

# DAILY NEWS

## **Have faith in the American voter**

*Despite the anti-Citizens United uproar, the electorate is not so easily fooled by political ads*

BY TREVOR BURRUS - OCTOBER 22, 2012

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A screenshot from an ad stating that Mitt Romney failed to disclose the existence of Swiss Bank accounts and the income they generated for him.

Are American voters savvy and competent political consumers or are they like children, getting spoon-fed flashy commercials for sugary cereal during Saturday morning cartoons? After all, commercials aimed at kids are regulated on the theory that children are not competent enough to resist ads. Is this how we should treat American adults when it comes to political ads?

The debate over campaign spending would change drastically if we believed in the competence of our fellow Americans. Competent people watch campaign ads with a suitable amount of skepticism and curiosity. Incompetent people, however, sit back and allow their opinions to be manipulated by flashy hokum.

Unfortunately, because of our increasingly party-segmented world — Republicans only know Republicans and only get news and opinions from Republican sources, and vice versa — Americans are more likely to believe that half of their countrymen are not just wrong, but that they're completely out of their minds.

What, exactly, is causing half of Americans to have insane political opinions?

Campaign spending has become the explanation for far too many: Secretive forces are spending vast amounts of “dark money” in an effort to brainwash Americans — and it's worked on 50% of us. Of course, which 50% depends on where you stand.

But informed Americans can be either Republicans or Democrats, and no sinister explanation is needed. Nor are we simply clay in the hands of political ad-makers.

Moreover, this view of campaign spending ignores the value of free speech in the political sphere.

Money given to campaigns, super PACs or spent independently by individuals or corporations creates more speech. The Supreme Court in its *Citizens United* ruling — which allowed corporations to fund political speech that is independent of campaigns — increased the amount of political speech during the election season.

Some of that speech may be misleading or inaccurate, but if you believe in the competence of Americans, and that rational, informed people can disagree with you, then this should not be a problem.

Studies also show that political ads can persuade, as the best have done ever since Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 "Daisy" ad. Persuasion is, after all, the whole point. Yet persuasion is not the same as brainwashing, even when someone is persuaded to believe something you regard as fundamentally wrong, if not outright dangerous.

Of course, the ads are expectedly political — heavy on rhetoric, and relatively light on substance — but Americans know this. Political speech is like any other form of advertising, and Americans, flooded as they are with advertisements of all kinds, thus already know to take political advertisement with a grain of salt.

Political ads have little to no effect on the ideologically committed. A life-long Democrat will assume a Romney-Ryan ad is making misleading and inaccurate claims, and a committed Republican will think the same about ads supporting President Obama.

Both partisans will roll their eyes and ask, "Who would be convinced by this stuff?" They will then imagine that hypothetical person, someone hypnotized by campaign rhetoric and beguiled by mellifluous narrators.

"Before Citizens United," the partisans will think, "those people were protected from this kind of misleading political speech that they are intellectually unprepared to hear."

Those voters who were "protected" from campaign ads before Citizens United were generally nonpartisan and not politically involved. Rather than being hypnotized by campaign rhetoric, these voters would have typically ignored it.

Today, if an ad makes a strong, provocative claim, these voters might become motivated to research the issue further and make a more informed decision about whom to vote for. Studies show that political ads increase both voter engagement and knowledge.

Strong ads are often criticized for "negative" messages that sully politics. But forceful, critical political speech works — it informs, it excites and causes people to perk up and listen — and that is what makes it valuable campaign rhetoric.

Forceful campaign rhetoric also spurs people to engage in political debate. The other candidate might run an ad rebutting the charge. Independent groups, including those dreaded super PACs, weigh in. News reporters run fact-checking segments; bloggers and journalists have their say, too. Political ads get people talking and writing to either rebut or confirm the accusations.

This is how it should be. A guiding First Amendment principle is that the proper response to "bad" speech is more speech.

Allowing the government to regulate misleading, inaccurate or negative speech not only puts too much trust in government officials who have a vested interest in curtailing speech directed against them, it puts too little trust in the American people.

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