REPUBLICAN VOTER RATING OF BELIEVABILITY**  
**SWIFT BOAT VETS “ANY QUESTIONS” AD**



The reaction of independent voters to the believability of the advertisement helps provide a sense of its effectiveness in weakening Kerry’s support among this cohort. More specifically, the image in Figure Three shows slightly positive and steady levels of believability among independents (n=124) viewing the advertisement. In other words, independents while not overwhelmingly falling for the message, never indicate significant levels of mistrust for the advertisement while watching the piece.

**FIGURE THREE**  
**INDEPENDENT VOTER RATING OF BELIEVABILITY**  
**SWIFT BOAT VETS “ANY QUESTIONS” AD**



**SECTION EIGHT: Conclusion**

The Swift Vet’s effort to damage John Kerry’s run for the White House has been trumpeted as a key event in the 2004 presidential election campaign. From political pundits to campaign managers there is consensus that Kerry’s drop in the polls during August was the result of the airing of the “Any Questions” advertisement. In this study we find evidence that the first Swift Boat advertisement possessed a number of qualities that enhanced its effectiveness (i.e. attention getting, persuasiveness) in weakening support for John Kerry. Most notably, our results tend to suggest that the Swift Boat ad was a textbook example of an effective negative advertisement. Negative ads seek to plant seeds of doubt about candidates in the minds of voters. In particular, attack ads aim



to weaken support for candidates among voters that are more prone to shift allegiance. This seems to be the case with the “Any Questions” advertisement. While this ad caused very little movement among Democrats and Republicans who had established firm positions on the candidates, it did seem to weaken the support of independent voters who were to some degree supporting Kerry before seeing the advertisement. In a close election like the 2004 presidential election, weakening support among even a small cohort of voters is extremely important. Thus, our results seem to support the argument that the first Swift Boat Ads was among the key factors that shaped the outcome of the race.

## **Part Two:**

### **Handling The Truth: An Evaluation of Voter Capability to Discern Political Advertisement Accuracy**

It has become custom in presidential elections, television advertisements once again were omnipresent in the 2004 race for the White House. And as in the past there has been continued concern regarding the truthfulness and factual accuracy of the many ads seen by the American electorate. In fact, there has been a concerted effort on the part of organizations such as the Annenberg Public Policy Center's Fact Check.Org to evaluate the accuracy of the campaigns advertisement claims. While such efforts have helped provide an independent evaluation of political ads, it remains unclear if voters who actually view campaign commercials are able to discern inaccuracies as they are being presented to them.

In this section of the study we seek to determine if voters themselves display skepticism for candidate claims that have been shown to be inaccurate or misleading by the evaluations from Fact Check.org. To accomplish this goal, survey respondents were asked to rate political advertisements on a number of criteria that are often associated with the integrity of an advertisement's message. These ratings are then compared to the we designed a study in which representative samples of voters were asked to view campaign ads via the Internet, while continuously rating the advertisements believability via movement of a mouse.

In addition, survey respondents were asked to rate the advertisements on a number of criteria that are often associated with the integrity of an advertisement's message. These ratings are then compared to the

## SECTION ONE: The Elements of a Deceptive Advertisement

Distortion of facts in the world of politics is not a new phenomenon. From Machiavelli onward, the use of deception to secure political strength is an accepted (if not appreciated) aspect of life even in the most vibrant democracies. In U.S. elections the use of deception in political advertisement has a long history. With the development of new and powerful mediums, the ability to deceive voters has been taken to a new level. Perhaps the most used and studied form of deceptive advertisement is the television commercial. Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1992) neatly describes some of the pivotal moments in deceptive advertisement , including the infamous Willie Horton ad from the 1988 presidential campaign. While there are many elements that make up a deceptive advertisement, there are a number of key tools that are employed.

First, negative advertisements rely on the use of incomplete information to provide facts to voters without context. The absence of critical details can take the most innocuous of behaviors and shape it into a monstrous deed. Second, negative advertisements often focus on personal characteristics of candidates that are easy to grasp by an electorate lacking in detailed information about policy related issues. Planting a seed of doubt with the inclusion of a well placed bit of troublesome information may be enough to sway a few key votes away from an opponent.

