

# Is Anybody Listening?

*Informing, Persuading, and Priming in the 2000 and 2004 Presidential Campaigns*

Andrew Therriault  
*New York University*

American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2011 Annual Meeting

May 14, 2011

# Overview

- In academic circles, longrunning debate over the potential for political campaigns to affect public opinion
- I argue that difficulty of identifying campaign effects reflects limitations of existing data and methods—*not* the absence of effects
- Since 2000, much better data available on both public opinion and campaign messages
- My paper combines panel data on voters with records of television advertising in the 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns, to test for a variety of potential campaign effects
- This presentation focuses on the search for one type of effect: how campaign messages shape perceptions of candidate positions

# Competing Views

- *Educational Hypothesis*: Campaign messages make voters more informed about candidates (Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004; Geer 2006)
  - This information allows voters to better align their candidate and policy preferences (Lenz 2009)
  - Plenty of empirical support
  - Problem: In two-candidate elections, only one candidate benefits from better-informed voters, so competing candidates shouldn't discuss their positions on the same issues (but they do!)
- *Repositioning Hypothesis*: Candidates will offer contrasting messages about their positions
  - Candidate closer to voters' policy preferences will clarify (provide true information), opponent will try to obfuscate (provide false information)
  - Proposed in existing literature (Franklin 1991, Alvarez 1997), but little evidence in subsequent studies
- So what's going on here?

# Reconciling the Alternatives

- Lack of data → bad assumptions → misleading results
- Data on campaigns has been scarce until very recently
- Researchers assumed that what happens *during* political campaigns is *caused* by those campaigns
- Impossible to distinguish effects of campaigns' actions from those of media coverage, interpersonal interactions, and other information sources
- On the public opinion side, use of cross-sectional data has hindered causal interpretation of the relationships between campaign messages, candidate perceptions, and voter behavior

# Research Design

- Data sources:
  - TV ads tracked in Wisconsin / CMAG dataset, coded by candidate, media market, date, and content
  - Respondents' candidate placements in 2000 and 2004 National Annenberg Election Surveys
- For each respondent, I calculate per-household ad spending (based on interview date) on policy ads by each candidate for 5 issues:
  - 2000: Medicare surplus, Social Security privatization, school vouchers, childrens' healthcare, right to sue HMOs
  - 2004: Bush tax cuts, job creation incentives, universal healthcare, prescription drug reimportation, stem cell research
- Controlling for overall trends in perceptions over time (in both swing and non-swing states), I model how issue ads predict whether or not a respondent correctly identifies each candidate's position on each issue

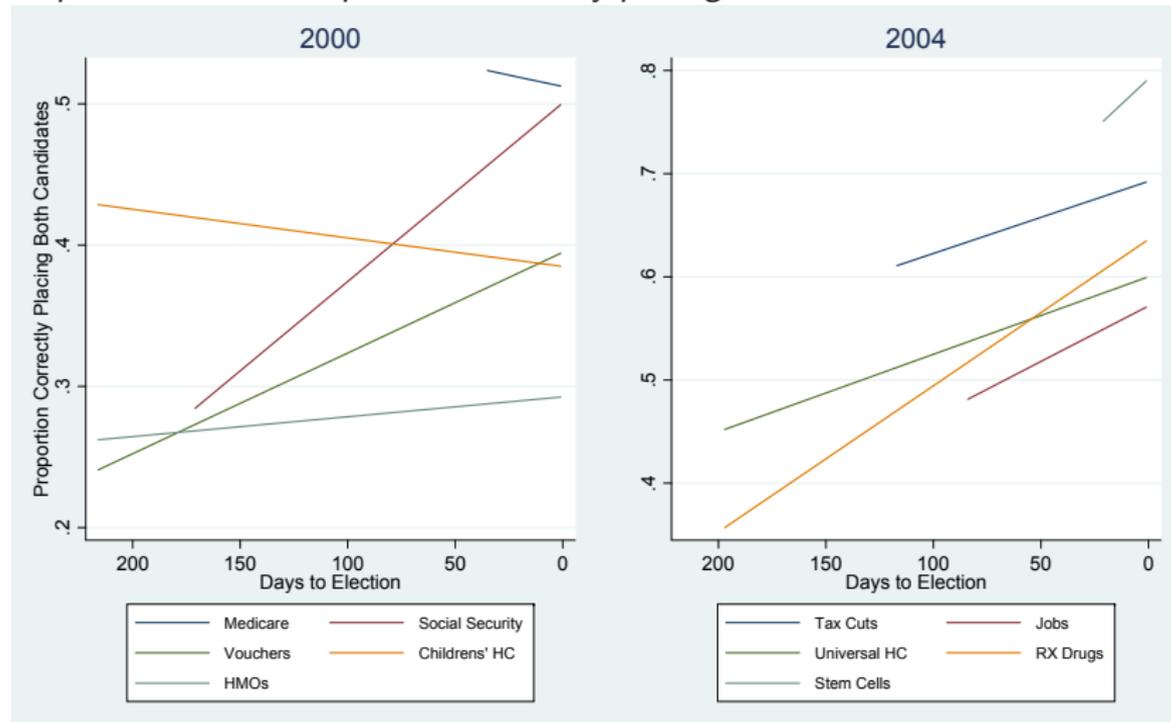
# Candidate Spending on Each Issue, Across Media Markets

*Mean spending in final 100 days of election, in \$ per household:*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Issue</i>	<i>Gore/Kerry Spending</i>	<i>Bush Spending</i>
2000	Medicare Surplus	0.30	0.32
	Social Security	0.16	0.33
	School Vouchers	0.14	0.48
	Children's Healthcare	0.33	0.23
	Right to sue HMOs	0.33	0.23
2004	Bush Tax Cuts	0.49	0.37
	Job Creation	0.64	0.11
	Universal Healthcare	0.47	0.31
	Prescription Drugs	0.47	0.31
	Stem Cells	0.47	0.32

