

MENTION OF SPONSOR BEFORE OR AFTER PUSH POLL: MORE TRUTHFUL,
TRUSTWORTHY, AND PERSUASIVE THAN ANONYMOUS SPONSOR?

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Abstract

Push polls (also known as smear polls) are a harmful political campaign tactic that spread damaging or false information about a candidate under the guise of legitimate survey research. The “Push Poll Disclosure Act of 2007” would require such pollsters to identify their financial sponsors after their surveys. This study examined potential effects of such a mandate by integrating an experimental push poll question into a survey of 90 voting-age church members who rated sponsor credibility, message truthfulness, and perceived persuasiveness depending on sponsorship (“Citizens for Solutions” vs. anonymous) and the time of sponsor mention (before vs. after). Subjects rated the push poll as significantly more truthful when the sponsor “Citizens for Solutions” was mentioned before the message ($p < .002$) or after the message ($p < .021$) as compared with an anonymous sponsor. The presence of an explicit sponsorship statement did not affect the perceived persuasiveness of the message. The usefulness of a sponsorship disclosure mandate is questioned.

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Preface

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Mention of Sponsor Before or After Push Poll: More Truthful, Trustworthy, and
Persuasive than Anonymous Sponsor?

Harmful political campaign tactics are on the rise in America (Lau & Pomper, 2002) with a specific practice known as “push polling” becoming more and more prevalent in political campaigns at the local, state, and national levels (Feld, 2000; Gerstmann & Streb, 2004; Sabato & Simpson, 1996). Unlike legitimate polls conducted by research firms, a push poll (also called a “smear poll”) is a telemarketing technique that seeks to change public opinion by spreading damaging information about the opposing candidate under the guise of legitimate polling research (AAPOR, 2007). Generally, these polls are phrased as questions in which the voter is asked how likely they are to change their vote “if they knew” some horrible secret (usually false or only partially true) about their preferred candidate (Moore, Fitzsimons, & Shiv, 2006). Some say the tactic originated during Nixon’s first run for Congress in 1946 in which Democratic voters allegedly received a call saying, “This is a friend of yours, but I can’t tell you who I am. Did you know that Jerry Voorhis is a communist?” (Sabato & Simpson, 1996).

Push polls are often confused with legitimate survey research that tests the potentially unpopular aspects of a candidate’s background before a campaign (AAPOR 2007; Bolger & McInturff, 1996; Feld, 2000; Gerstmann & Streb, 2004). There are important differences, none the least of which is motivation. Push pollsters seek to spread damaging information or lies about a candidate to as many people as possible with the intent of hurting a candidate’s election chances. Legitimate pollsters may ask similar questions in order to research perceptions about a candidate’s background, but they abide

by ethical standards set forth by the polling community. For example, legitimate pollsters use a small representative sample of 1,200 or less, while push pollsters usually contact thousands of voters and do not collect or analyze data (Gerstmann & Streb, 2004).

Legitimate surveys that test negatives are controversial; however, the polling community accepts these because it claims the sample size is too small to significantly affect an election outcome (AAPOR, 2007).

Some researchers think that if push polls affect voters' attitudes, it may be because push polls tend to exploit common stereotypes, prejudices, and fears (Moore et al., 2006). For example, some believe Senator John McCain (R-AZ) lost South Carolina in the 2000 Republican primary because thousands of voters received an anonymous push poll asking "If you knew that John McCain fathered an illegitimate black child, would you be more or less likely to vote for him?" Since McCain had stumped in South Carolina with his dark-skinned adopted daughter from Bangladesh, there was fodder for the lie (Davis, 2004; Moore et al, 2006).

It is difficult to know whether push polls actually cause attitude change, despite their widespread use during election season. The secretive and unethical nature of push polls makes them hard for researchers to track down, study, or replicate in experimental settings. Moore et al. (2006) and Fitzsimons and Shiv (2001) are the lone researchers to conduct experiments directly related to push polls, but these experiments were conducted in a lab, with little external validity. Still, the authors found convincing evidence that hypothetical questions like those used in political push polls strongly influenced their subjects' subsequent voting choices in a mock election (2006), especially when they were

consistent with stereotypes about politicians (2001). These findings will be discussed in detail in a later section.

Despite little field evidence that push polls work, political strategists and independent political groups use them often enough to suggest that the people who live and breathe politics think they are worth sinking their time and money into (Moore et al, 2006). Popular literature abounds with examples of disgruntled citizens who claim they received a push poll and candidates who claim they were victimized by the tactic (Feld, 2000). For example, Sabato and Simpson (1996) interviewed 45 candidates who ran for the 104th Congress; 80% claimed push polls were used against them during their campaign.

Most sponsors of push polls operate under the radar and enjoy anonymity (Sabato & Simpson, 1996). Rarely, the true sponsor of a push poll is discovered. Patti Morrissey, the 2003 Democratic candidate in the 32nd Virginia House District race, apologized to Muslims when it was discovered she authorized a push poll asking voters whether they would vote for her opponent if they knew he had accepted money from terrorist groups. The groups to which the push poll referred were actually Muslim-Americans with no terrorist affiliations (Abdullah, 2003).

More often, a victimized candidate is left to deal with a damaged reputation with no way of knowing who conducted the push poll (Gerstmann & Streb, 2004). For example, 1994 incumbent U.S. Representative (D-OH) Eric Fingerhut fell victim to an anonymous push poll during his bid for re-election during which some voters were asked, “Would you still vote for him if you knew he was gay?” (Sabato & Simpson, 1996, p. 30). Fingerhut, who was single at the time, did not hold a press conference to state he was

heterosexual (1996). He lost the election, though it is impossible to say whether the push poll was to blame.

Congressional sponsors of the “Push Poll Disclosure Act of 2007” hope to dampen the supposed effects of such anonymous polls. If passed, the law would require that all pollsters seeking opinions about a federal election identify the financial sponsor of their poll after the survey (Govtrack.us, 2007). The bill, which was re-introduced in 2007 (it didn’t pass in 2005) by U.S. Representative Thomas Petri (R-WI), would not apply to legitimate researchers contacting a scientifically representative sample, even if those pollsters ask similarly “negative” questions. Rather, the law would apply to those who do not record or analyze data from the interviews and who contact more than 1,200 respondents (Petri, 2007). Petri hopes to limit push polls by forcing sponsors to claim sponsorship of their work much like the required “paid for by” statements at the end of political advertisements (2007). The legislation resembles similar measures that were implemented in Nevada and Florida in the late 1990’s, though officials in those states said those laws did little to stop push polls (Gerstmann & Streb, 2004).

Before similar measures are implemented at the national level, it is important to understand how sponsorship disclosure might affect the perception of push polls. There is little reason to mandate sponsorship disclosure if it would do little or nothing to mitigate the effects of push polls. Conversely, Rep. Petri’s efforts to decrease their persuasiveness could backfire if his recommendations are not tested for unwanted effects. Well-meaning laws could make push polls worse if they unintentionally help the pollsters “push” more voters away from the victimized candidate. In other words, sponsorship disclosure should not be mandated if voters tend to place higher trust in the push pollster’s information

when a sponsor is revealed versus when the survey is anonymous. Additionally, Petri's choice to require that sponsorship disclosure must be mentioned *after* the survey should be tested (Govtrack.us, 2007). A wide body of empirical research has concluded that the time at which a source is mentioned (before, after, during the message) can highly affect the persuasive outcome of a message (see Pornpitakpan, 2004 for a review). Before the bill is accepted as law, these possible effects need to be addressed.

This study will attempt to shed light on these issues by inserting the name of an ambiguous sounding independent sponsor before and after survey questions that are similar to those used in a push poll. Such a sponsor is chosen for this study because evidence suggests a disclosure law would cause push pollsters to create independent groups with benign-sounding names. According to Gerstmann and Streb (2004), current state-wide disclosure laws do little to prevent push polls because groups get around such laws by creating legitimate-sounding groups for the sole purpose of conducting the polls. The authors said it is "not uncommon for organizations to create misleading names" (p. 42) meant to dupe the public by sounding objective. If Petri's bill passes, these are exactly the type of cover-names that one would expect to accompany these fake polls. An extensive content analysis of 2000 election advertisements provides a less related reason. Goldstein and Freedman (2002) found that independent groups sponsor television political attack ads vastly more often than actual candidates. There is little reason to believe sponsorship of push polls, a close cousin to the television attack ad, would be any different.

