

**STUDY IN S.D.: WEB SEARCH RANKS THREATEN DEMOCRACY** Manipulation of sites to favor a candidate the danger, it says **BY JOSHUA STEWART** [joshua.stewart@sduniontribune.com](mailto:joshua.stewart@sduniontribune.com)

Texas senator and Republican presidential candidate Ted Cruz has a problem with his campaign website. Activists beat him to registering TedCruz.com and posted a message that urges visitors to support President Barack Obama and immigration reform.

It's a snafu that means the candidate's official website, TedCruz.org, comes up around 75th on Google's search results page, well after links that lead would-be voters to articles about things such as how one erroneous link on the candidate's real campaign site brings up a picture of a pasty derrière.

If Cruz is trying to attract voters, they first have to wade through a sea of critical coverage and portage around a big butt to find his official presentation.

The odds are fighting against him: Academic and marketing studies show that people usually click on the top search results.

Now, a Vista-based research group said this type of issue also threatens democracy — but suggests that regulations could fix the problem. The group worries that search engines such as Google, Yahoo and Bing, either through programming or an employee with a political agenda, could manipulate search results and swing an election.

"If, with or without intervention by company employees, the algorithm that ranked election-related information favored one candidate over another, competing candidates would have no way of compensating for the bias. It would be as if Fox News were the only television network in the country," researchers Robert Epstein and Ronald Robertson wrote in their report, which was published last week in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

They concluded that biased search rankings could shift the voting preferences of undecided voters by 20 percent or more.

Epstein and Robertson couldn't be reached for comment.

In an experiment conducted in San Diego, they asked 306 eligible voters to read brief biographies of Tony Abbott and Julia Gillard, two candidates for Australian prime minister whom the American test subjects presumably knew nothing about. Participants were then asked to rate, on a 10-point scale, how much they trusted and liked each candidate.

Next, the participants were assigned to one of three groups.

Using a fake search engine called "Kadoodle," one group saw results with top links that portrayed Gillard as the better candidate and positive articles about Abbott at the bottom. The second group saw top-ranked results that favored Abbott, with pro-Gillard articles at the bottom. The third group's results favored neither candidate.

Afterward, the participants rated the candidates again. Researchers then compared the first- and second-round ratings.

"Following the web research, all candidate ratings in the bias groups shifted in the predicted directions compared with candidate ratings in the control group," Epstein and Robertson wrote.

They also found that web links at the top of a search results list got more clicks, and that the vast majority of study participants couldn't discern bias shown on various websites.

Epstein and Robertson conducted two additional experiments, including one in India where voters looked at search results for candidates in an upcoming national election whom they presumably knew more about. In both cases, the researchers found similar outcomes.

This led them to conclude that the order of search results could swing voting preferences among undecided voters. They also conceded that they don't know whether the impact has a lasting effect.

The researchers suggested that regulations could prevent search engines from influencing an election, but didn't offer specific recommendations for such policy.

The U.S. government has tried to balance political perspectives in media. The "equal time" rule requires television and radio broadcasters to give equal access to opposing political candidates. Also, before it expired in 2011, the Fairness Doctrine mandated that broadcasters with an FCC license present balanced depictions of controversial issues.

Search engines likely aren't as influential in an election campaign as they appear in the new report, and it's unlikely that biased search results could actually swing a close election, said Thad Kousser, a political science professor at UC San Diego.

He said a lot of voters aren't truly undecided, and that even if they are, any sort of influential bias would need to stick with them until they cast their ballots.

But search results could have a greater impact during elections with fewer details or news coverage about the candidates, or where the electorate is learning about candidates for the first time, Kousser said.

Campaigns' headquarters do pay attention to how their candidates fare in search results and often work to improve a candidate's standing on the web, said Tom Shepard, a San Diego-based political consultant.

"Increasingly, voters rely on the Internet for information about campaigns, about candidates. And voters who rate the trustworthiness of information rate information they obtain about campaigns online very highly," he said.