To measure individual perception of deceptiveness in an advertisement we ask a number of questions of our sample that focus on: (1) the use of incomplete or missing information and (2) the inclusion of troublesome information. In Table One Below we

show the percentages of respondents that found the advertisements in our study to have incomplete or missing information or troublesome content.

**TABLE ONE**  
**PERCEPTIONS OF ADVERTISEMENT QUALITIES**

<b>ADVERTISEMENT</b>	<b>Percent of Respondents who Indicated Ad had Incomplete or Missing Information</b>	<b>Percent of Respondents who Indicated Ad contained information that troubled them</b>
Ten Million (FC)	40%	45%
Troubling (FC)	42%	52%
Risk	38%	46%
Weapons (FC)	42%	59%
Optimist (FC)	25%	9%
Patriot Act (FC)	31%	34%
Country (FC)	36%	17%
Pessimist (FC)	33%	35%
Pilot	26%	10%
First Choice (FC)	23%	19%
Three Minutes (FC)	26%	19%
Priorities	37%	42%
Who is this Man	33%	34%
Family Priorities (FC)	40%	51%
Strength	32%	35%
<b>Any Questions (FC)</b>	42%	<b>55%</b>
Rassman	32%	34%
Sellout (Swift Two)	41%	61%
Shame (Swift Three)	43%	55%
<b>AVERAGE OF ALL ADS</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>37%</b>

As noted earlier, it is our goal to compare the evaluations of advertisement deceptiveness from our study with the evaluations put forth by FactCheck.org. All of the ads that are marked with an (FC) in Table One signify that FactCheck.org evaluated the advertisement for accuracy of claims. In the following section we compare what Factcheck.org found and what respondents in our study observed.

## SECTION THREE: Comparison of FactCheck.org and Muhlenberg Evaluations

### Pro Kerry Advertisements:

#### 1. Country

Ad Summary: Senator Kerry discusses the lack of health care in America, stating that 43 million Americans don't have health care. He then reiterates his commitment to reversing this problem.

**Fact Check Analysis:** 43 million Americans don't have health *insurance*, not health *care*, and the difference is deceptive. Although it is clear that a lack of health insurance does indeed lead to a lack of health care, the correlation between the two is not direct, as Senator Kerry claims in this advertisement. This advertisement also implies that Kerry's plan would deliver health care to all Americans, something that Kerry's own plan does not attempt to say.

Muhlenberg Ratings (n = 438)

- Missing Information ..... 36%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about missing information:** The Advertisement does not give enough specifics about what Kerry would do to improve the situation
- Troubling Information ..... 17%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about troubling information:** The claim that the country is headed in the wrong direction

#### 2. Optimist:

Ad Summary: This ad features Senator Kerry advocating his administration goals, such as creating jobs in America, lowering health care costs, independence from Middle East oil and improving America's foreign policy.

**Fact Check Analysis:** This advertisement contains a series of positive generalities, but no facts or specific policy proposals to discuss how Senator Kerry will achieve his goals. However, since no factual statements were actually made in these ads, they cannot be judged for their veracity.

Muhlenberg Ratings (n = 426)

- Missing Information ..... 25%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about missing information:** Information on how Kerry accomplished these goals.....(70%)
- Troubling Information ..... 9%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about troubling information:** The fact that Kerry is in the ad.....(65%)

3. Ten Million Jobs:

Ad Summary: This ad states that President Bush favors the outsourcing of jobs and is quoted as saying it “makes sense” for America. In contrast, Senator Kerry’s economic proposals would create ten million new jobs in America.

**Fact Check Analysis:** President Bush never actually said the words that Senator Kerry claims he did, not sign off on the report by his Economic Advisors who actually made the statement used in this advertisement. The ad makes it seem as if President Bush favors the loss of American jobs, when in reality no statements have ever been made by the President to that effect.

