

EXERCISE 7.4 Distinguishing Fact from Opinion in an American Presidential Campaign

INTRODUCTION

Many Americans take a dim view of their representatives in government, believing that politicians seek nothing more than power and perks and will say anything—even lie—to get elected. But how many citizens undertake the tough task of evaluating the accuracy of candidates' statements? The line between fact and opinion is not always clear, and drawing that line demands more knowledge and understanding of politics and public policy than many citizens have or want to have. Yet democracy hinges on an educated citizenry.

Political campaigns illustrate the difficulty of separating fact from opinion. The first problem is that politicians exaggerate and distort, whether intentionally or not, to cast themselves in a favorable light and their opponents as creatures of the dark. The second hurdle is that, because media coverage of campaigns is often careless, candidates' statements routinely are taken out of context or blown out of proportion. The third obstacle to drawing a clear line between fact and opinion is that many Americans are only marginally attentive to campaign coverage and rarely consult sources of information outside the mainstream media.

The quest for accuracy has been made easier in recent presidential campaigns through the work of newspapers, especially the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, which regularly analyze claims made in political ads and presidential debates. The *Washington Post* was particularly effective in tracking down the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth claim that John Kerry's war record was fabricated. The ad was shown to be inaccurate in every respect. Nevertheless, the "Swifties" purpose had been served: They raised doubts about the candidate's veracity and war-hero status.¹

ASSIGNMENT

Study Reading 7.4.1, which describes the difference between statements of fact and statements of opinion. The questions that follow ask you to distinguish fact from opinion in candidate statements from the three presidential debates of 2004.

READING 7.4.1 FACT OR OPINION?

A statement of fact can be verified as true or refuted as false. In the social sciences, a statement of fact and truth are not necessarily the same. According to one social scientist, "Facts are not to be confused with Truth. A fact is only as good as the means of verification used to establish it, as well as the frame of reference within which it requires meaning. A great deal of science consists of using methodological advances to reverse, modify, or even falsify 'facts' . . . formerly verified."²

For example, during the first presidential debate of 2004, President Bush, in response to Senator Kerry's accusation that the Bush administration had not vigorously pursued Osama bin Laden and other Al Qaida terrorists, asserted, "Seventy-five percent of known Al Qaida leaders have been brought to justice."³ Bush's statement can be verified using scientific methods of investigation.

¹ Michael Dobbs, "Swift Boat Accounts Incomplete," *Washington Post*, August 22, 2004, p. A01.

² Kenneth Hoover and Todd Donovan, *The Elements of Social Scientific Thinking*, 7th ed. (Boston: Bedford, St. Martin's, 2001), p. 132.

³ Transcript of the First Presidential Debate, website of the Commission on Presidential Debates, <http://www.debates.org/>. All subsequent debate statements are from the transcript link on this website.

Because Bush qualified the statement to *known* Al Qaida leaders, an investigator could determine whether 75 percent of them had been captured (“brought to justice”). Verification would require investigating how many terrorists the intelligence community had identified as leaders and how many of those had been captured.

A *statement of opinion* is based on personal values, ideology, or wishful prediction. With the passage of time, an opinion may turn out to be true, partially true, or false. But a statement of opinion at the time it’s made cannot be verified or refuted scientifically. For example, in the second presidential debate of 2004, President Bush, in response to Senator Kerry’s assertion that the Bush administration should have been directly engaged with North Korea to keep that regime from developing nuclear weapons, said, “It is naive and dangerous to take a policy that he suggested the other day, which is to have bilateral relations with North Korea. Remember, he’s the person who’s accusing me of not acting multilaterally. He now wants to take the six-party talks we have—China, North Korea, South Korea, Russia, Japan, and the United States—and undermine them by having bilateral talks.” Whereas parts of the statement are at least partially factual—Kerry did, for example, criticize Bush for not acting multilaterally *in Iraq*—Bush’s main point was to establish the peril of Kerry’s proposal for bilateral talks with North Korea. Which approach is better—bilateral or multilateral talks with North Korea—is a matter of opinion. Both approaches have their proponents and both have good arguments to support them. Time will tell whether or not the Bush approach was correct. Even if the multilateral approach works, however, we still would not know how the bilateral approach might have fared.

Most statements candidates make about their positions on issues are statements of opinion, even when a candidate has abundant arguments and apparent evidence to support the position. For example, a candidate who says that the media are destroying family values—but who does not preface the statement with “I believe”—is misrepresenting a statement of opinion as a statement of fact. There is no body of evidence or standard of measurement by which that statement of opinion can be verified or refuted.

In questions 1–10, identify each statement as fact—something that can be confirmed or refuted—or opinion. To answer part b of each question (“Why?”), do this: If it’s a statement of fact, explain how it could be verified or refuted. If it’s a statement of opinion, explain why it cannot be verified or refuted. Some of the statements mix fact and opinion. (You do not have to determine whether or not the statements are accurate.)

1. Kerry (Debate 1): “This president has made [in Iraq], I regret to say, a colossal error of judgment. And judgment is what we look for in the president of the United States of America.”

a. Statement of fact or of opinion?

b. Why?

2. Bush (Debate 1): “The world is safer without Saddam Hussein.”

a. Statement of fact or of opinion?

b. Why?

3. Kerry (Debate 2): "The president has presided over an economy where we've lost 1.6 million jobs. The first president in 72 years to lose jobs."

a. Statement of fact or of opinion?

b. Why?

4. Bush (Debate 2): "Government-sponsored health care would lead to rationing. It would ruin the quality of health care in America."

a. Statement of fact or of opinion?

b. Why?

