

GSG Compass

MESSAGE STRATEGY

Just the Facts Can Be Just as Effective (if Not More)

OCTOBER 2014

In God we trust? Actually, most voters these days would have trouble believing God himself was telling the truth in a campaign ad.

Their cynicism runs deep – so deep that neither birth certificates nor the consensus of 97 percent of scientists can prove anything, and major news outlets once considered vanguards of validation are now viewed warily by skeptical eyes .

Voters' trust level seems to deteriorate more and more with each election, putting higher and higher premiums on crafting a campaign message that is not just believable but also truthful in order to avoid a "Pinocchio" label from a fact checker.

Are any news organizations considered reliable and trustworthy today? How important is a fact checker's assessment of a campaign ad's veracity – do voters care or even notice? And for a message rated as false, is there a more honest and factual way of constructing it that is just as effective at moving votes?

This month's **GSG Compass** provides some answers and leads the way to messages voters can believe again.

Campaign ads are **trusted less** than news outlets or fact checkers, but most voters **doubt the reliability** of any election information

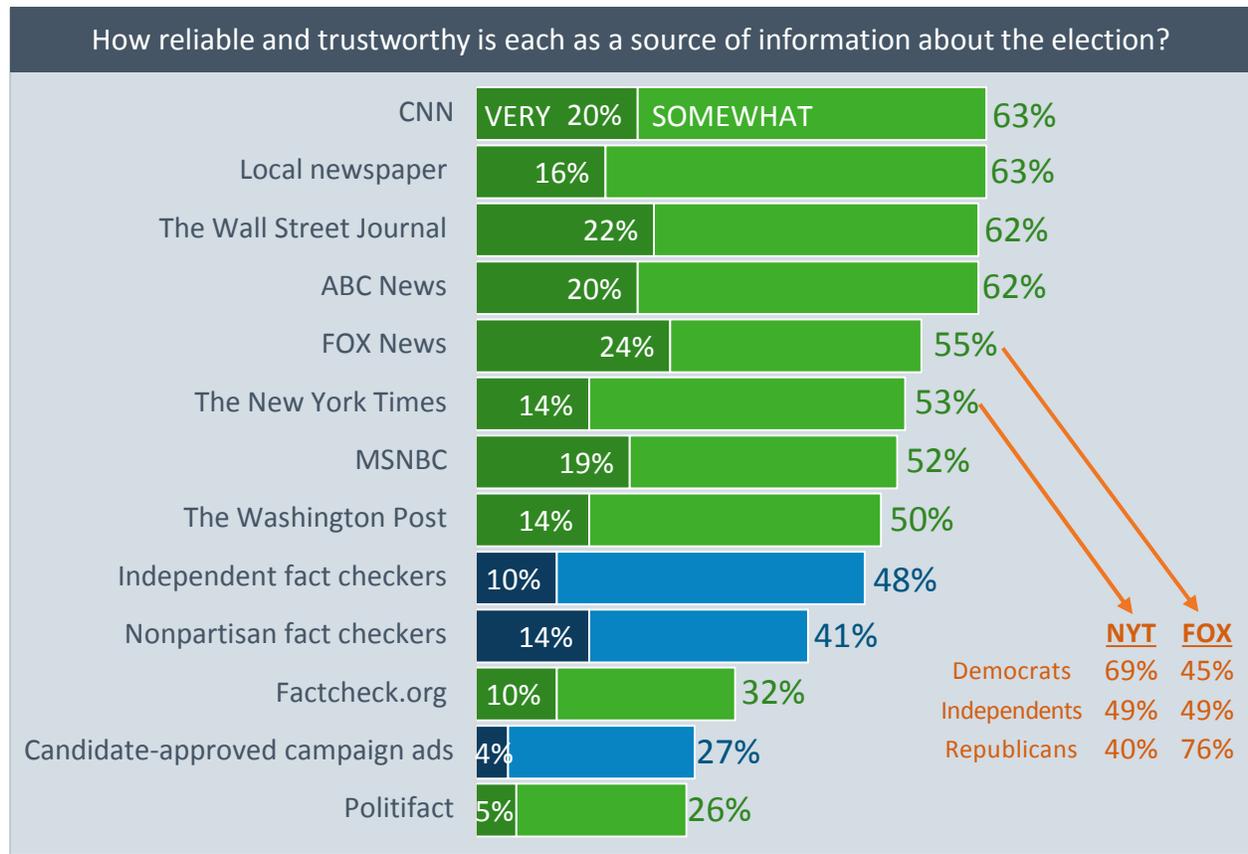
According to voters, candidate-approved campaign ads are one of the least reliable or trustworthy sources of information about the upcoming election. Barely more than a quarter (27%) are willing to rate them as even “somewhat” reliable and trustworthy, and just 4% go so far as to say “very.”