Do survey participants think benign-sounding interest groups are trustworthy? Do they believe that attack information is more truthful when it comes from such groups vs.

an anonymous source? Does it affect the persuasiveness of the message depending on whether the sponsor's name is revealed before or after the push poll (or is anonymous)?

The purpose of this study is to offer insight into potential push poll disclosure laws.

Policy-makers would benefit from knowing whether people tend to trust or distrust independent political pollsters and whether they trust or distrust accusations about candidates from such groups versus anonymous pollsters. They would also benefit from knowing whether push polls are perceived as more or less persuasive depending on whether sponsorship disclosure comes before or after the survey (or is anonymous).

Literature Review

It is best to examine what the empirical literature says about push polls before discussing any unwanted effects of such disclosure laws. Unless push polls affect attitudes, there is no sense studying how to best regulate them. Therefore, this review will first examine the effects of the kinds of questions push polls employ, and then dissect the various interactions between perceived source credibility and the time at which the source is mentioned. It will conclude by introducing some research questions that are relevant to the Push Poll Disclosure Act of 2007 (Govtrack.us, 2007).

Hypothetical Questions Affect Subsequent Decision-making

Though few researchers have produced studies about push polls and their ability to change attitudes or behavior, some researchers have conducted experiments that observed the effects of hypothetical questions in political and non-political contexts (Fiedler, Armbruster, Nickel, Walther, & Asbeck, 1996; Fitzsimons & Shiv, 2001; Moore et al., 2006; Neal, Fitzsimons, & Hoffman, 2006). After all, as several researchers argued, push polls are essentially hypothetical questions posed as survey research (Fitzsimons & Shiv 2001; Moore et al., 2006). By framing questions hypothetically, i.e., “If you knew that candidate X did such and such, would you be more or less likely to vote for him,” push pollsters are asking respondents to imagine whether or not a hypothetical situation would affect their vote. Push pollsters are not stating their messages as facts; instead they are merely implying the information could be true in a hypothetical context (Moore et al., 2006). Since push polls are hard to track down and unethical to replicate in the field (Gerstmann & Streb, 2004), researchers have drawn strong conclusions about push polls through studies of hypothetical questions.

Hypothetical questions can significantly affect subsequent decision-making in a variety of contexts, both political and non-political. In an experiment that used similar hypothetical questions to those used in political push polls, Fitzsimons and Shiv (2001) found that such questions affected subjects' subsequent intentions to vote for the push poll target. The authors exposed 117 college students to mildly supportive information and five newspaper articles about two fictional candidates for office in Kansas. Two treatment groups received additional negative information about one of the candidates either as a factually-worded newspaper article or a hypothetical question that asked, "If you learned that Bob Clark had been convicted of fraud in 1988 on a charge stemming from several illegal donations accepted and subsequently misrepresented during his successful campaign for state treasurer, would your opinion of him increase or decrease?" (2001, p. 227). All subjects were then asked to indicate for whom they would vote. Both treatment groups were significantly less likely to vote for Clark than control. However, participants who received the hypothetical question were even less likely to vote for Clark than those who read the accusation as fact in a newspaper article, though this finding was not statistically significant ($p > .10$).

Moore et al. (2006) found stronger evidence that hypothetical questions that attack a candidate affect subsequent voting intentions, especially when the question was stereotype-consistent. The authors conducted an experiment in which they asked 205 college students hypothetical questions that were either consistent or inconsistent with the stereotype that "politicians are dishonest." Modeled after Fitzsimons and Shiv's (2001) experiment, the authors exposed participants to photos and five newspaper articles about fictional candidates (Moore et al., 2006). Subjects in the "stereotype-consistent"

condition were presented with Fitzsimons and Shiv's (2001) hypothetical question about Bob Clark's fraud. Subjects in the "stereotype-inconsistent" condition were instead asked, "If you learned that Bob Clark had been offered and turned down several illegal donations in 1988 during his successful campaign for State Treasurer (despite a low likelihood of being caught), would your opinion of him increase or decrease?" (Moore et al., 2006, p. 9).

The authors (Moore et al., 2006) found that participants' intentions to vote for Bob Clark were significantly affected by the stereotype-consistent question immediately after the treatment and after a 30-minute delay. Stereotype-inconsistent participants were only affected by the hypothetical question immediately after the treatment; when asked to vote 30-minutes later, their intentions to vote for Bob Clark were no different than control. The authors therefore concluded that push polls utilizing stereotype-consistent hypothetical questions will affect intentions to vote for the push poll target even after a time lapse, whereas stereotype-inconsistent hypothetical questions will only have an immediate impact which will fade with time. This is important because push pollsters tend to disseminate hypothetical questions that play upon negative stereotypes such as "politicians are corrupt" in order to change public opinion (2006).

Outside the political realm, even hypothetical questions used to detect bias in jury selection questionnaires can backfire and induce bias later during sentencing (Neil et al., 2006). Eighty community members who were waiting to be called as potential jurors in actual trials served as participants in a recent experiment (2006). One group received a questionnaire that included the following question: "Evidence in this trial may indicate that the defendant was a member of a gang. Hypothetically, how would this influence

your ability to be a fair and impartial juror?” (2006, p. 8). A second group received this question, plus a message meant to raise doubts about the source’s credibility: “These questions have been submitted by the attorneys for the defense and prosecution and you should not use them to draw any conclusions about the case. These questions are designed only to measure your general attitudes” (2006, p. 11). All participants were then exposed to a mock murder trial after which jurors were asked to come up with a verdict and sentence. Subjects in each group did not differ in their tendency to find the defendant guilty. However, those subjects who were exposed to the hypothetical question about gang-membership were significantly more punitive in jail sentences than the control group. Most importantly, the authors found that the subjects who received the statement about the source were unaffected by the hypothetical question. In other words, subjects who received source information were no more or less punitive than control.

Several studies provided convincing evidence that hypothetical questions can affect subsequent decision-making, regardless of whether the information in the question was accurate or not. Though it is nearly impossible to measure whether the hypothetical questions in real push polls have an effect on voters’ Election Day choices, these studies provided strong evidence that they might. Still, Neil et al.’s (2006) study suggested it is possible to mitigate the biasing effects of hypothetical questions if the source is revealed and their credibility questioned.

Perceived Source Credibility Affects Persuasiveness of Message

Researchers know that the source of a message matters when it comes to persuasion (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Hundreds of articles are devoted to source credibility as one characteristic that can affect the persuasive power of a message. This review will not

attempt to dissect source credibility in its entirety, but will focus on how perceived source credibility interacts with the time at which the source is mentioned since Rep. Petri's bill would require source disclosure at the end of the survey (Govtrack.us, 2007). However, it is first important to understand some general concepts from the broad literature. Most researchers find that trustworthiness and expertise are the most important elements that differentiate a credible source from a non-credible source (Kelman & Hovland, 1953; Mills & Jellison, 1967). Expertise is defined as the extent to which a source is perceived as capable of making accurate assessments and assertions, while trustworthiness is summarized as "the degree to which an audience perceives the assertions made by a communicator to be ones that the speaker considers valid" (Sternthal, Phillips, & Dholakia, 1978, p. 287). Less important characteristics that can affect perceived credibility include, but are not limited to, attractiveness (Horai, Naccari, & Fatoullah, 1974; Mills & Harvey, 1972), similarity between the source and the audience (Feldman, 1984), the perception that the source "likes" the audience (Mills, 1966), and safety, qualification, and dynamism (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969).

Timing of Source Mention Can Affect Persuasion

Even though highly credible communicators usually effect more positive attitude change than their low-credibility counterparts (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Kelman & Hovland, 1953; Schulman & Worrall, 1970), source credibility can interact with other factors to make persuasion more complicated than it may seem at first glance (Sternthal, Dholakia, & Leavitt, 1978). The time at which source credibility is mentioned in a message is one factor that can affect persuasiveness (Greenberg & Tannenbaum, 1961; Greenberg & Miller, 1966; Homer & Kahle, 1990; Mills & Harvey, 1972; Pornpitakpan,

2004; Sternthal, Dholakia et al., 1978; Tormala, Brinol, & Petty, 2005; Ward & McGinnies, 1974).

