

Truth in Advertising

Fact-checking Outfits Monitor Claims in Political Ads

By Daniel Weiss



Public mistrust of political advertising and other communications is hardly new. But a poll released last month found that a majority of voters believe they were frequently misled during the 2010 campaign—and that the rate of political mendacity is on the rise. The poll, conducted by the University of Maryland’s Program on International Policy Attitudes, found that 91 percent of voters reported encountering information they considered false or misleading during the campaign; 56 percent say this occurred frequently; and 54 percent believe its prevalence is increasing.

It is an open question whether these perceptions reflect a real decline in political truth-telling or simply the fact that ads that would once have stayed under the radar, reaching only targeted voters, are now available for all to see on the Internet, where the most extreme specimens go viral and get picked up by national media. Indeed, public awareness of misleading ads may even be a result of efforts by media organizations to help voters wade through the thicket of creative exaggeration, statistical hocus-pocus and flat-out lies flung around in the heat of the campaign by fact-checking political claims. These fact checks may even help to turn the tide and hold political campaigns to a higher standard of accuracy.

Political fact checking has been an occasional feature of media outlets such as the *New York Times* for years, though these efforts tend to be sidebars to their primary mission of news gathering. In the last decade, however, two organizations have launched full-time enterprises dedicated to political fact checking—and they have begun to make their presence felt. FactCheck.org, a project of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center that launched in late 2003, gained renown the next year when Vice President Dick Cheney referenced it in his debate with Democrat John Edwards in an attempt to rebut Edwards's charges regarding Cheney's former company, Halliburton. (Ironically, Cheney misstated the Web address as FactCheck.com, and media focus on his solecism brought the organization even more attention.)

PolitiFact, launched by the *St. Petersburg Times* in 2007, won a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign. The Pulitzer board's citation saluted it for examining "more than 750 political claims, separating rhetoric from truth to enlighten voters." Over the last two years, PolitiFact has expanded its mission to fact-check members of Congress and the White House as well as other political players, rendering judgments with the six settings of its "Truth-O-Meter": True, Mostly True, Half True, Barely True, False and Pants on Fire. (The latter is reserved for claims that are not only inaccurate but ridiculously so.) It has also partnered with local papers to set up state-based operations in Florida, Wisconsin, Texas, Ohio, Virginia, Georgia, Oregon and Rhode Island.

As the new fact checkers on the block settle in, campaigns are feeling out how to handle them. Like all political reporters, the fact checkers get plenty of pushback from campaigns that feel they have been treated unfairly, though they also get calls that sound a bit like students pleading for a D rather than an F on a paper. "Sometimes campaigns would say, 'Oh, tell me it's not a False,' or, 'Can't you just make that a Barely True?'" says Greg Borowski, editor of PolitiFact Wisconsin. "There was this sense of, 'We under-



PolitiFact's harshest rating is reserved for claims that are both inaccurate and ridiculous.

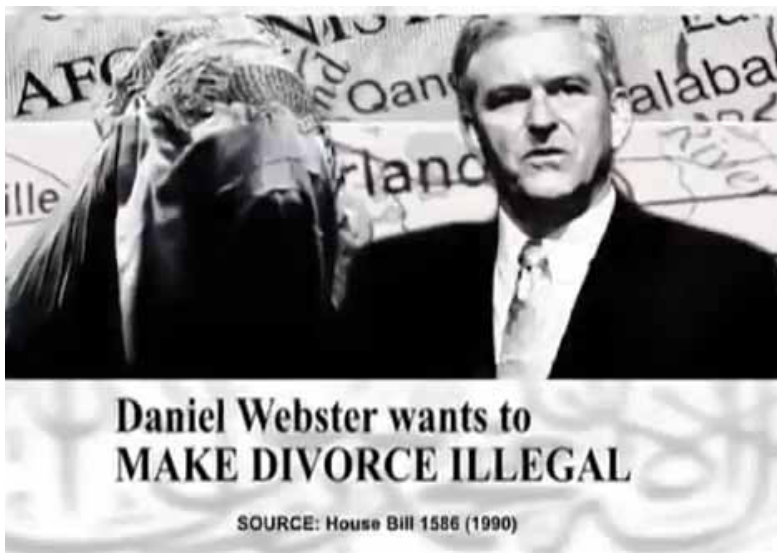
stand what you're doing, just don't give us a False or, God forbid, Pants on Fire."

Campaigns also regularly chime in with exhortations to look into their opponents' allegedly dubious claims and clearly see the potential in taking advantage when their adversaries receive damning ratings. "If an opponent ran a negative ad that was rated False, hitting back with an ad saying, 'Even this non-partisan fact-checking organization said this attack was false' would be extremely effective," says Abe Dyk, who managed Florida Congressman Kendrick Meek's 2010 Senate campaign.