The most reliable and trustworthy sources are major news organizations, though fewer than two-thirds consider any entity tested to be reliable and trustworthy (and not even a quarter consider any of them to be “very” reliable or trustworthy).

Organizations like CNN, ABC News, and local newspapers are thought of as more reliable and trustworthy than those perceived to have partisan leanings, like FOX News and *The New York Times* (and those partisan leanings are evident by which voters find each one reliable and trustworthy).

Generically, though fact check groups are trusted by fewer voters than news organizations because fewer voters are familiar with them, 48% of voters call “independent” fact checkers reliable and trustworthy – just shy of *The Washington Post* (50%), MSNBC (52%), and *The New York Times* (53%). Considerably fewer (41%), however, say the same about “nonpartisan” fact checkers.

In addition, fact checkers generically rate higher than specific groups such as Factcheck.org (32%) and Politifact (26%) – though of the two, Factcheck.org’s brand is stronger.



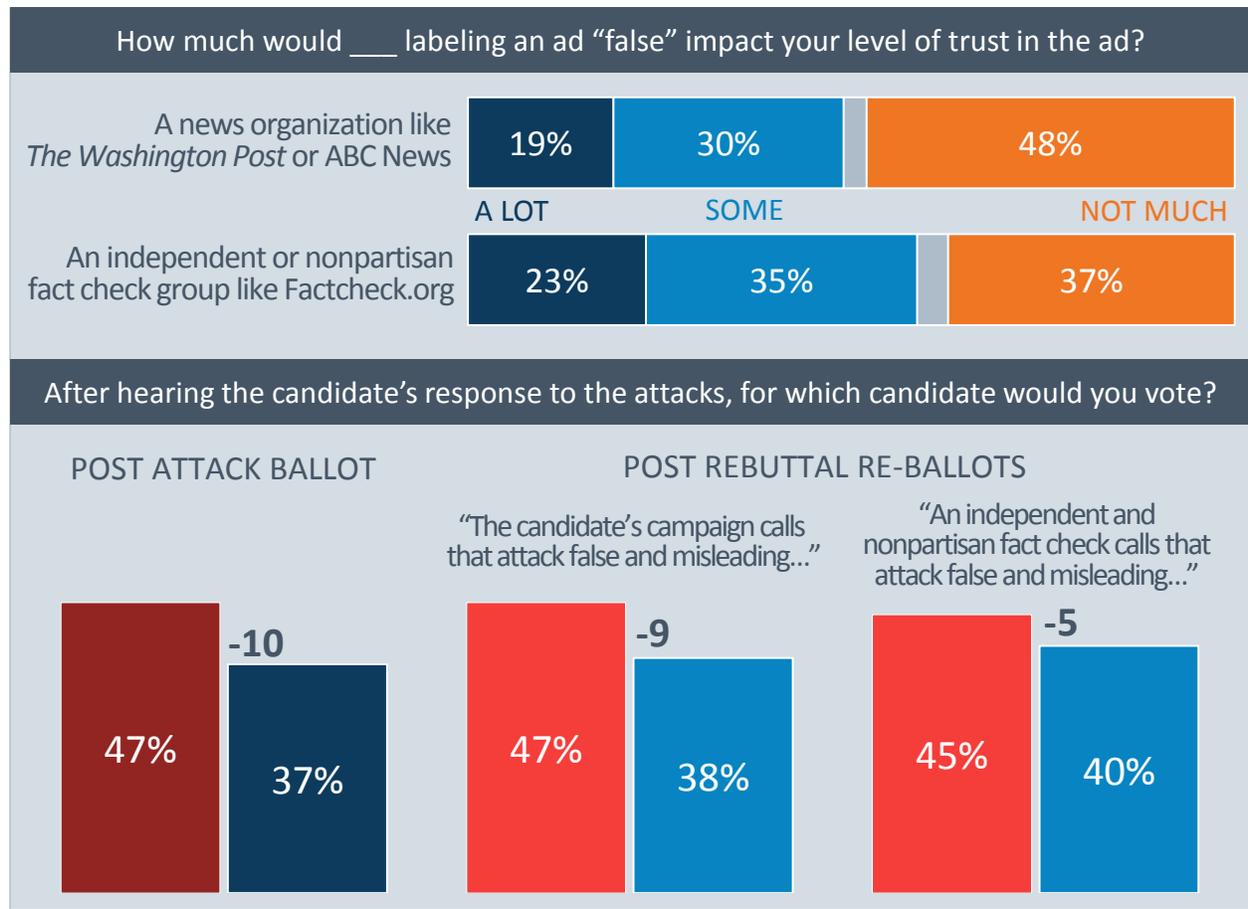
Independent fact checkers can **strengthen a rebuttal** and have a **greater impact on perceptions** of campaign ads than news reports