Highly credible sources. A strong consensus of researchers has found that it is usually most persuasive to mention a highly credible source before a persuasive message (Greenberg & Tannenbaum, 1961; Greenberg & Miller, 1966; Homer & Kahle, 1990; Mills & Harvey, 1972; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Sternthal, Dholakia et al., 1978). Greenberg and Tannenbaum (1961) conducted an experiment with four conditions: a credible byline at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of one of three persuasive articles, or no byline information given at all. The sources were three highly credible public figures that were well-known at the time. Each participant read three articles that presented strong persuasive arguments regarding chemical warfare, a three semester college plan, and the American press. The authors found that the presence of a “positive” byline produced significant positive attitude change, “but only when it appear[ed] at or near the beginning of the message” (1961, p. 536). They concluded that when a persuasive message was associated with a “positive” source, the sooner the source information was revealed, the more the audience was persuaded. In other words, it was most persuasive to reveal source information prior to the message when the source was perceived as credible and the message was relatively strong.

Mills and Harvey (1972) reached a similar conclusion; when the source was an expert, that information should precede the message. They paired strong messages with two sources: one who was described as a professor of education and one of the country’s top experts, and one who was described as a college sophomore, education major, and previous vice-president of his freshman class. Seventy-two female college students read a

speech in favor of general rather than focused education. Source information was given before or after the message. The authors found that it was most persuasive to reveal credible source information before the message when the source was expert. This result supports similar findings that credible source information such as expertise should precede the message for maximum persuasion.

Ward and McGinnies' (1974) found evidence that contradicted the original theory that a credible source should always precede the message. In their seminal experiment, 248 college students were exposed to a persuasive message proposing the necessity of territorial expansions in Gambia to alleviate alleged suffering there. The source was either a highly credible expert on international law who was described in trustworthy terms (honest, sincere), or a low-credibility recent college graduate who was described in untrustworthy terms (devious, calculating). The sources were mentioned before, after, and not at all in separate experiment groups. As expected, the trustworthy expert outperformed the untrustworthy college graduate in producing positive attitude change when source information preceded the message. However, the authors did not find that early mention of the expert was any more persuasive than late or no mention of the expert. In other words, they found that if the source is highly credible, disclosing the source first is certainly better than mentioning a low-credible source first. However, early mention of a highly credible source was no more persuasive than revealing that information at the end of the message or not at all. Late mention of the credible source did not increase or impede persuasion.

Audience Involvement. Several researchers have examined how audience involvement affects source credibility and found that highly credible source information

should precede the message when the audience is highly involved but not necessarily when the audience has low involvement (Homer & Kahle, 1990; see also Andreoli & Worchel, 1978; Heesacker, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1983). Message involvement is a factor that determines how a message is processed i.e., centrally or peripherally (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979) and how persuasive it will be (Park, Levine, Westerman, Orfgen, & Foregger, 2007). Involvement is inherent in an audience when, for example, the audience already holds strong opinions about or interest in the message topic. Or, message involvement can be inherent to the message, such as when it utilizes certain factors that increase attention and processing which can lead to greater understanding, memory, or the perception that the message is personally relevant (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979).

Homer and Kahle (1990) found a significant three-way interaction between involvement, source credibility, and the timing of source mention. In an experiment that exposed participants to print advertisements, the authors measured attitude change toward skin-care products. The three conditions were: source expertise (high: dermatologist, or low: account executive), timing of source information (before or after), and message involvement (high or low). When the ads successfully induced audience involvement (product said to be offered in local rather than foreign markets), it was most persuasive to link a dermatologist to the ads, and to showcase his credibility before the message.

On the other hand, when Homer and Kahle (1990) examined subjects with low message involvement, they found that an expert source was most persuasive when identified after the message. Some participants were told that the skin-care line would only be introduced in European markets, which successfully decreased message involvement in pre-tests because all participants were Americans. In the high-credibility

condition, subjects were told after the message that the source was a dermatologist and skin-care consultant. When message involvement was low, high-credibility information received after, rather than before the message induced the most positive attitude change. The authors suggested this occurred because an audience that does not devote much thought or cognitive effort to message points may generate a more favorable overall impression when the last information they receive is expert source information. This last impression may cause the audience to remember the message positively in later judgments, even if they forget the message points. Therefore, presentation of an expert source at the end of the message may increase the likelihood that an uninvolved audience will remember the positive source rather than the message, even if the message was strong.

In brief, it is generally most persuasive to present source information before the message when the message is strong, the source is credible, or the audience is highly involved (Greenberg & Tannenbaum, 1961; Homer & Kahle, 1990; Mills & Harvey, 1972). When the audience is relatively uninvolved, it is best to reveal a credible source after the message (Homer & Kahle, 1990).

Low-credibility sources. Even though a strong consensus of researchers agree it is least persuasive to link a persuasive message to a low-credible source, persuasion is still possible when the timing of the source's identification is manipulated (Greenberg & Tannenbaum, 1961; Greenberg & Miller, 1966; Homer & Kahle, 1990; Mills & Harvey, 1972; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Sternthal, Dholakia & Leavitt, 1978; Tormala, Petty & Brinol, 2006; Ward & McGinnies, 1974). In four separate experiments, Greenberg and Miller (1966) exposed participants to a persuasive message either preceded or followed by high

or low credibility sources, or containing no source information at all. For example, one experiment message argued that natural food consumption was a better preventer of tooth decay than tooth-brushing. This message treatment was attributed to a manufacturer of natural food who had a financial stake in the argument's acceptance (low credibility treatment). The authors found that even though a high credibility source outperformed the low credibility source when identified before the message, persuasion was not entirely lost by using a low-credible source. By presenting the low-credible source information after the message, some of the negative reaction to the message was prevented. Positive attitude change occurred because participants had already formed a positive reaction to the message by the time the source was mentioned. Still, the authors concluded that, when possible, it was more persuasive to offer no source information at all rather than link a message with a low-credibility source. When use of a low-credibility source is necessary, the authors recommended it is more effective to delay the source information until after the message is presented.

Sternthal, Dholakia et al., (1978) found an interesting exception to this rule. When the audience holds favorable initial attitudes toward the topic, it can be more persuasive to precede the message with a less credible, rather than highly credible, source. The authors examined the timing of highly credible and moderately credible source mentions when experiment participants held favorable initial attitudes toward the topic. In two experiments, either a Harvard-trained lawyer (high credibility) or a lobbyist with no expertise (moderate credibility) presented written arguments in favor of passing the Consumer Protection Agency bill. The authors found that when the source was introduced before the message, the moderately credible source was more persuasive than

the highly credible source. When the source followed the message, the credible lawyer was significantly more persuasive than the lobbyist.

The authors (Sternthal, Dholakia, et. al, 1978) pointed to cognitive response theory to explain this exception. When an audience already favors the position that the message advocates, they may generate more support arguments in their mind to “help” the less credible source make his points. Thus, at the end of the message, they may have strengthened their position and been more persuaded. However, if the source is perceived as highly credible, the audience may feel no need to generate supporting arguments in their mind. They may reason his competence means they are hearing the best arguments on the topic and may not become any more or less persuaded than they already were before hearing the message.

More recent researchers also found that sometimes, a low-credibility source can outperform a high-credibility source depending on message quality and when the source is mentioned (Tormala, Petty, & Brinol, 2005). When an audience is exposed to a message that generates a negative reaction (because message points are weak or unconvincing), it may be more persuasive to associate that message with a low-credibility source after the message rather than with a high-credibility source after the message. In two experiments, Tormala et al. (2005) tested the effects of revealing high and low credibility source information after a persuasive message by utilizing a 2 (high source credibility: federal agency researching medical products, or low source credibility: high school freshman) x 2 (argument quality: strong or weak) design. The authors measured whether the message generated positive or negative reactions by having participants note the thoughts they had while reading a strong or weak message promoting either an aspirin

product (experiment 1) or phosphate-based detergents (experiment 2). For example, in the aspirin experiment, the “strong argument” condition stated that “Comfrin works 50% faster than other aspirins, lasts 3 hours longer..., has no harmful side effects, and recently received a perfect score...in quality and efficiency testing” (2005, p. 686). The “weak argument” condition stated that “Comfrin lasts about as long as other aspirins, has very few harmful side effects, contains only small amounts of caffeine and sodium, and recently received a 6 out of 10 in quality and efficiency testing” (2005, p. 686).