5. Bush (Debate 2): "As a matter of fact, the tools now given to the terrorist fighters are the same tools that we've been using against drug dealers and white-collar criminals."

a. Statement of fact or of opinion?

b. Why?

6. Kerry (Debate 2): "Ladies and gentlemen, in 1985, I was one of the first Democrats to move to balance the budget. I voted for the balanced budget in '93 and '97. We did it. We did it. And I was there."

a. Statement of fact or of opinion?

b. Why?

7. Kerry (Debate 2): "I'm against the partial-birth abortion, but you've got to have an exception for the life of the mother and the health of the mother under the strictest test of bodily injury to the mother."

a. Statement of fact or of opinion?

b. Why?

8. Bush (Debate 3): "People need to remember: Six months prior to my arrival, the stock market started to go down. And it was one of the largest declines in our history. And then we had a recession and we got attacked, which cost us 1 million jobs. But we acted. I led the Congress. We passed tax relief. And now this economy is growing. We added 1.9 million new jobs over the last 13 months."

a. Statement of fact or of opinion?

b. Why?

9. Kerry (Debate 3): "Under President Bush, the middle class has seen their tax burden go up and the wealthiest's [sic] tax burden has gone down. Now that's wrong."

a. Statement of fact or of opinion?

b. Why?

10. Kerry (Debate 3): "It's long overdue time to raise the minimum wage."

a. Statement of fact or of opinion?

b. Why?

11. Read through the transcripts of one of the three presidential debates held during the 2004 campaign. The transcripts are available from the website of the Commission on Presidential Debates: <http://www.debates.org>.⁴

Choose one statement of fact made by each candidate in one of the debates, and then check the accuracy of those statements of fact. There are a variety of ways to check the accuracy of politicians' statements, but good daily newspapers are one of the best. After each presidential debate, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* published articles about the accuracy of the claims made in the previous debate. The archives of the newspapers are available through ProQuest (National Newspaper Index Database). Your college library likely subscribes to the database. Do a search for full-text articles between October 1, 2004, and October 15, 2004. Begin with the search term "presidential debates 2004," and try others as needed. Another useful resource for checking facts in presidential races is FactCheck.org at <http://www.factcheck.org>. A useful website for learning more about the presidential candidates' positions on the issues for the purpose of checking whether they were representing their positions accurately during the debates is the On The Issues website at http://www.issues2000.org/George_W_Bush.htm and http://www.issues2000.org/John_Kerry.htm.

a. Debate number (1, 2, or 3):

Bush statement of fact: _____

Accuracy: _____

b. Debate number (1, 2, or 3):

Kerry statement of fact: _____

Accuracy: _____

12. The polling data in Table 7.4.1 indicate the public's knowledge of Bush's and Kerry's positions on major public policy issues. Study the table. Then determine whether a plurality of the

⁴ Website URLs sometimes change. Try an external search (e.g., Google) to find the website. Configurations of a website often change. Try an internal search of the site to locate the information. Sometimes websites and pages within websites are removed. In that case, move on to the next question.

TABLE 7.4.1 Voters' Knowledge of Candidates' Positions on the Issues, October 14–20, 2004

Who favors completely eliminating the estate tax, that is the tax on property worth more than one and a half million dollars left by people who die—George W. Bush, John Kerry, both or neither?

Bush	46%
Kerry	20%
Both	6%
Neither	10%
Don't know	18%

Which candidate wants to make additional stem cell lines from human embryos available for federally funded research on diseases like Parkinsons?

Bush	9%
Kerry	74%
Both	5%
Neither	5%

Which candidate proposes moving sixty to seventy thousand troops stationed in Europe and South Korea to other locations, including the United States, in the next decade—George W. Bush, John Kerry, both or neither?

Bush	40%
Kerry	31%
Both	9%
Neither	8%

Which candidate has stated he favors reinstating the military draft—George W. Bush, John Kerry, both or neither?

Bush	22%
Kerry	14%
Both	4%
Neither	53%

Which candidate favors placing limits on how much people can collect when a jury finds that a doctor has committed medical malpractice—George W. Bush, John Kerry, both or neither?

Bush	48%
Kerry	16%
Both	11%
Neither	10%

Which candidate favors allowing the federal government to negotiate with drug companies for lower prescription drug prices for senior citizens—George W. Bush, John Kerry, both or neither?

Bush	17%
Kerry	55%
Both	14%
Neither	6%

Which candidate favors increasing the five dollar and fifteen cent minimum wage employers must pay their workers—George W. Bush, John Kerry, both or neither?

Bush	8%
Kerry	66%
Both	13%
Neither	4%

*Those with no opinion are not shown.

SOURCE: Used with permission by the National Annenberg Election Survey of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Centre, "Voters Learned Positions on Issues since Presidential Debates," October 23, 2004, <http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/index.htm>.

respondents to the poll correctly identified each candidate’s positions and fill in the chart, “Accuracy of Voters’ Perception of Candidates’ Position,” accordingly. Use the On The Issues website (www.issues2000.org/George_W_Bush.htm and www.issues2000.org/John_Kerry.htm) to check the respondents’ accuracy.

ACCURACY OF VOTERS’ PERCEPTION OF CANDIDATES’ POSITION	
Issue	Plurality (most respondents) Perceived Candidates’ Position Correctly? (Yes or No)
Estate tax	
Stem cells	
Troop location	
Reinstating draft	
Limits on medical malpractice suits	
Regulate Rx for lower costs to seniors	
Increase minimum wage	

13. What do Table 7.4.1 and your answers to question 12 tell you about voters’ understanding of candidates’ positions on major issues?