Despite the fact that more voters consider news organizations reliable and trustworthy, fact check organizations have greater impact on voters' perceptions of campaign ads.

Fewer than half (49%) say a "false" label from a news organization like ABC News or *The Washington Post* would impact their level of trust in an ad, and just 19% say their trust would be impacted a lot. On the other hand, 58% say a "false" label from an independent or nonpartisan fact check group like Factcheck.org would impact their trust, including 23% who say it would impact their trust level a lot.

Indeed, the judgment of fact checkers can be employed effectively by a campaign when rebutting attacks levied by an opponent.

In a hypothetical simulation, one candidate trails an opponent by 10 points after a series of attacks. Following a response that essentially pits the word of one campaign against the word of the other, the candidate still trails by nine points – a mere one-point improvement. But following a response that notes that independent and nonpartisan fact checkers called the attacks false, the margin is cut in half, with the candidate down just five points.



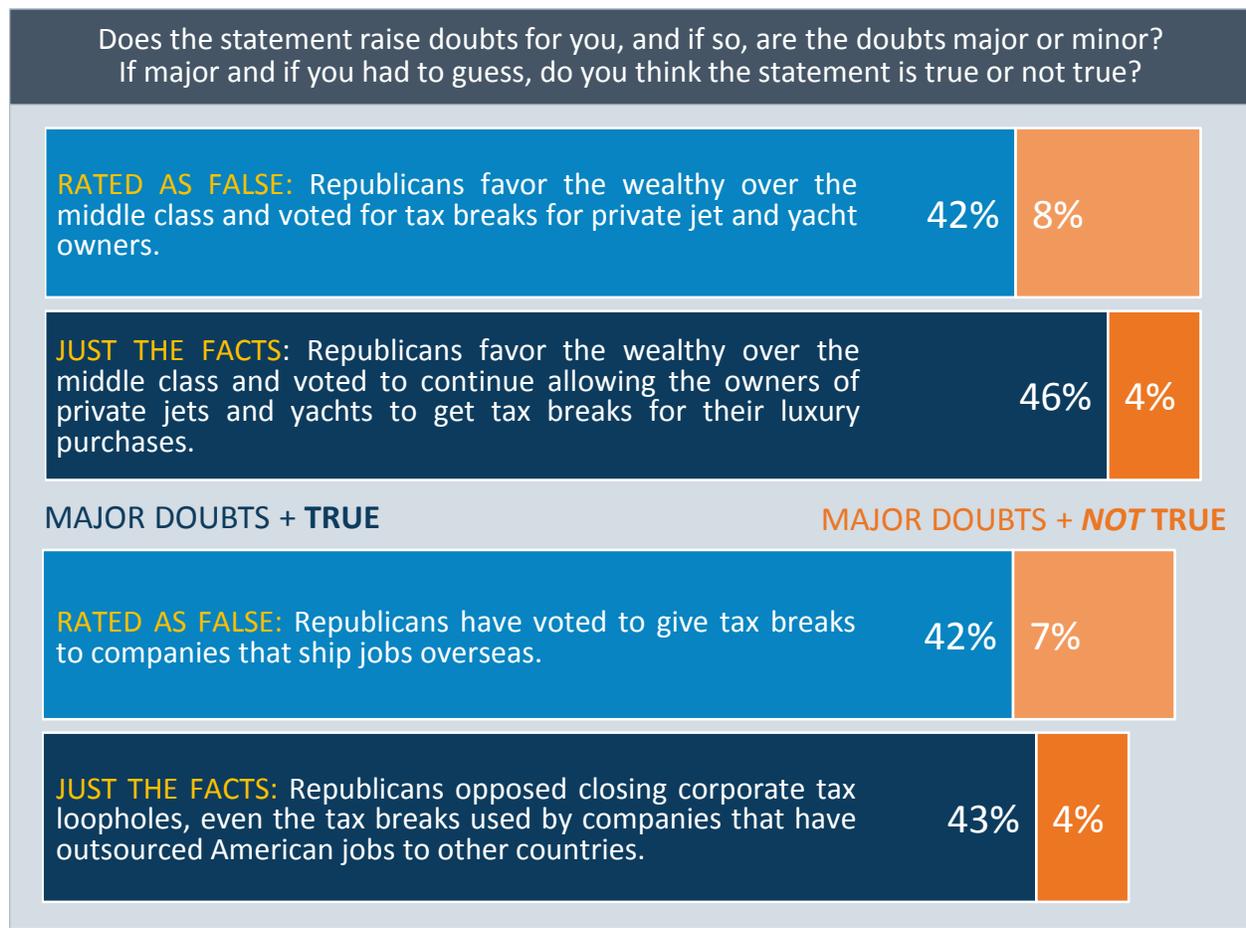
Factual messages that are intellectually honest are **just as effective** but **harder to rebut** than generalizations that exaggerate the truth