The authors found that, as usual, strong arguments paired with a highly credible source (federal agency) led to the most attitude change. However, when weak arguments were paired with high-credibility sources, less persuasion occurred than when the same weak argument was paired with the low-credibility source (high school freshman). According to Brinol, Tormala, and Petty (as cited in Tormala, et. al, 2005), this counter-intuitive phenomenon occurs because people place either confidence or doubt in their reactions to a message depending on how credible the source turns out to be. In other words, if a person thinks about a message and decides it is weak, that person may place more confidence in their negative reaction when he/she learns that the source is highly credible. If, on the other hand, the audience produces negative thoughts toward a message and then learns the message came from an unreliable source, the audience tends to doubt their negative reaction. Perhaps they reason that their negative reaction to the message is based on bad presentation, not the merits of the argument. The authors conclude it is more persuasive to give low, rather than high credibility source information after a weak message that is likely to generate negative reactions and thoughts in the audience (Tormala et al., 2005).

The persuasiveness of a message is affected by perceived source credibility and the time at which the source is mentioned within the message. The most positive attitude change tends to occur when a highly credible source is mentioned before a message that is inherently strong (Greenberg & Miller, 1966; Tormala et al., 2005). However, persuasion is not lost on moderate and low-credibility sources when the timing of the source's identification is manipulated. Positive attitude change can occur when a low-credibility source is revealed after a relatively strong message (Greenberg & Miller, 1966). Positive attitude change can occur when a moderately credible source is revealed before a message position that the audience already favors (Sterthal, Dholakia et al., 1978). Positive attitude change can occur when a low-credibility source is revealed after a weak message and causes the audience to doubt their initial negative reaction to the content of the message (Tormala et al., 2005).

Summary

Persuasive messages are rarely judged solely on the merits of their arguments. Rather, an intricate system of effects can result from various message/source/audience interactions to produce varying levels of attitude or behavioral change. Such effects can range from the seemingly obvious, i.e., a strong message and a highly credible message will effect the most persuasion (Greenberg & Tannenbaum, 1961; Greenberg & Miller, 1966; Homer & Kahle, 1990; Mills & Harvey, 1972; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Sterthal, Dholakia et al., 1978), to the counter-intuitively complex, i.e., a low credibility source is more persuasive than a high credibility source when it is mentioned after a message that is weak (Tormala et al., 2005).

When examined against this background of literature, it is unclear whether the well-intentioned requirements in the “Push Poll Disclosure Act of 2007” will work as straight-forwardly as its congressional sponsors may hope. Specifically, since the act would require sponsor identification at the end of the survey, two factors could unintentionally interact and spark backfiring effects: 1) the sponsor’s perceived credibility and 2) the insertion of the sponsor’s name at the end, rather than beginning, of the survey. Further complicating matters, it is unknown whether the recipients of a push poll would automatically mistrust the sponsor (as Rep. Petri might hope) since push pollsters may give ambiguous-sounding names such as “Citizens for Solutions,” which some critics believe would happen if a disclosure law were implemented (Gerstmann & Streb, 2004). Therefore, when presented with a vicious push poll,

RQ1: How do respondents rank the trustworthiness of a vaguely named sponsor depending on whether the sponsor is mentioned before vs. after the poll,

RQ2: How do respondents rank the truthfulness of the information in the poll depending on whether the sponsor is mentioned before the poll, after the poll, or is anonymous, and

RQ3: How do respondents rank the persuasiveness of the push poll message depending on whether the sponsor is mentioned before the poll, after the poll, or is anonymous?

Method

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to examine how subjects rated the trustworthiness of a fictional survey sponsor named “Citizens for Solutions,” and the truthfulness and persuasiveness of a push poll message attacking a fictional political candidate depending on when the sponsor’s name was mentioned (before and after) vs. if the sponsor was anonymous. The study used an experimental research design in which three treatments (sponsor disclosed before the poll, sponsor disclosed after the poll, anonymous) were incorporated into a survey questionnaire that was conducted by telephone. The experimental method was selected because it is the most powerful way to address a cause and effect research question such as those in this study (Westley, 1989). The telephone survey was selected as the method of experimentation because it is widely accepted as the most efficient and inexpensive way to obtain surface-level answers from multiple subjects (Leavitt, 1991). Also, this method was chosen because it is the most generalizable to the phenomenon of interest since push polls are conducted by telephone.

Context

All subjects lived in Alabama and were contacted by telephone between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. central daylight time Monday-Saturday. The 9:00 a.m. start time was selected in case there were voting age members of the household working at home. The 8:00 p.m. end time was selected to avoid subjects’ annoyance at being contacted late in the evening. Calls were made March 18, 2008 through April 11, 2008.

Subjects

The Human Review Board at Johns Hopkins University approved all materials and procedures before any subjects were contacted and granted this study full exemption. My population was comprised of 1,984 church families who were listed in the 2007 Briarwood Presbyterian Church Directory in Birmingham, Alabama. The population was chosen out of convenience because my parents have high name recognition within the community. It was assumed that subjects would be less likely to hang up when “Jim and Cheryl Blackmon” were mentioned at the start of the survey.

The population is not representative in that it was comprised of a small sample of mostly white, conservative, church-going people living in Birmingham, Alabama, who were chosen in a biased way. Still, the population is useful. Even though it is highly limited, this study’s homogenous population provides some important real world insights into push polls. Recall that since push pollsters do not collect or analyze data, they do not seek a representative sample (Gerstmann & Streb, 2004). Often, push pollsters target specific voting districts where beliefs, attitudes, and voting habits may be highly homogenous (Gerstmann & Streb, 2004). While this study cannot extrapolate any conclusions onto the general public, it provides interesting insights into what can happen when an extremely homogenous population is targeted with a push poll.

Sampling Procedures

Once the population was established, 150 households were chosen to serve as the sample. The selection process was not random; it was determined that it would be unethical to randomly contact directory-listed members who may not know Cheryl Blackmon (since she is a Briarwood employee) and there are policies preventing the

misuse of the phonebook. Therefore, she went through the directory and marked 150 households in which members would recognize her name when I mentioned it.

Households were selected rather than individual members because any one household could yield several people of voting age. I did not seek to reach a certain quota of men or women; the sole criterion for participation was that the subject be a voting-age member of the selected household. If the subject's age was in question, I simply asked the subject whether they were of voting age before conducting the survey. In the real world, this is how push polls operate. A push pollster seeks to influence as many voters as possible as quickly as possible regardless of demographics (Gerstmann & Streb, 2004).

Subjects from the sample were assigned to one of three groups: sponsor before treatment, sponsor after treatment, or anonymous sponsor treatment. Each group required 30 subjects, and slots were filled on a rolling basis. This process was not randomized because of the difficulty in reaching subjects. Many households were called 4-5 times before I either completed an interview or stopped trying to reach the household. Because of this difficulty, I made calls on a rolling basis until I filled the "sponsor before" group, then the "sponsor after" group, then the "anonymous" group.

Avoiding non-response bias. Several techniques were employed to reduce the chance of non-response bias. First, a postcard detailing the purpose of the study and the intent to call the subject was sent to 150 subjects one week before any calls were made (see Appendix A). The postcard provided an email address and phone number in case subjects did not wish to be contacted or wanted to suggest the best time to reach them. This measure proved to be highly effective. Once I was able to establish contact, I did not receive a single hang-up. Most of the subjects were already aware of who I was and why

I was calling. Second, the survey's opening sentences mentioned the names of well-known church members in an attempt to keep subjects from immediately hanging up. This too, was effective for the few members who did not receive their postcard. Third, the survey was designed to take less than five minutes and subjects were immediately advised of the survey's length. This was effective in convincing subjects to complete the interview even if they were short on time. Lastly, 30 more subjects than needed were selected in anticipation that some calls would fail due to hang-up, busy signal, answering machine, or no answer. This was important since I was ultimately unsuccessful in reaching a portion of subjects due to no answer. Had I only selected 90 subjects, I would have been unable to complete enough interviews.

Anonymity. In order to protect the anonymity of the subjects, a coded system was utilized in which each successful interview received a code number. The codes were written next to the names of the subjects for the sole purpose of identifying them in the opening sentence of the survey, i.e., "Hello, is this (name)?" Each successful interview was represented by a coded booklet in which the subject's code number was recorded on the front cover of the booklet, and all answers from the interviews were hand-recorded next to pre-coded survey questions (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000). The coded booklets were used to record all data into the statistical spreadsheets; therefore, the final data sets were detached from subjects' names.