Muhlenberg Ratings (n = 170)

- Missing Information ..... 40%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about missing information:** No information about Kerry’s plan to solve these problems
- Troubling Information ..... 45%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about troubling information:** General negativity of the advertisement.....(48%)

**Pro Bush Advertisements:**

4. Any Questions:

Ad Summary: This ad features a variety of Vietnam War Veterans (the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth) who claim that John Kerry was falsely awarded some of his military decorations that he earned during the Vietnam War.

**Fact Check Analysis:** This ad was funded by a group of conservatives who had previously donated money to the Republican party. Their stories are also contradicted by the testimony of other witnesses (including the veteran that John Kerry reportedly saved) and official navy records. Also noted is that one of the soldiers who appears in the advertisement regretted what he said in the commercial, only to retract his own statement of regret later on.

Muhlenberg Ratings (n = 638)

- Missing Information ..... 42%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about missing information:** Not enough information about the specific circumstances.....(42%)
- Troubling Information ..... 55%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about troubling information:** Overall negativity.....(44%)

5. Family Priorities:

Ad Summary: This advertisement attacks Senator Kerry's records on "family priorities," noting his votes on emergency contraception and parental notification on abortion.

**Fact Check Analysis:** The ad correctly notes Senator Kerry's votes on bills pertaining to these topics. However, it is misleading in the sense that Kerry sought for a compromise measure that would have allowed physicians to provide their services to the teenagers if the doctors believed the teenager to be mature enough to handle the situation herself. The advertisement also mischaracterizes Kerry's vote on emergency contraception; in actuality, Kerry voted against an amendment to bar the use of federal funds for emergency contraception to be given to anyone under 18 in schools.

Muhlenberg Ratings (n = 593)

- Missing Information ..... 40%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about missing information:** Bush's position on the issue.....(43%)
- Troubling Information ..... 51%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about troubling information:** Portrayal of Kerry .....(28%)

6. Priorities:

Ad Summary: This advertisement attacks Senator Kerry for missing a large amount of votes in the United States Senate while campaigning for President and also states that he voted against the Laci Peterson law that would have protected pregnant woman from violence.

**Fact Check Analysis:** Senator Kerry had indeed missed a variety of votes while campaigning. However, he did not vote against protecting pregnant women from violence; he actually voted against a law that referred to an "unborn child" as a second victim of a murder, while voting for a bill that was essentially identical, just without the reference to an unborn child. Additionally, this advertisement states that Senator Kerry missed a vote to lower health care costs, when in actuality he only missed a vote to cap malpractice awards in court cases.

Muhlenberg Ratings (n = 398)

- Missing Information ..... 37%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about missing information:** The reasons why Kerry did not make the votes .....(32%)
- Troubling Information ..... 42%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about troubling information:** Overall negativity .....(45%)

7. First Choice:

Ad Summary: This advertisement features senator John McCain of Arizona discussing the difficulty of the War on Terror and noting what he believes to be President Bush's firm resolve and good handling of the situation.

**Fact Check Analysis:** The advertisement contains no facts, so nothing in it can be considered factually inaccurate. However, it does contain false implications. The ad seems to be implying that McCain is discussing President Bush's handling of the War on Iraq, when in actuality he was speaking more broadly on the War on Terror. He has, in the past, been critical of President Bush's handling of the War on Iraq. None the less, the endorsement of President Bush featured in the advertisement is accurate.

Muhlenberg Ratings (n = 488)

- Missing Information ..... 23%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about missing information:** Reasons for fighting the war .....(39%)
- Troubling Information ..... 19%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about troubling information:** Focus on the war.....(28%)

8. Pessimist:

Ad Summary: This ad features President Bush discussing his economic successes, noting that he passed the largest tax cut in history. He goes on to criticize Senator Kerry for attacking his economic record, particularly attacking Senator Kerry for his pessimistic attitude.

**Fact Check Analysis:** The economic statistics cited by President Bush are accurate and Senator Kerry did indeed refer to the economic situation as "the worst job recovery since the Great Depression." However, Bush's claims that his tax cuts are the largest in history are false if one figures in inflation and the size of the economy.