Raising doubts about an opponent in the minds of voters is critical to winning elections, but if no one believes what is being said – either because a fact checker called it a lie or because the attack is too outrageous to possibly be true – then the message will not have the necessary impact.

For example, half of voters (50%) say the fact that Republicans “voted for tax breaks for private jet and yacht owners” raises major doubts about them. But when asked if the statement is true, 42% say it is, while 8% say it is not – and fact checks agreed with the latter, labeling the statement false.

The same number of voters (50%) say it raises major doubts that Republicans “voted to continue allowing the owners of private jets and yachts to get tax breaks for their luxury purchases.” This statement, with its greater level of specificity and more honest representation of the facts, is thought to be true by 46%, while half as many (4%) say this statement is not true – and no Pinocchios from fact checkers, robbing Republicans of one of the most effective attack responses.

The same thing happens with outsourcing attacks – it’s more believable that Republicans would refuse to close a corporate loophole rather than give a tax break specifically to outsourcers.



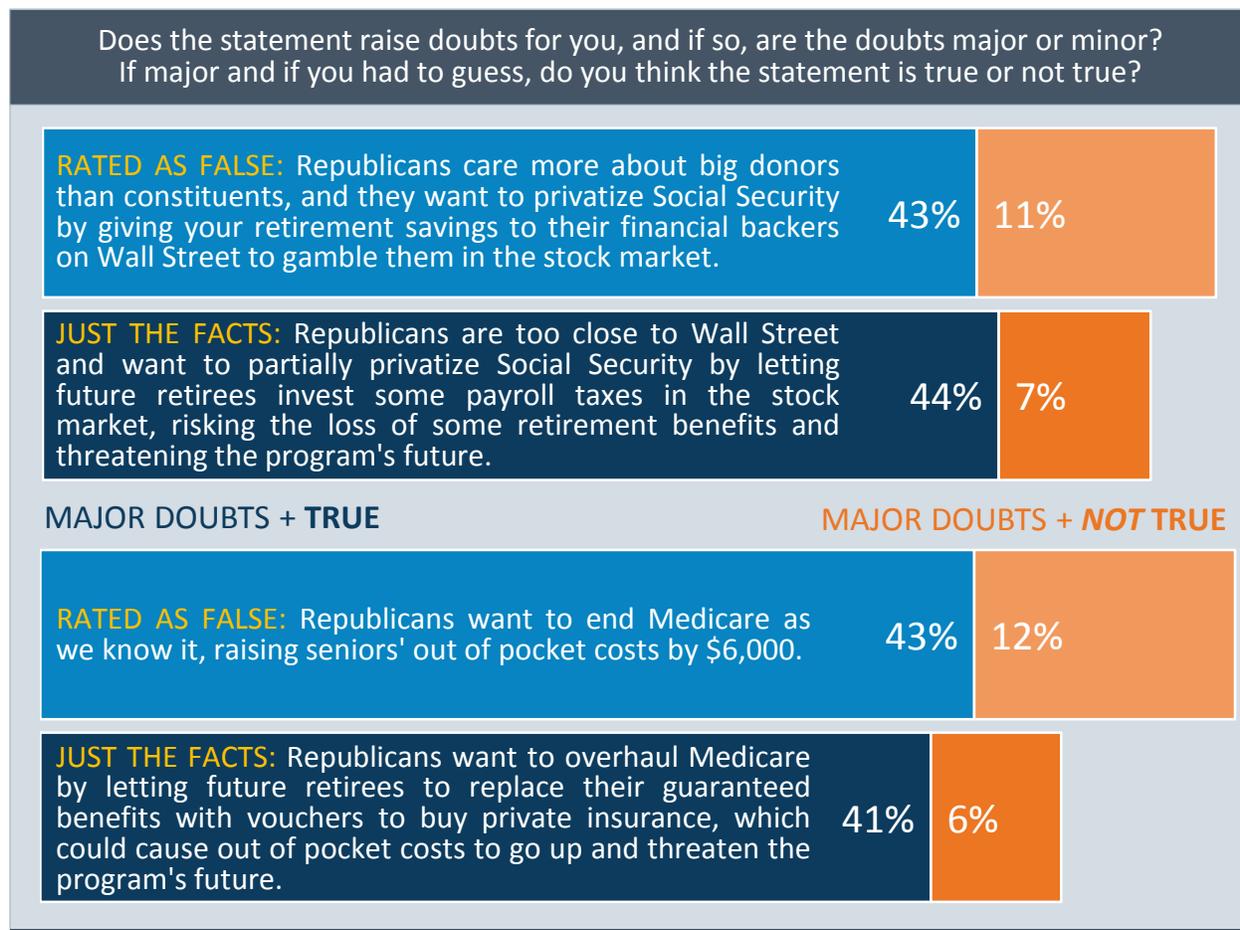
The devil may be **in the details**, but so too is a message's **credibility**, particularly when communicating about entitlement programs

Social Security and Medicare have been exploited by demagogues on the right and left for decades, so greater specificity, more details, and intellectual honesty are even more important when communicating about an opponent's positions on entitlement programs.

A message that goes after Republicans for wanting to privatize all of Social Security and gamble everyone's retirement benefits on the stock market raises major doubts for 54% of voters. But just 43% say they believe that attack is true. By contrast, admitting Republicans would only partially privatize Social Security and allow future retirees to risk some benefits raises major doubts for 44% who also believe the statement is true.

