

# People tend to exaggerate influence of political ads on others

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The push for campaign finance reform may be driven by a tendency to overestimate the power of political messages to influence other people's opinions, according to researchers.

In an experiment, people who viewed negative political advertising said the advertisements had little effect on their own opinions, but believed the ads would have a greater influence on others, said Fuyuan Shen, associate professor, communications, Penn State.

"People have a tendency to overestimate the effect [media messages](#) have on others," Shen said. "The perception is that negative messages, like television violence and pornography, in [mass media](#) affect others more."

Shen added that when the message is socially desirable, such as donating money, the perception is reversed; people think the message has more of an effect on themselves than on others.

"There is a gap in perception," he said.

The exaggerated perception of media power may prompt people to believe that media censorship and campaign finance reform are necessary to limit media influence, according to Shen.

"People have a tendency to overestimate the media's impact, especially when we don't necessarily like the message," said Shen. "And this belief could have larger behavioral implications on censorship and the

regulation of [media content](#)."

In the experiment, the researchers, who reported their findings in the current issue of the *Journal of Political Marketing*, showed 129 students negative television advertisements created by MoveOnPac.org for the 2004 [presidential election](#). The ads focused either on then-President George W. Bush's character or on political issues, such as the Iraq war and the environment. About 45 percent of the participants identified themselves as Bush supporters and 55 percent considered themselves opponents of the president.

Both supporters and opponents indicated that the effect of the ads on others was significantly greater than their own reaction to the ads, said Shen, who worked with Frank E. Dardis, associate professor, communications, Penn State, and Heidi Hatfield Edwards, associate professor, communication, Florida Institute of Technology.

The experiment also indicated that watching more negative ads increased the effect. People who watched from three to five ads perceived that the influence of the advertisements was greater on others compared to people who just viewed one ad.

"The more ads you see, the more you believe that those [ads](#) are affecting people," said Shen.

The researchers tried to create the most natural conditions for the experiment as possible, Shen said. The experiment featured actual political advertisements and was conducted a few weeks before the election when attention on the election was at its height.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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