

WMD Found---Weapons of Mass Distraction

Our political system is struggling under the threat of WMD, by which I mean *weapons of mass distraction*. Killer sound bites of misinformation circulate in the blogosphere and are carried via talk radio and cable news. They are spread by intense partisans, particularly eager to disseminate through self selected events like town halls and internet *quick votes*.

My grandma is not shovel ready. Death panels in Obamacare. Birther obsessions about the President's origins. Or on the far left, strange conspiracy theories about the real causes of 9/11 being somehow traceable to the Bush administration. WMD of this sort infects both left and right at the fringes.

Sometimes these WMD are injected into the system by 527s with a clear partisan agenda. In 2004, a Presidential campaign was upended by the *Swift Boats*. In classic Orwellian double speak they managed to turn a war hero's record into a political liability--through the distractions of toxic misinformation spread by intense partisans.

As our research with deliberative democracy shows, there is a remedy offering protection for at least the vast bulk of the population. For a systematic summary see [When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation](#). The remedy is civil discussion in diverse settings with those with whom one disagrees, in a context where toxic misinformation can get corrected. The Deliberative Poll models that process for the media with a scientific microcosm. But deliberative practices can be spread more broadly, particularly in the schools and on the internet. This is a large undertaking, but if one has to combat a serious threat, and there is only one known remedy, then one should try and deploy it.