Muhlenberg Ratings (n = 441)

- Missing Information ..... 33%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about missing information:** The advertisement did not give context of Kerry's statement.....(44%)
- Troubling Information ..... 35%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about troubling information:** The overall negativity towards Kerry .....(34%)

9. Patriot Act:

Ad Summary: This ad attacks Senator Kerry's position on the Patriot Act, noting that Kerry first voted for the act but then changed his mind. The advertisement goes on to say that Senator Kerry would repeal the ability of the government to use wiretaps, subpoena powers and surveillances against terrorists.



**Fact Check Analysis:** The advertisement is correct in noting that Kerry first favored the Patriot Act, but then changed his mind. However, in reality, Senator Kerry advocated better judicial oversight of these new government power so that civil rights were not violated. In fact, five Republicans joined Kerry in co-sponsoring a resolution that would have amended the act.

Muhlenberg Ratings (n = 426)

- Missing Information ..... 31%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about missing information:** The advertisement did not give the reasons why Kerry voted against the act .....(37%)
- Troubling Information ..... 34%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about troubling information:** General negativity of the advertisement.....(36%)

10. Weapons:

Ad Summary: This ad attacks Senator Kerry's record on opposing weapons necessary to win the War on Terror, including planes, missiles and armor for troops.

**Fact Check Analysis:** The ad takes Senator Kerry's votes out of context. The truth is that Senator Kerry voted against large "money bills" for the Pentagon that happened to contain the specific items noted in the advertisement, such as F-18 Fighter Jets and body armor for troops.

Muhlenberg Ratings (n = 189)

- Missing Information ..... 42%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about missing information:** Lack of context about the votes that Kerry made.....(58%)
- Troubling Information ..... 59%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about troubling information:** The use of the war for political gain.....(38%)

11. Troubling:

Ad Summary: This advertisement claims that Senator Kerry has supported tax raises hundreds of times, including taxes on gasoline and Social Security benefits. It also claims that he has opposed a variety of tax relief measures and that his economic plan would result in a massive tax increase.

**Fact Check Analysis:** The advertisement is a blatant mischaracterization of Senator Kerry's past legislative record. He never made statements he is accused of making in the advertisement. Additionally, the numbers of votes cast against tax relief measures in the commercial actually counts one vote against multiple tax reductions. The advertisement also fails to account Senator Kerry's promises to retain a large amount of President Bush's tax breaks.

Muhlenberg Ratings (n = 170)

- Missing Information ..... 42%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about missing information:** Bush's positions on these topics .....(42%)
- Troubling Information ..... 52%
  - **Most Common open-ended comment about troubling information:** General tone and negativity .....(47%)

**SECTION FOUR: Comparison of FactCheck Evaluations with Respondent Ratings**

While the lack of a numeric rating of advertisements by FactCheck precludes any quantitative evaluation of association between ad accuracy and voter perception of ad believability, a general comparison can be made. In particular, FactCheck's most critical evaluations among ads that we studied appear to be on the pro Bush ads "Troubling", "Weapons" and "Any Questions", and the Pro Kerry ad "Ten Million Jobs." Fact Check uses words and phrases such as "blatant mischaracterization" and "out of context" to describe the nature of these ads. Interestingly, those ads are among the highest in terms of respondent ratings of incomplete information and troubling content. For example, the four ads that Fact Check seems to evaluate most critically received averages of 40% on the category of incomplete information and 50% on the presence of troublesome claims. Conversely, the ads that Fact Check was less critical of maintained averages of 32% (incomplete information) and 25% (troublesome claims). While the small number of ads in this comparison make broad inferences about the capability of individuals to discern the accuracy of political commercials, the findings do provide some preliminary evidence that the public maintains capabilities to identify aspects of ads that are misleading.