Instrumentation

I introduced my survey by giving my name, my parents' names, and asking subjects whether they received the postcard I sent them. I reminded subjects of the purpose of the study, how long it would take to complete, and asked them if they would

be willing to participate. The survey included six sections which consisted of related questions (see Appendices B-D for all three treatment versions). First, the “voting history” section asked subjects two questions written by professional pollsters. I did not use these questions in later analysis; they were used solely to provide non-threatening warm-up questions that related to the survey’s general purpose, which is a common and useful technique in survey research (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000). An example question from this section was: “Many people do not vote in elections. How often would you say you vote—always, nearly always, part of the time, or seldom?” (D. Beck, personal communication, February 25, 2008).

The second section served as an introduction to the experimental aspect of the survey by briefly describing “Bob Clark,” a fictional candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives in the 4th Congressional district of Missouri. Subjects were not informed that the candidate was fictional until the survey was completed so results would not be skewed. This section was explained in this way: “I would like to ask you some specific questions about a campaign going on in Missouri. It may seem strange I am asking you to comment on an election in a different state, but it is very important that I talk to people with an objective point of view.” Subjects were then read the following statement: “Bob Clark is running for the U.S. House of Representatives in Missouri’s 4th Congressional district. Mr. Clark is a respected leader in Missouri and served as State Treasurer before moving into the non-profit sector. For the past five years, he has been the chief financial officer for a major non-profit organization. He is a family man and attends church regularly.” This description was designed to give subjects vague background information that would describe Clark in relatively positive terms. The name “Bob Clark,” the choice

to use a Midwestern state's election with which my subjects would most likely be unfamiliar (and therefore not realize it was fictional), and the inclusion of relatively positive background info about Clark are all based on Fitzsimons and Shiv's (2001) and Moore, et al's (2006) experiments and used with permission from the lead author (G. Fitzsimons, personal communication, February 15, 2008).

The third section included the survey's experimental conditions in which all subjects were read a "telephone message that voters in Missouri have been receiving recently." Subjects were then read the following message: "Quote: If you knew that while Bob Clark was State Treasurer, he gave a high-paying job to an unqualified woman he was having an extramarital affair with, would you be more or less likely to vote for him? Close-Quote." This message was chosen because it was my belief that such a charge would be particularly inflammatory for conservative, Southern church members. Thirty subjects were told that the sponsor of the message was "Citizens for Solutions" before they heard the push poll message, thirty subjects were told that the sponsor was "Citizens for Solutions" after the push poll message, and thirty subjects were told the message was anonymous. The "anonymous" treatment group was informed of the sponsor's anonymity when I said "This is an anonymous telephone message that voters in Missouri have been receiving recently." It was important for me to mention the word "anonymous" so subjects would not confuse the lack of a source to mean I myself was the source of the information. Two questions immediately followed the push poll question to make sure the message and source were properly understood. I asked "Could you briefly tell me what the phone message said about Clark" and "If you remember, could you tell me who sponsored the message?" This was done because my survey was naturally longer and

more complicated than a real-world push poll and may have been confusing to subjects. By drawing attention to the important aspects of the survey before measuring attitudes, I hoped to increase the likelihood that my subjects digested the survey information correctly.

The final three questions were designed to measure subjects' a) perceived trustworthiness of the source "Citizens for Solutions" (except for the anonymous group), b) perceived truthfulness of the accusation against Bob Clark, and c) perceived effect that the push poll message would have on intention to vote for Bob Clark "if they were a voter in Missouri." Perceived trustworthiness was measured by asking, "You may not have heard of the message's sponsor, Citizens for Solutions, but if you had to guess, how trustworthy would you say the group is? Would you say it is slightly trustworthy, moderately trustworthy, highly trustworthy, or would you say it is slightly, moderately, or highly untrustworthy?" Perceived truthfulness was measured by asking, "With the very limited information you have been given, how truthful would you guess the accusation about Bob Clark is? Would you say it is slightly truthful, moderately truthful, or highly truthful, or would you say it is slightly, moderately, or highly untruthful?" Perceived persuasive effect was measured by asking, "If you were a voter in Missouri, how much do you think this phone message would affect your intention to vote for Bob Clark? Would it maybe affect your vote, probably affect your vote, definitely affect your vote, or would it maybe not, probably not, or definitely not affect your vote?" I used this question instead of "If you were a voter in Missouri, who would you vote for?" because subjects were not given any information about an alternative fictional candidate. Such an addition would have made the survey longer and potentially more confusing. All survey responses

were recorded on seven-point Likert scales, with a “no opinion/don’t know” neutral option only being recorded if that answer was volunteered by a subject, which is a common practice in survey research (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000).

In the final section I revealed that “Bob Clark” and “Citizens for Solutions” were fictional and briefly identified the true purpose of the study: “You have just participated in an experiment about push polls. Push polls are usually conducted by fake groups who spread rumors about political candidates by pretending to do a telephone survey. Your answers will help me understand if people think that push polls are believable when the sponsor sounds like a credible source.” I thanked the subjects for their time and asked them if they had any questions or concerns they would like to discuss.

Data Analysis

All data was analyzed using SPSS 13.0. In order to answer RQ1 which asked, how did subjects rank the trustworthiness of the sponsor depending on whether the sponsor was mentioned before vs. after the push poll message, I ran a *t*-test for independent samples because this research question only addressed the differences between two treatment groups (sponsor before vs. sponsor after) and did not include the third treatment group (anonymous). I compared the means to determine whether any difference between the groups was significant enough ($p < .05$) to be due to a real difference, not just chance (Selkind, 2005).

In order to answer RQ2 which asked, how did subjects rank the truthfulness of the push poll message depending on whether the sponsor was mentioned before the poll, after the poll, or was anonymous, I ran a simple ANOVA (analysis of variance) because this question included one treatment variable (sponsorship disclosure) that was explored

among three groups (sponsor before, sponsor after, anonymous). I compared the means for the three groups and any difference was measured at the $p < .05$ level of significance. The least significant difference test (LSD) was used for post hoc analysis and was used to determine which, if any, of the three groups constituted a significant difference since t -tests between groups would substantially increase Type I error (Selkind, 2005). This test was chosen because it is the default test in *SPSS* for pairwise comparisons of one-way ANOVA tests (Garson, 2008).

In order to answer RQ3 which asked, how did subjects rank the persuasiveness of the push poll message depending on whether the sponsor is mentioned before the poll, after the poll, or was anonymous, I ran a separate ANOVA in which all means were compared and tested at the $p < .05$ significance level for any difference that could be due to a real difference, not just chance. A LSD post hoc analysis was used to determine which, if any, of the three groups constituted a significant difference.

Results

Two individual ANOVAs and one *t*-test for independent samples were used to analyze three research questions regarding subjects' attitudes toward a fictional push poll and sponsor. This section will describe each attitude measurement, presenting the most significant findings first.

Message Truthfulness

RQ2 asked, "How did subjects rank the truthfulness of the push poll message depending on whether the sponsor was mentioned before the poll, after the poll, or was anonymous?" A one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference between groups, ($F(2, 87) = 5.64, p < .005$), revealing a source effect on subjects' perceptions of the push polls' truthfulness (see Table 1). A post hoc LSD comparison (see Table 2) revealed a highly significant difference ($p < .002$) between the sponsor-before and anonymous groups, where subjects who were told the sponsor was "Citizens for Solutions" before the message ranked the message as significantly more truthful ($M = 4.43, SD = 1.61, n = 30$) on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = highly truthful, 7 = highly untruthful) than those who were told the sponsor was anonymous ($M = 5.87, SD = 1.59, n = 30$). A significant difference ($p < .021$) also existed between the sponsor-after ($M = 4.83, SD = 1.89, n = 30$) and anonymous groups, however no significant difference ($p < .366$) existed between the sponsor-before and sponsor-after groups.

When "Citizens for Solutions" was mentioned before or after the message, subjects were significantly more likely to rate the message as more truthful than subjects who were told it was anonymous. Though the mean of the sponsor-before group ($M =$

4.43) indicated a slightly higher rating of message truthfulness than the mean of the sponsor-after group ($M = 4.83$), this difference was statistically insignificant.