Another Florida campaigner, Todd Jurkowski, who was communications director for former Congressman Alan Grayson, likens PolitiFact and FactCheck.org to non-partisan, governmental entities. "These fact-check organizations are very much like the Congressional Budget Office," he says. "Politicians and campaigns tout the information when it works in their favor and dismiss it when it's against what they want."

There is some anecdotal evidence that persistent fact checking can make campaigns more careful in how they present their claims. "As we got further into the season, the phrasing in some of the ads we saw seemed to improve," says Borowski. "It's hard to quantify, but you'd tackle a statement and say, 'That's a lot truer than how they might have put it earlier.'"

In a few instances, campaigns (and other political players) have actually corrected themselves after being taken to task by fact checkers. Here are three such examples from the 2010 campaign.



Rep. Alan Grayson’s ad, “Taliban Dan Webster,” suggested that his opponent tried to outlaw divorce. PolitiFact thought otherwise.

Submit to Me—Or Not

Facing a well-known former Republican state House speaker in his bid for re-election, outspoken first-term Congressman Alan Grayson, D-Fla., swung for the fences—and missed. On September 25, his campaign released a television ad arguing that his opponent, Daniel Webster, had views on women’s roles that placed him in the company of religious extremists found in Iran or the Taliban.

Among other things, the ad claimed that Webster “wants to make divorce illegal” and “tried to deny battered women...the right to divorce their abusers.” Punctuating the ad were video outtakes from a speech in which Webster said, apparently approvingly, “Wives submit yourself to your own husband” and “She should submit to me, that’s in the Bible.” The phrase “submit to me” was repeated several more times before the ad’s title appeared at the bottom of the screen: “Taliban Dan Webster.”

In its fact check, PolitiFact noted that the unedited version of the speech quoted in the ad showed that Webster was actually advising men *against* citing Bible verses that command their wives to submit to them. “Don’t pick the ones that say, ‘She should submit to me,’” goes the unedited quote. Thus, PolitiFact judged the ad’s claim that Webster thinks wives should submit to their husbands False.

The ad’s claims about restrictions on the right to divorce were based on an unsuccessful 1990 Florida House bill sponsored by Webster to create an alternative form of matrimony called “covenant marriage” that could only be dissolved in case of adultery. PolitiFact judged these claims Half True since covenant marriages would have been voluntary, but for those who chose them, divorce would be extremely restricted and unavailable on grounds of abuse.

The ad received widespread criticism in the media. Webster devoted the front page of his campaign Website to debunking its claims (including a FactCheck.org piece

on it titled, “Rep. Grayson Lowers the Bar”) and raked in tens of thousands with a fund-raising appeal drawing attention to the ad.

“The message was being lost because people started to focus on ‘submit to me’ versus the point of the ad,” says Todd Jurkowski, Grayson’s then-communications director, “which is why we stopped running it and created a different ad with almost the same points but without ‘submit to me.’”

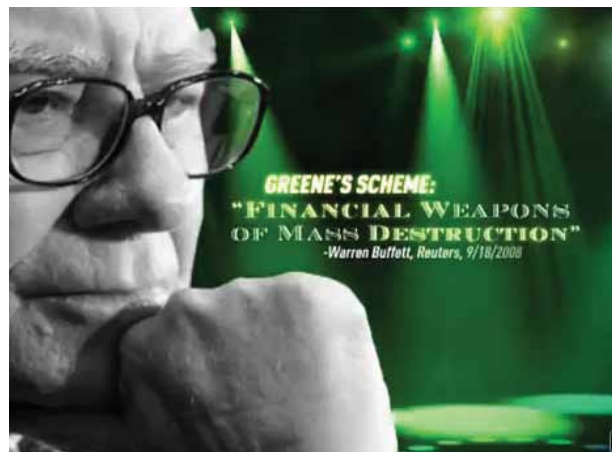
That follow-up ad, titled “The Facts,” was released on October 6. In addition to losing the “submit to me” quotes, it did away with comparisons between Webster and Muslim extremists. The new ad’s references to covenant marriage were also much more precisely worded. “Webster sponsored a bill to create a form of marriage that would trap women in abusive

relationships,” read the narrator. Given the limitations on divorce in the bill Webster had sponsored, PolitiFact judged this version of the claim True.

Grayson went on to lose by 18 points in November. However, the uproar over the ad had “very little, if any, impact,” claims Jurkowski. “In the end the Democrats did not vote, and that is why we lost.”

Warren Buffett Said What?