**COMPARISON OF BELIEVABILITY TIMELINES:**

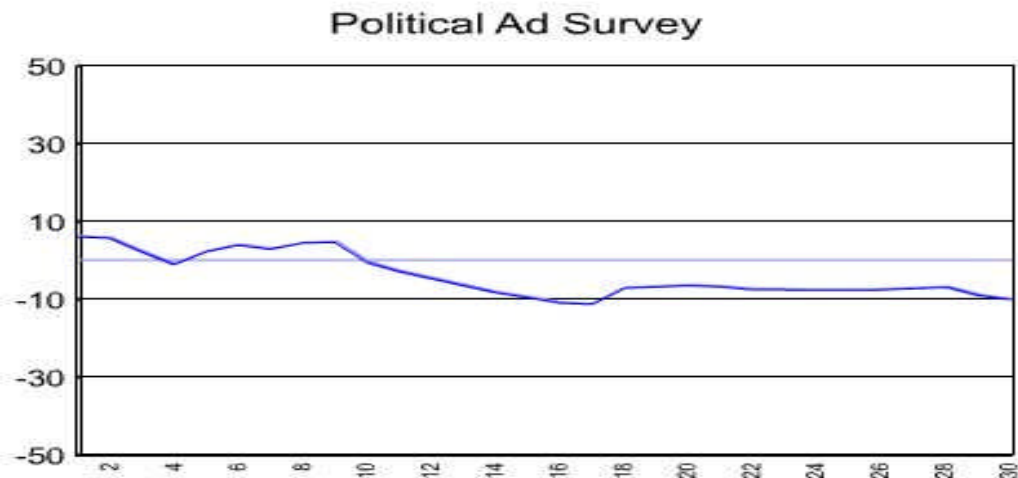
As was noted earlier respondents rated the believability of political ads through a continuous movement of their computer's mouse. After collecting this data we aggregate

the results to determine overall trends in respondent reactions. In the following section we examine two particular ads that appeared to elicit high and low levels of believability.

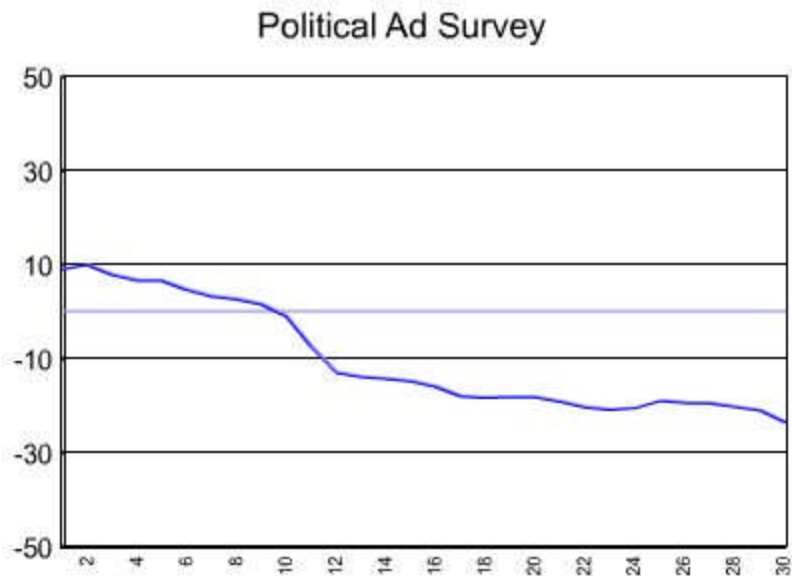
The Bush campaign's "weapons" advertisement received very high levels of concern in terms of both missing information and troubling content. Among the criticisms levied against it by respondents was that the ad did not provide enough context about Kerry's votes on weapons systems. At about the 10 second mark of the advertisement the focus of the ad shifts from general statements about the troops fighting the war to criticisms of Kerry's votes on weapons programs. As can be seen in the following graphs, both independents and Democrats lower their rating of believability as the ad shifts focus to criticizing Kerry's record.