Table 1

Subjects' Post-Treatment Ratings of Message Truthfulness (RQ2)

Question	Group	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Q2	SB	30	4.43	1.61	2	5.64*	.005
	SA	30	4.83	1.89			
	A	30	5.87	1.59			

SB = Sponsor-Before, SA = Sponsor-After, A = Anonymous

*Significance at $p < 0.05$

Table 2

Post Hoc LSD Comparison of Mean Differences (RQ2)

Question	Group (i)	Group (ii)	Mean Difference (i minus ii)	<i>p</i>
Q2	SB	→ SA	-.400	.366
		↘ A	-1.433*	.002
	SA	→ SB	.400	.366
		↘ A	-1.033*	.022
	A	→ SB	1.433*	.002
		↘ SA	-1.033*	.021

*Significance at $p < 0.05$

Sponsor Trustworthiness

RQ1 asked, “How did subjects rank the trustworthiness of the sponsor depending on whether the sponsor was mentioned before vs. after the push poll message?” A *t*-test for independent samples (see Table 3) revealed that the time at which the source was mentioned (before vs. after) was statistically insignificant ($t = -1.07, df = 58, p > .29$). The means for the sponsor-before group ($M = 5.03, SD = 1.81$) and sponsor-after group ($M = 5.53, SD = 1.81$) revealed that both groups tended to rate the sponsor as “slightly untrustworthy” within the range of 5 on a seven-point Likert scale.

Table 3

Subjects’ Post-Treatment Ratings of Sponsor Trustworthiness (RQ1)

Question	Group	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Difference	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Q1	SB	30	5.03	1.81	-.5	-1.07	.290
	SA	30	5.53				

Perceived Effect on Vote

RQ3 asked, “How did subjects rank the persuasiveness of the push poll message depending on whether the sponsor was mentioned before the poll, after the poll, or was anonymous?” A one-way ANOVA (see Table 4) yielded insignificant results ($F(2, 87) = .30, p < .739$). The means for the sponsor-before group ($M = 4.43, SD = 2.03$), sponsor-after group ($M = 4.20, SD = 1.94$) and anonymous group ($M = 4.03, SD = 2.02$) revealed

that all groups tended to rate the perceived effect on their vote as neutral within the range of 4 on a seven-point Likert scale.

Table 4

Subjects' Post-Treatment Ratings of Message Persuasiveness (RQ3)

Question	Group	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Q3	SB	30	4.43	2.03	2	.304	.739
	SA	30	4.20	1.94			
	A	30	4.03	1.59			

Conclusion

This study explored attitudes about a fictional push pull and sponsor in an attempt to understand whether the presence of a sponsor (“Citizens for Solutions” vs. anonymous) and the time at which the sponsor was mentioned (before vs. after) would affect subjects’ ratings of 1) sponsor trustworthiness, 2) message truthfulness, and 3) perceived persuasiveness. The goal was to gain insight into potential legislation that would mandate sponsorship disclosure for all pollsters who seek opinions regarding a federal election and contact more than 1,200 respondents (Govtrack.us, 2007).

The most important finding from this study was that when “Citizens for Solutions” was mentioned before and after the message, subjects were significantly more likely to rate the message as more truthful than subjects who were told it was anonymous. This is important because the goal of the “Push Poll Disclosure Act of 2007” is to provoke voter skepticism, not trust, by requiring push poll sponsors to say who they are (Petri, 2007). For my sample, an anonymous rather than ambiguously named sponsor provoked the highest skepticism about the message’s truthfulness. The anonymous group tended to rate message truthfulness as “moderately untruthful.” Subjects in both the sponsor-before and sponsor-after groups tended to rate message truthfulness between “neutral” and “slightly untruthful”. If voters tend to distrust push poll accusations more when they are anonymous, it may not be necessary to mandate sponsorship disclosure.

The time at which the sponsor was mentioned did not produce statistically significant differences between groups in all attitude measurements. However, it is interesting to note that the sponsor-before group’s means were slightly lower (closer to 1= highly trustworthy, highly truthful) than the sponsor-after group’s means in ratings of

sponsor trustworthiness and message truthfulness. This could be supportive of previous research suggesting more credible sources should precede the persuasive message (Greenberg & Tannenbaum, 1961; Greenberg & Miller, 1966; Homer & Kahle, 1990; Mills & Harvey, 1972; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Sternthal, Dholakia et al., 1978). If voters tend to rate push poll sponsors as even slightly more credible when mentioned before the survey, perhaps persuasion could be weakened by requiring source disclosure after the survey, as Rep. Petri's bill now states (Govtrack.us, 2007). More research is needed to determine if voters think push pollsters are credible.

Subjects' ratings of the push poll question's perceived effect on their vote were largely neutral and did not differ between all groups, regardless of sponsor name and time of source mention. This was not surprising since the question was hypothetical and involved a fictional candidate. Subjects could speculate about whether or not the push poll question would affect their vote, but the only way to truly assess the question's efficacy would be if it involved a real candidate and subjects' actual Election Day votes could be analyzed. This limitation will be discussed more in the following section.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the sample was representative of a biased sample of Briarwood church members and was not representative of American voters. A random sample of voting-age citizens is needed to determine whether the findings from this study can be generalized for a broader population.

Second, despite several measures to maximize question validity, some subjects expressed confusion about the question meant to measure perceived persuasiveness of the message. This question was, "If you were a voter in Missouri, how much do you think

this phone message would affect your intention to vote for Bob Clark?” The subjects who raised concerns said they did not know whether the question meant it would positively or negatively affect their vote. During data entry I observed that some subjects who ranked the sponsor as untrustworthy and the message as untruthful, said the message would “definitely” or “probably” affect their vote. Perhaps they meant the push poll would strengthen their resolve to vote for Clark, and thus their vote would “definitely” be affected. “Definitely affect my vote” was intended to represent the idea that the push poll was successful in “pushing” that subject away from Bob Clark. Therefore, it is unclear whether persuasiveness of the push poll message was accurately measured or if implications can be drawn from the results.

Third, the use of a fictional political candidate is an important factor that limits the utility of this study. A common statement during the course of interviewing was, “How can I answer these questions? I don’t know anything about the guy.” In real-world push polls, voters usually hold knowledge of and interest in the particular candidates at hand, and often hold rather strong opinions about them. The use of a fictional candidate is an imperfect solution that other push poll researchers have used since it is unethical to replicate an actual push poll of a real person (Fitzsimons & Shiv, 2001; Moore et al, 2006).

Lastly, a research design flaw may have skewed the results that showed the time at which the source was mentioned (before vs. after) was an ultimately insignificant variable in the experiment. In pre-tests of the anonymous group, subjects tended to think I was the source of the information unless I explicitly stated the sponsor was anonymous. Perhaps without proper care of implications, the final survey draft for the anonymous

group was re-worded and mentioned sponsor anonymity *before* the message. As such, I should have created a third (anonymous-after) and fourth (no sponsor information, control) treatment group to address this problem. Important comparisons might have been made from adding these groups.

Recommendations for Future Research

Despite a lack of evidence that push polls affect attitudes, each election cycle churns out its share of defeated candidates who blame a push poll or a wave of citizens who are angry at receiving one. It is not surprising that some policy-makers are attempting to write a law to limit push polls. This study is helpful in raising doubt about whether an ambiguously named sponsor would provoke more skepticism in voters than an anonymous sponsor. However, several important factors remain unclear and should be addressed in future research.

First, who do real push pollsters say they are when they call? Do they remain anonymous? Do they tend to give the name of an ambiguously named independent group as some authors have suggested (Gerstmann & Streb, 2004)? This is a difficult research question to address since push poll transcripts are not usually available and evidence about them is largely anecdotal (Moore et al., 2006). Still, the answer to this question would provide important direction for future research and take some of the guessing out of sponsor credibility manipulations.

Second, it is still unclear what role timing of sponsor mention plays since my experiment was not thorough enough to analyze all possible outcomes. Future researchers should consider manipulating sponsor credibility (high, moderate, low) and time of source mention (before, after) in a 3 x 2 design. My research may have yielded richer

information had I compared my results to those when sources of varying levels of credibility were mentioned before and after a push poll message. This design would more closely resemble successful studies of source credibility and timing of source mention effects (Greenberg & Tannenbaum, 1961; Greenberg & Miller, 1966; Homer & Kahle, 1990; Mills & Harvey, 1972, Ward & McGinnies, 1974).

The challenge for push poll researchers is to find creative ways to study this tactic without using the names of real candidates or leaving out important factors such as interest, involvement, and prior attitudes toward candidates, which can happen when fictional candidates are used. Without simulating a real push poll with real, well-known candidates, we may not fully understand if they affect attitudes and to what extent.