On Medicare, 12% do not believe the most common attack line levied against Republicans by Democrats for their votes in favor of Congressman Paul Ryan's budget, and the message has been further undercut by fact checkers repeatedly calling the attack a lie. However, only half as many (6%) doubt the validity of an honest portrayal of the plan Republicans supported.

Voters can see through strident, hyperbolic generalizations and appear ready to reward those who engage in an honest, straightforward campaign dialogue.



KEY COMPASS POINTS

- Most voters doubt the reliability and trustworthiness of any election information, regardless of the source.
- Campaign ads, even when candidate-approved, are trusted less than either news organizations or fact checkers.
- The judgment of independent or nonpartisan fact checkers impacts voters' perceptions of campaign ads more than news reports, and utilizing that judgment strengthens a campaign's rebuttal.
- Factual messages that are intellectually honest are also more effective, more believable, and harder to rebut than generalizations that exaggerate the truth and get labeled as "false" by fact checkers.
- Specifics and details increase the credibility of campaign messages, particularly when communicating about entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicare that have been exploited by demagogues for decades.
- Bucking conventional political wisdom, voters stand ready to reward honesty over hyperbole and straightforward fact over strident generalization.

METHODOLOGY

This edition of **GSGCompass** references the results of a nationwide survey of 1,000 registered voters conducted by Global Strategy Group on September 22-25, 2014 using live callers over the telephone. Special care has been taken to ensure that partisan, geographic and demographic divisions are properly represented by the survey's respondents. The margin of error for a survey with this sample size at the 95% confidence level is +/- 3.1%.