**FIGURE ONE**

**INDEPENDENT VOTER RATING OF BELIEVABILITY  
BUSH CAMPAIGN "WEAPONS" AD**

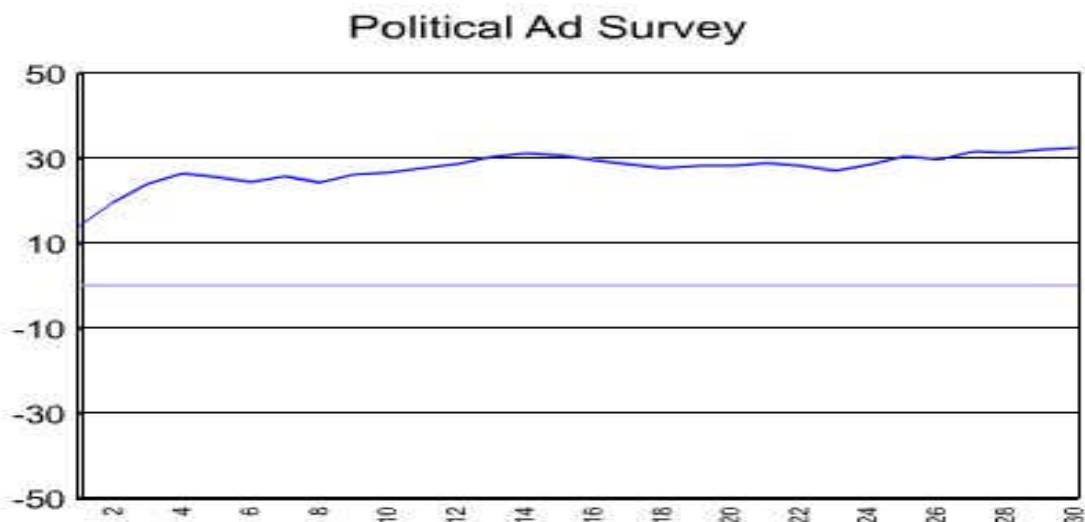


**FIGURE TWO**  
**DEMOCRATIC VOTER RATING OF BELIEVABILITY**  
**BUSH CAMPAIGN “WEAPONS” AD**



As may be expected, Republican reactions to the advertisement's believability were significantly more positive. As can be seen in Figure Three, Republicans have an immediate spike in believability at the start of the advertisement when President Bush appears on the screen to announce his approval of the advertisement. As the ad turns to Kerry's record on votes dealing with weapons there is no decline in believability among respondents.

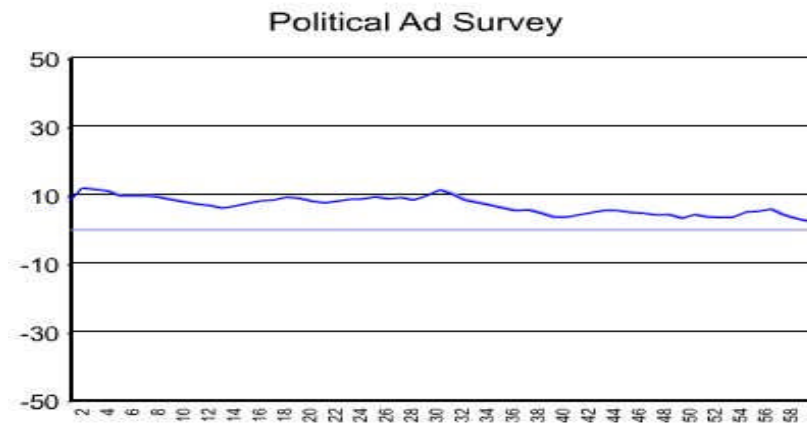
**FIGURE THREE**  
**REPUBLICAN VOTER RATING OF BELIEVABILITY**



While the Bush Campaign's "Weapons" ad draws low marks on believability, it's "First Choice" ad featuring John McCain scores very well in terms of its message. This advertisement featuring an endorsement of the President by Senator McCain received relative positive marks in terms of the level of content that was troublesome or incomplete. The believability timeline for independents, Democrats and Republicans follows in Figures Four through Six.