The American election process affords candidates with time and access to mediums (radio, TV, direct mail, etc) in which they can inform the public of important differences between their opponents and themselves. Some of these mediums require financial sponsorship disclosure, i.e. “This message is paid for by...” which may help limit the public dissemination of outright lies. Anonymous push pollsters can easily avoid such accountability. As Sabato and Simpson (1996) put it, “TV and radio ads can be heard by anyone and are often reported in the newspaper. Direct mail can find its way into anyone’s hands. Phone calls leave no such trace” (p. 28). However, this might not be a bad thing if voters tend to distrust anonymous surveys. Legislators should not assume a sponsorship disclosure mandate would solve the push poll problem unless it is tested for potential unwanted effects. Such diligence would benefit future victims of push polls and provide the wider community of policy-makers with an example of a law that was tested before it was written.

Appendices

Appendix A: Postcard

You Are Invited



To participate in thesis research for
Rachel Blackmon Bryars
Johns Hopkins University

Please accept a brief phone call

Dear

I grew up as a member of Briarwood Church where my parents, Jim and Cheryl Blackmon, and sister, Anna Joy Blackmon, still attend.

I am finishing a Master's Degree in Political Communication at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, D.C. As part of my thesis research on harmful political campaign tactics, I am conducting a brief phone survey of a sample of Briarwood Church members.

I would like to call you in the coming weeks. I hope you will take a few moments out of your busy day to give me your valuable input. All of your answers will be completely anonymous and I would be happy to send you a copy of my final report.

If you prefer not to be contacted or would like to let me know the best time to reach you, please feel free to call (703.820.2109) or e-mail me

at RachelBryars@yahoo.com.

I very much look forward to speaking with you and hope you will keep this postcard as a reminder that I will be calling soon.

Best Regards,

Rachel Bryars

Appendix B: Sponsor-Before Survey Instrument

Hi! Is this (insert name)? This is Rachel Bryars, daughter of Jim and Cheryl Blackmon from Briarwood. Did you get the postcard I sent you last week? (No: Oh I am sorry to hear that. Well,) (Yes: Great...as my note mentioned...) I'm calling because I'm working on a master's degree at Johns Hopkins University and I'm conducting a quick survey for my thesis. If you have five minutes, I would really appreciate your insights... Would you take a few minutes to answer my questions?

Great!

(IF AGE NOT OBVIOUS) First, I need to make sure that I am speaking with someone of voting age. Are you at least 18 years old? **(IF NOT 18, ASK TO SPEAK WITH SOMEONE IN THE HOUSEHOLD WHO IS OLDER THAN 18).**

VOTING HISTORY (Gallup, 2006)

I'd like to start by asking you a few questions about political elections.

V1. Do you happen to know where people who live in your neighborhood go to vote?

___01: YES

___02: NO

V2. Many people do not vote in elections. How often would you say you vote—always, nearly always, part of the time, or seldom (D. Beck, personal communication, February 25, 2008)? **(IF SUBJECT VOLUNTEERS “NEVER,” MARK AS 05 BELOW.)**

___01: Always

___02: Nearly Always

___03: Part of the time

___04: Seldom

___(05: Never)

DESCRIPTION OF BOB CLARK (Based on Moore, Fitzsimons & Shiv, 2006 experiment instrument):

Now I'd like to ask you some specific questions about a campaign going on in Missouri. It may seem strange that I am asking you to comment on an election in a different state, but it is very important that I talk to people with an objective point of view.

Please listen carefully to the following information. I will need to ask you about it in a moment:

Bob Clark is running for the U.S. House of Representatives in Missouri's 4th Congressional district. Mr. Clark is a respected leader in Missouri. He served as State Treasurer for ten years before moving into the non-profit sector. For the past five years, he's been the chief financial officer for a major non-profit organization. He is a family man who attends church regularly.

EXPERIMENTAL TREATMENT

Now I'd like you to listen carefully as I read you something. This is a telephone message that voters in Missouri have been receiving recently. The message asks a question, but you don't need to answer it...please just listen.

The sponsor of the following message is "Citizens for Solutions."

Quote: If you knew that while Bob Clark was State Treasurer, he gave a high-paying job to an unqualified woman he was having an extramarital affair with, would you be more or less likely to vote for him? Close-Quote.

POST-TREATMENT ATTITUDE MEASUREMENTS

I'd like to ask you a few questions about the phone message you just heard.

P1: Could you briefly tell me what the phone message accused Bob Clark of?

{RECORD AS YES OR NO}

___01: Yes

___02: No

P2: Could you tell me who sponsored the message?

___01: (Yes, Citizens for Solutions)

___02: (No, could not remember)

___03: (Don't know/Refused/Code as no)

P3: You may not have heard of the message's sponsor, Citizens for Solutions. But if you had to guess, how trustworthy do you think the group is?

[CREDIBILITY MEASURE] Would you say it is slightly, moderately or highly trustworthy, or would you say it is slightly, moderately, or highly untrustworthy?

- ___01: Highly trustworthy
- ___02: Moderately trustworthy
- ___03: Slightly trustworthy
- ___04: (Neutral/DK/Refused)
- ___05: Slightly untrustworthy
- ___06: Moderately untrustworthy
- ___07: Highly untrustworthy

P4: Based on the limited information you have been given, how truthful would you guess the accusation against Bob Clarke is? [**ACCURACY MEASURE**] Would you say it is slightly, moderately, or highly truthful or would you say it is slightly, moderately, or highly untruthful?

- ___01: Highly truthful
- ___02: Moderately truthful
- ___03: Slightly truthful
- ___04: (Neutral/DK/Refused)
- ___05: Slightly untruthful
- ___06: Moderately untruthful
- ___07: Highly untruthful

This is the last question in my survey:

P5: If you were a voter in Missouri, how much do you think this phone message would affect your intention to vote for Bob Clark? Would you say it would maybe affect your vote, probably affect your vote, definitely affect your vote, or would it maybe not, probably not, or definitely not affect your vote? [**PERSUASION MEASURE**]

- ___01: Definitely affect vote
- ___02: Probably affect vote
- ___03: Maybe affect vote
- ___04: Neutral/DK/Refused

___05: Maybe not affect vote

___06: Probably not affect vote

___07: Definitely not affect vote

POST EXPERIMENT BRIEF

Okay, we're done! Before we get off the phone, I'd like to tell you some important information about this survey. Bob Clark and "Citizens for Solutions" are both completely fictional. You have just participated in an experiment about push-polls, which are usually conducted by fake groups who spread rumors about political candidates by pretending to do a telephone survey. Your answers will help me understand if people think that push polls are believable when the sponsor sounds like a credible source. Do you have any questions or concerns about the survey?

Thank you very much for your time; all of your answers are confidential and will help me as I complete my thesis. Have a wonderful (day/evening)!

Appendix C: Sponsor-After Survey Instrument

Hi! Is this (insert name)? This is Rachel Bryars, daughter of Jim and Cheryl Blackmon from Briarwood. Did you get the postcard I sent you last week? (No: Oh I am sorry to hear that. Well,) (Yes: Great...as my note mentioned...) I'm calling because I'm working on a master's degree at Johns Hopkins University and I'm conducting a quick survey for my thesis. If you have five minutes, I would really appreciate your insights... Would you take a few minutes to answer my questions?

Great!

(IF AGE NOT OBVIOUS) First, I need to make sure that I am speaking with someone of voting age. Are you at least 18 years old? **(IF NOT 18, ASK TO SPEAK WITH SOMEONE IN THE HOUSEHOLD WHO IS OLDER THAN 18).**

VOTING HISTORY (Gallup, 2006)

I'd like to start by asking you a few questions about political elections.

V1. Do you happen to know where people who live in your neighborhood go to vote?

___01: YES

___02: NO

V2. Many people do not vote in elections. How often would you say you vote—always, nearly always, part of the time, or seldom (D. Beck, personal communication, February 25, 2008)? **(IF SUBJECT VOLUNTEERS “NEVER,” MARK AS 05 BELOW.)**

___01: Always

___02: Nearly Always

___03: Part of the time

___04: Seldom

___(05: Never)

DESCRIPTION OF BOB CLARK (Based on Moore, Fitzsimons & Shiv, 2006 experiment instrument):

Now I'd like to ask you some specific questions about a campaign going on in Missouri. It may seem strange that I am asking you to comment on an election in a different state, but it is very important that I talk to people with an objective point of view.

