

Barbara Allen and Daniel Stevens

Truth in Advertising? Lies in Political Advertising and How they Affect the Electorate.
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In the UK in November 2018, following two national elections and a referendum which saw various claims to truth and lies circulate, the Coalition for Reform in Political Advertising called on the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee to make special reference to election campaigns in its report "Disinformation and fake news". In particular demanding all political advertisements be pre-cleared and fact-checked with oversight given to a regulatory body. The argument for this is the evidence presented through the analysis offered by Allen and Stevens, a work any would-be regulator needs to read carefully.

The work is contextualised within 'post-factual' democracy, with the rules of free speech appearing to be abused in the unregulated environment of political campaigning. As voters rely on motivated processing they are less able to distinguish between truths, half-truths and outright lies, hence we move further away from what the authors describe as the fundamental tenet of desirable electoral politics that voters turn out and cast informed votes (p. 10). In order to determine whether this ideal has practical currency, the research tests whether political advertising is instructive, or whether it misleads voter choices.

The study focuses on US politics and the 2008 contests; this somewhat unfortunate time lag is justified as it marked the start of the era of hypermedia, intense microtargeting and when campaigners began presenting alternative facts. The critique of modern US democracy is based on the work of Tocqueville who argued: "persistent misstatements... exceed the bounds of discourse meant to enable civic engagement in self-governance" (p. 23). If election campaigns' uncivil character is accepted it denies the very principles of US democracy they argue. Hence the research tests political advertisements across a raft of fifteen discrete areas of enquiry with a sophisticated measurement scheme that includes every component variable scoring ads for accuracy for issue and trait claims and the viewing figures to determine the extent US voters were informed.

Extrapolating the main findings, the research describes in detail the levels of accuracy that voters are exposed to. Mapping the terrain, the authors firstly find that when a candidate trails in the polls they tend to resort to negative messages, and usually claims were made about the traits of their opponents. They also find that greater levels of inaccuracy in presidential campaigns tend to appear closer to election day. In Senate campaigns there is more evidence of reciprocity in campaigning tone, leading to tit-for-tat style messaging, but this appeared dependent on the standing of candidates in the polls also. Resources were also identified as a factor determining campaign reciprocity, meaning campaigns can only respond directly to that of the other candidate if they have deep coffers to quickly produce an advertisement.

Worryingly, given the evidence that negativity is increasing and proving more engaging, the research also shows that negative advertising is far more likely to be inaccurate than positive

advertisements. It is also the less accurate ads that are pushed more, hinting that voters are not better informed as fact-check systems fail to forewarn them. The work not only highlights the prevalence of inaccuracy and that it gains visibility, but that other aural and visual cues which have emotional resonance are often used to reinforce claims of questionable accuracy. In contrast to received wisdom, the authors find that evidence is likely to be cited when the claim is inaccurate. Furthermore, a female voice-over seems more likely to be used for an inaccurate claim, although one might comfort oneself to know this does not seem to impact on the trust levels of the audience. The authors themselves suggest this conclusion requires further testing.

More importantly, in exploring the impact of inaccurate claims more generally, the authors find that even on an issue where there are high levels of knowledge about a candidate's position, "a single ad containing false claims moved a substantial tranche of respondents into incorrect perceptions" (p. 319). This finding, combined with turnout data and the likelihood of exposure to ads containing inaccurate claims which shows higher turnout in areas experiencing more airings of ads that are false and misleading, indicates as the authors conclude that the US is largely failing the test of having informed voters.

Of course one might argue that the three sets of data, one on the accuracy of claims, election survey data and the frequency ads are aired each represent unique snapshots of a contest that cannot be readily combined. It is impossible to prove that a highly inaccurate ad did indeed drive turnout. Equally one can also argue 2008 was unique in many ways, having the first black presidential candidate with an agenda that appeared radical within an American context. However, arguably the authors are not simply falling into a trap of finding correlation to fit their predisposition. We know voting behaviour has a strong emotional component and many voters rely on heuristic cues relating to issues of greatest resonance. Elections are also highly contested communication environments and deliberately polarize voters into making a choice. Hence it is unsurprising that politically and emotionally resonant communication will cut through. The authors demonstrate inaccurate claims are likely accompanied by powerful images and music, as well as citation evidence, hence it would seem logical to argue that inaccuracy is likely to be highly manipulative.

However should inaccuracy play any role in democratic processes? Normatively it should not. Hence the major value of this work is to provide the tools by which accuracy can be comprehensively measured, and alongside the wider features of the ad, in order to build a rich picture of the nature of contemporary campaign communication. Thus there is significant value in this work for the researcher. More immediately however there is a call that needs to be responded to, hinted at the start of the review, concerning the need to regulate political advertising. Failure to do so is to allow campaigns to lie, for voting to be shaped by inaccurate claims and for trust in democracy, especially when lies are exposed, to decline further.