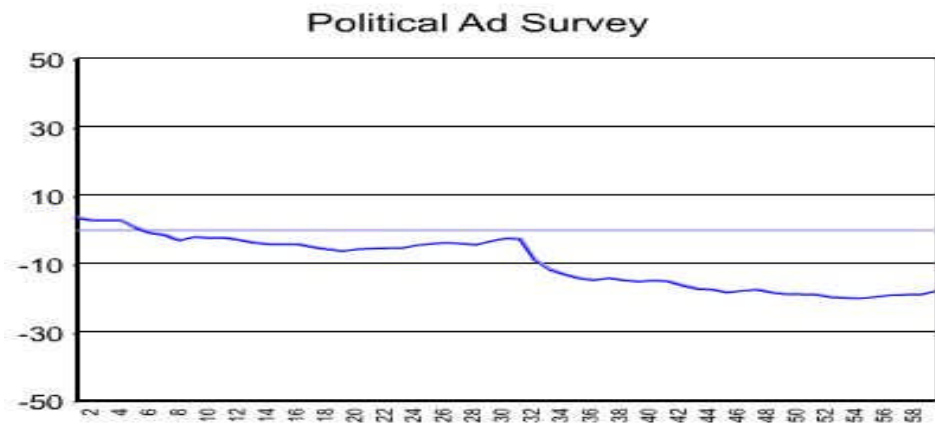
**FIGURE FOUR**

**INDEPENDENT VOTER RATING OF BELIEVABILITY  
BUSH CAMPAIGN "FIRST CHOICE" AD**



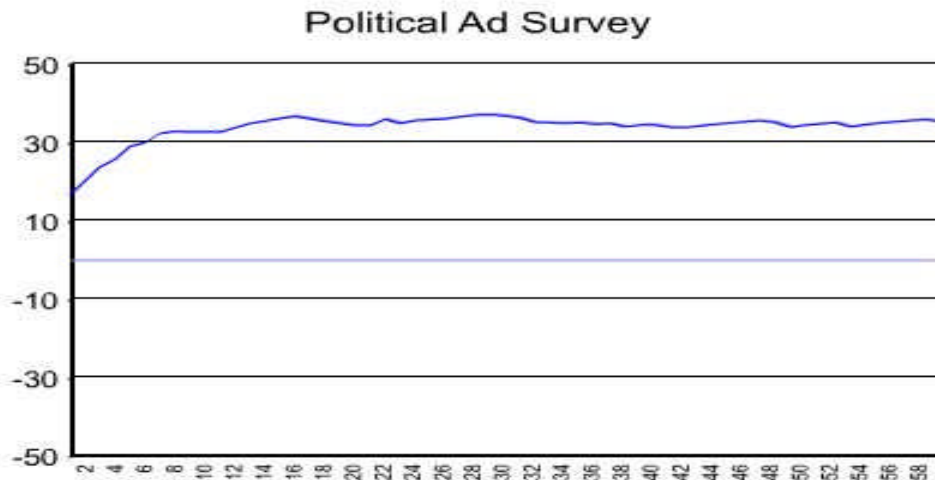
**FIGURE FIVE**

**DEMOCRAT VOTER RATING OF BELIEVABILITY  
BUSH CAMPAIGN "FIRST CHOICE" AD**



**FIGURE SIX**

**REPUBLICAN VOTER RATING OF BELIEVABILITY  
BUSH CAMPAIGN “FIRST CHOICE” AD**



Independents rate the believability of “First Choice” as moderately positive, with a minor dip occurring as the ad switches from Senator McCain’s image as he endorses President Bush, to images of the President with voice overlays from the Arizona Senator.

Democrats show only moderately negative views of believability when John McCain is on the screen, with a sharp drop at the arrival of Bush’s image. Finally, Republicans almost immediately rate believability high, with no changes between the McCain and Bush images.

**CONCLUSION**

The use of misleading political advertisements is not new in the United States, but their use remains a concern for the quality of political deliberation in the nation. In this study we attempted to provide some very preliminary insight into the ability of voters

to discern deceptive tactics in contemporary political advertisements. We find that respondents to our Internet surveys tended to identify higher levels of misleading attributes in advertisements that were also rated as misleading by FactCheck.org. We thus suggest further research that refines the types of measures used to identify misleading ads, with additional field studies of voter's ability to discern deceptive tactics and content.



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