Please listen carefully to the following information. I will need to ask you about it in a moment:

Bob Clark is running for the U.S. House of Representatives in Missouri's 4th Congressional district. Mr. Clark is a respected leader in Missouri. He served as State Treasurer for ten years before moving into the non-profit sector. For the past five years, he's been the chief financial officer for a major non-profit organization. He is a family man who attends church regularly.

EXPERIMENTAL TREATMENT

Now I'd like you to listen carefully as I read you something. This is a telephone message that voters in Missouri have been receiving recently. The message asks a question, but you don't need to answer it...please just listen.

The sponsor of the following message is "Citizens for Solutions."

Quote: If you knew that while Bob Clark was State Treasurer, he gave a high-paying job to an unqualified woman he was having an extramarital affair with, would you be more or less likely to vote for him? Close-Quote.

POST-TREATMENT ATTITUDE MEASUREMENTS

I'd like to ask you a few questions about the phone message you just heard.

P1: Could you briefly tell me what the phone message accused Bob Clark of?

{RECORD AS YES OR NO}

___01: Yes

___02: No

P2: Could you tell me who sponsored the message?

___01: (Yes, Citizens for Solutions)

___02: (No, could not remember)

___03: (Don't know/Refused/Code as no)

P3: You may not have heard of the message's sponsor, Citizens for Solutions. But if you had to guess, how trustworthy do you think the group is?

[CREDIBILITY MEASURE] Would you say it is slightly, moderately or highly trustworthy, or would you say it is slightly, moderately, or highly untrustworthy?

- ___01: Highly trustworthy
- ___02: Moderately trustworthy
- ___03: Slightly trustworthy
- ___04: (Neutral/DK/Refused)
- ___05: Slightly untrustworthy
- ___06: Moderately untrustworthy
- ___07: Highly untrustworthy

P4: Based on the limited information you have been given, how truthful would you guess the accusation against Bob Clarke is? [**ACCURACY MEASURE**] Would you say it is slightly, moderately, or highly truthful or would you say it is slightly, moderately, or highly untruthful?

- ___01: Highly truthful
- ___02: Moderately truthful
- ___03: Slightly truthful
- ___04: (Neutral/DK/Refused)
- ___05: Slightly untruthful
- ___06: Moderately untruthful
- ___07: Highly untruthful

This is the last question in my survey:

P5: If you were a voter in Missouri, how much do you think this phone message would affect your intention to vote for Bob Clark? Would you say it would maybe affect your vote, probably affect your vote, definitely affect your vote, or would it maybe not, probably not, or definitely not affect your vote? [**PERSUASION MEASURE**]

- ___01: Definitely affect vote
- ___02: Probably affect vote
- ___03: Maybe affect vote
- ___04: Neutral/DK/Refused

___05: Maybe not affect vote

___06: Probably not affect vote

___07: Definitely not affect vote

POST EXPERIMENT BRIEF

Okay, we're done! Before we get off the phone, I'd like to tell you some important information about this survey. Bob Clark and "Citizens for Solutions" are both completely fictional. You have just participated in an experiment about push-polls, which are usually conducted by fake groups who spread rumors about political candidates by pretending to do a telephone survey. Your answers will help me understand if people think that push polls are believable when the sponsor sounds like a credible source. Do you have any questions or concerns about the survey?

Thank you very much for your time; all of your answers are confidential and will help me as I complete my thesis. Have a wonderful (day/evening)!

Appendix D: Anonymous Instrument

Hi! Is this (insert name)? This is Rachel Bryars, daughter of Jim and Cheryl Blackmon from Briarwood. Did you get the postcard I sent you last week? (No: Oh I am sorry to hear that. Well,) (Yes: Great...as my note mentioned...) I'm calling because I'm working on a master's degree at Johns Hopkins University and I'm conducting a quick survey for my thesis. If you have five minutes, I would really appreciate your insights... Would you take a few minutes to answer my questions?

Great!

(IF AGE NOT OBVIOUS) First, I need to make sure that I am speaking with someone of voting age. Are you at least 18 years old? **(IF NOT 18, ASK TO SPEAK WITH SOMEONE IN THE HOUSEHOLD WHO IS OLDER THAN 18).**

VOTING HISTORY (Gallup, 2006)

I'd like to start by asking you a few questions about political elections.

V1. Do you happen to know where people who live in your neighborhood go to vote?

___01: YES

___02: NO

V2. Many people do not vote in elections. How often would you say you vote—always, nearly always, part of the time, or seldom (D. Beck, personal communication, February 25, 2008)? **(IF SUBJECT VOLUNTEERS “NEVER,” MARK AS 05 BELOW.)**

___01: Always

___02: Nearly Always

___03: Part of the time

___04: Seldom

___(05: Never)

DESCRIPTION OF BOB CLARK (Based on Moore, Fitzsimons & Shiv, 2006 experiment instrument):

Now I'd like to ask you some specific questions about a campaign going on in Missouri. It may seem strange that I am asking you to comment on an election in a different state, but it is very important that I talk to people with an objective point of view.

Please listen carefully to the following information. I will need to ask you about it in a moment:

Bob Clark is running for the U.S. House of Representatives in Missouri's 4th Congressional district. Mr. Clark is a respected leader in Missouri. He served as State Treasurer for ten years before moving into the non-profit sector. For the past five years, he's been the chief financial officer for a major non-profit organization. He is a family man who attends church regularly.

EXPERIMENTAL TREATMENT

Now I'd like you to listen carefully as I read you something. This is an anonymous telephone message that voters in Missouri have been receiving recently. The message asks a question, but you don't need to answer it...please just listen.

Quote: If you knew that while Bob Clark was State Treasurer, he gave a high-paying job to an unqualified woman he was having an extramarital affair with, would you be more or less likely to vote for him? Close-Quote.

POST-TREATMENT ATTITUDE MEASUREMENTS

I'd like to ask you a few questions about the phone message you just heard.

P1: Could you briefly tell me what the phone message accused Bob Clark of?

{RECORD AS YES OR NO}

___01: Yes

___02: No

P2: Could you tell me who sponsored the message?

___01: (Yes, Anonymous)

___02: (No, could not remember)

___03: (Don't know/Refused/Code as no)

P3: Based on the limited information you have been given, how truthful would you guess the accusation against Bob Clarke is? **[ACCURACY MEASURE]** Would you say it is slightly, moderately, or highly truthful or would you say it is slightly, moderately, or highly untruthful?

___01: Highly truthful

- ___02: Moderately truthful
- ___03: Slightly truthful
- ___04: (Neutral/DK/Refused)
- ___05: Slightly untruthful
- ___06: Moderately untruthful
- ___07: Highly untruthful

This is the last question in my survey:

P5: If you were a voter in Missouri, how much do you think this phone message would affect your intention to vote for Bob Clark? Would you say it would maybe affect your vote, probably affect your vote, definitely affect your vote, or would it maybe not, probably not, or definitely not affect your vote? **[PERSUASION MEASURE]**

- ___01: Definitely affect vote
- ___02: Probably affect vote
- ___03: Maybe affect vote
- ___04: Neutral/DK/Refused
- ___05: Maybe not affect vote
- ___06: Probably not affect vote
- ___07: Definitely not affect vote

POST EXPERIMENT BRIEF

Okay, we're done! Before we get off the phone, I'd like to tell you some important information about this survey. Bob Clark is completely fictional. You have just participated in an experiment about push-polls, which are usually conducted by fake groups who spread rumors about political candidates by pretending to do a telephone survey. Your answers will help me understand if people think that push polls are believable when the sponsor is anonymous. Do you have any questions or concerns about the survey?

Thank you very much for your time; all of your answers are confidential and will help me as I complete my thesis. Have a wonderful (day/evening)!

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Curriculum Vitae

Rachel Blackmon Bryars was born September 22, 1982 in Birmingham, Alabama, and completed her primary and high school education at Briarwood Christian School. She graduated *cum laude* from Palm Beach Atlantic University where she was editor-in-chief of the University newspaper and the 2004 Outstanding Communication Graduate. After graduation, Bryars worked briefly as a television news reporter for the ABC affiliate in Richmond, Virginia, (WRIC) before marrying Pepper Bryars and moving to Washington, D.C., where she has pursued freelance writing and graduate work at Johns Hopkins University while raising her two young children. Bryars has been published in the *Washington Post*, *Washington Examiner*, *Palm Beach Post*, and many other publications in the Washington, D.C. area.