

Liar, Liar

Site separates fact from fiction in the promises of politicians

The midterm elections are a month away, but the battles have been raging for a while. With 24-hour news coverage now the norm, it seems that politicians are perpetually campaigning. While political junkies thrive on this never-ending stream of “breaking news,” I suspect most people are too busy with their lives to keep abreast of all the policies, positions and posturing.



KEVIN O'NEILL

InSites

Both the right and the left have legions of committed followers who will vote the party line regardless of the facts. However, pollsters show many people are still in the “undecided” column for many of the races.

Obviously, a lot of us don't make up our minds until shortly before the election.

So how do average citizens, who have been busy working — if they're lucky — raising a family, taking care of a household, etc., find the time to get up to speed on the candidates? Visit the website factcheck.org to find out where each side stands and, more importantly, to find out which side is telling the truth.

Everybody is doing it

While it's great to have a resource like this to separate fact from fiction, it's disheartening to see how often politicians from both parties lie.

The site is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, a nonpartisan, nonprofit consumer advocate for voters. The center was established by the late publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg. The site's self-proclaimed mission is to apply the practices of journalism and scholarship to increase public knowledge and understanding. Its personnel investigate what is said by U.S. politicians and report on the accuracy of the statements. Often, the results show that our elected officials, and those aspiring to be, have little regard for the truth.

On the home page of the website is a section that cycles through a handful of topical political issues. The Republicans' recent “Pledge to America” is fact checked here and comes up short of the truth in many areas:

- It declares that “the only parts of the economy expanding are government and our national debt.” Not true. So far this year, government employment has declined slightly, while private sector employment has increased by 763,000 jobs.
- It claims the stimulus bill is costing \$1 trillion, considerably more than the \$814 billion, 10-year price tag currently estimated by nonpartisan congressional budget experts.
- It says Obama's tax proposals would raise taxes on “roughly half the small business income in America,” an exaggeration. Much of the income the GOP is counting

actually comes from big businesses making over \$50 million a year.

There are also several instances in this section exposing Democrats as being less than honest:

■ Rep. Alan Grayson (D, Fla.) falsely accuses his opponent, Daniel Webster, of dodging the draft, hating America and being a religious fanatic who demands that wives submit to their husbands.

■ Democrats in many races are accusing Republicans of wanting to do away with Social Security by taking quotes out of context. In fact, there is little broad-based Republican support for dismantling the popular program.

Thorough debunkings

Each fact-checked story has a brief summary of the claim and whether it is true. Clicking on the headline takes you to a more complete examination of the facts. Some claims are true, some are false, and some contain elements of truth that have been taken out of context, misinterpreted or exaggerated.

In addition to the articles investigating claims, there's a section where users can submit questions they want verified. A section called “Cash Attack” attempts to track the source of money being used by various groups trying to influence elections. There is also a mailbag, an archives section and podcasts on the site. The “Classroom” section has materials for educators to teach kids about the political system and how to evaluate political advertising. A donations link lets people support the site's efforts financially.

The site provides a valuable service in this age of dizzying media spin. It has a decent design and intuitive navigation. My only problem with factcheck.org is that in its efforts to be factual and nonpartisan it fails to categorize falsehoods by degree. It will nitpick figures in a claim to prove it's false, even if the overarching theme is true. It also gives equal weight to slight exaggerations and minor errors as it does to egregious lies. It should have separate categories for whoppers, exaggerations, opinions and mistakes.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a graphic artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timeshamrock.com with links to your favorite websites.