In the 2010 Democratic primary for Florida Senate, Congressman Kendrick Meek faced billionaire investor Jeff Greene, who was pumping millions of his own funds into his campaign. Meek’s first television ad, titled “He’s the Man” and released statewide in late July, argued that Greene had made his fortune “on Wall Street betting middle-class families would lose their homes” and stated that “Warren Buffett called Greene’s scheme ‘financial weapons of mass destruction.’”



Was Buffett talking about Jeff Greene? No, said PolitiFact.

This “scheme” was Greene’s extensive investment in credit default swaps, or bets against mortgage-backed securities, which paid out hundreds of millions of dollars when the housing market collapsed. PolitiFact Florida looked into the ad’s claim about Buffett and found that the “Oracle of Omaha” had referred to derivatives (a type of financial instrument that includes credit default swaps) as “financial weapons of mass destruction” in 2003, several years before Greene ever invested in the swaps. Since the line in the ad suggested Buffett had been speaking specifically about Greene and his investments, PolitiFact rated the claim False.

On August 4, Greene’s campaign put out a press release accusing Meek of lying about Buffett’s comments that cited the False rating handed down by “independent and credible” PolitiFact. The release also included a quote from Buffett himself, obtained by the Associated Press, attesting, “I have never spoken about Jeff Greene or any of his transactions in any way.”

A follow-up ad released by the Meek campaign on August 11 and entitled “All Support” again argued that Greene had profited off the housing meltdown. However, the reference to Buffett was rephrased as follows: “Warren Buffett called credit default swaps ‘financial weapons of mass destruction.’ And Greene was the first individual to use them.” PolitiFact judged the amended language True.

Abe Dyk, Meek’s campaign manager, says the initial ad’s phrasing was a product of the need to be concise within the constraints of a thirty-second ad, not an intention to mislead. He claims that the rephrasing was not a response to criticism by PolitiFact and others, though he acknowledges that getting a True rating was to the campaign’s advantage. “You never want an outside validator to say an ad’s inaccurate,” he says. “It could take away not only from the credibility of that specific ad, but also the credibility of other arguments your campaign will make.”

Indeed, the follow-up ad trumpets a positive fact check of part of the first ad by WESH, a local NBC affiliate. “Did Greene become a billionaire betting middle-class families would lose their homes?” asks a television announcer before rendering the judgment: “True.”

Meek went on to win the primary by a resounding 26 points.

The Senator Who Wasn’t Was There

Locked in a tough re-election fight, Senator Russ Feingold, D-Wis., put out an ad called “Garage Door” that harkened back to his first Senate campaign in 1992, when he stenciled his campaign promises on the garage doors of his Middleton, Wis., home. After some vintage footage of Feingold standing in front of the stenciled doors, the scene cuts to the senator standing in the same position in 2010. “I still live in the same house and I continue to put the people of Wisconsin ahead of any party or corporate interest,” he says.

About as positive an ad as one could hope to find, but it still found its critics. On September 22, a blogger for the

conservative *National Review Online* claimed that Feingold had been “green-screened” into the shot in front of his house, only to retract the allegation in an undated update after being assured by the Feingold campaign that the senator was shot on location. Then, in its September 25 broadcast, *Wait Wait ... Don’t Tell Me*, the NPR weekend comedy news quiz show with an audience of three million, spread the story of the green-screened senator, only to retract it as well the following Monday, September 27.

Nonetheless, on his September 28 show, conservative Milwaukee talk radio host Mark Belling announced, “Feingold is not standing in front of his house in this new ad. They faked it.” Belling suggested that an unnamed video expert backed up the accusation and, when asked by PolitiFact Wisconsin for evidence, presented a list of the ad’s suspicious features, including inconsistent lighting and shadows and the fact that Feingold’s feet are not in the frame. Belling admitted, however, that he had no ultimate proof.

To establish that Feingold was in fact shot in front of his house, his campaign produced his schedule the day of the shoot and a photo of Feingold with a crewmember in front of his house. A journalist who witnessed the shoot backed up the campaign’s story. In light of this preponderance of evidence, PolitiFact judged Belling’s accusation both inaccurate and ridiculous and therefore deserving of its most extreme judgment: Pants on Fire.



Photographic proof that Sen. Feingold was indeed at his house for an ad shoot.

“This claim had already been put out there and retracted or debunked several times, yet it’s still being presented as a factual thing,” says Greg Borowski, editor of PolitiFact Wisconsin. “That helped make it a ridiculous claim.”

In response, Belling gave in, posting a retraction (of sorts) on his website that read, in part, “Russ Feingold’s latest fake campaign ad, unlike his other fake campaign ads, is not a fake. It may be phony and disingenuous, but it’s not a fake.”

Feingold, who told PolitiFact that of all the “cheap shots” he had received in his political career, the allegation that he had not been present for the ad shoot was “the dumbest one of all time,” went on to lose in November by 5 points.

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