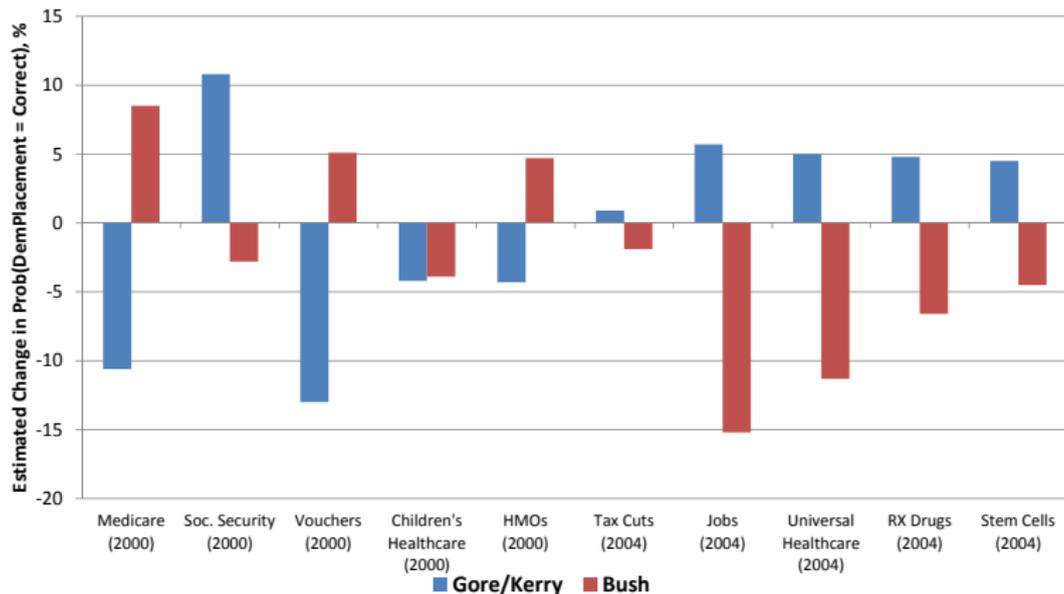
# Aggregate Trends in Voters' Perceptions

Proportions of RCS respondents correctly placing both candidates on each issue:



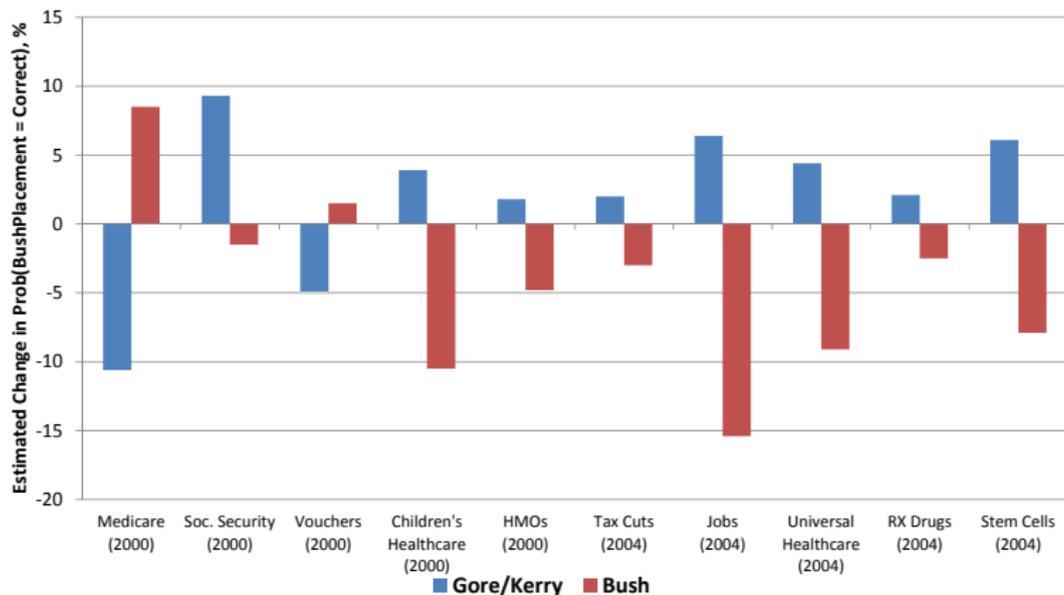
# Effects of Ads on Candidate Placements: Gore and Kerry

*Estimated effects of additional \$1 in per-household ad spending by each candidate:*



# Effects of Ads on Candidate Placements: Bush

*Estimated effects of additional \$1 in per-household ad spending by each candidate:*



## Additional Results

- Campaigns are only responsible for a very small proportion of observed changes in perceptions, but have the potential to make a difference if spending is asymmetrical
- Changes in perceptions have a significant effect on vote choice
- While the effects of these changes are small in terms of overall popular vote, the electoral college provides opportunities for well-targeted ads to have a substantial impact

# Discussion

- These results contradict previous findings that ads are generally informative
- They show need to distinguish between effects of candidates campaign messages from those of the broader campaign environment
- Caveat: Ads may have a secondary effect by driving media coverage, and perhaps this filtering ultimately does increase knowledge (not observed here because such coverage is increasingly national)
- Future research: With original data on public opinion (from CCES modules) and campaign messages (from candidate websites), I look at the effects of messages by Senate and House candidates in the 2010 election.