



In American Politics Today, Even Fact-Checkers are Viewed through Partisan Lenses

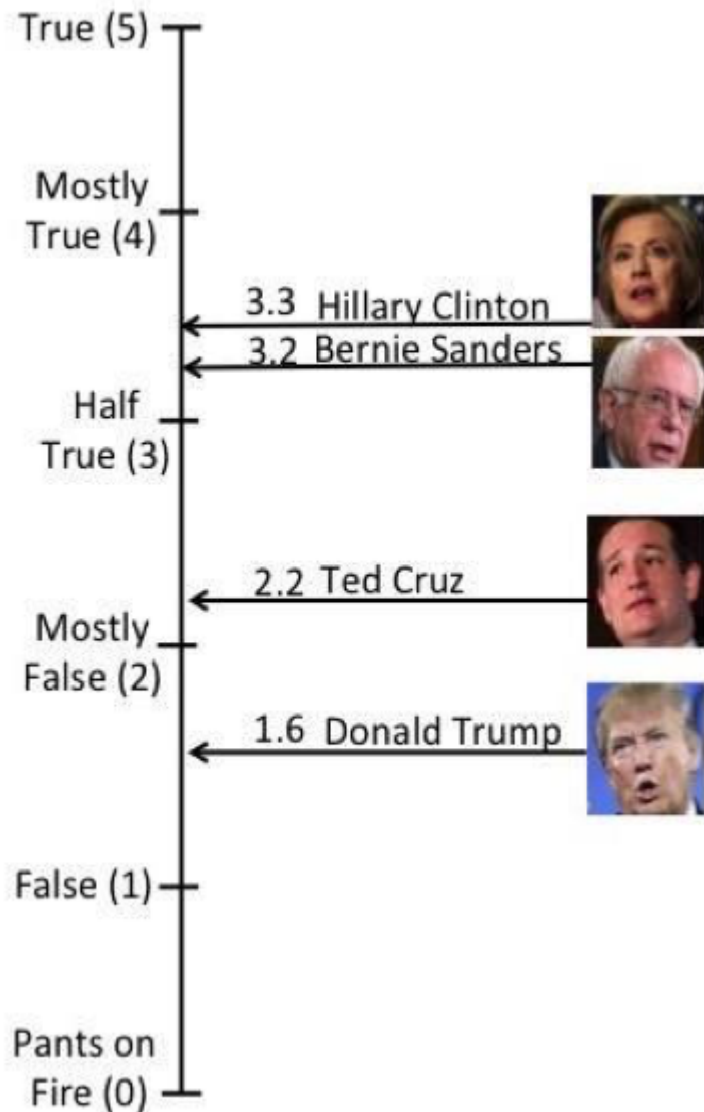
David Barker, American University

What can be done about the “post-truth” era in American politics? Many hope that beefed-up fact-checking by reputable nonpartisan organizations like Fact Checker, PolitiFact, FactCheck.org, and Snopes can equip citizens with the tools needed to identify lies, thus reducing the incentive politicians have to propagate untruths. Unfortunately, as revealed by research I have done with colleagues, fact-checking organizations have not provided a cure-all to misinformation. Fact-checkers cannot prevent the politicization of facts, because they themselves are evaluated through a partisan lens.

Partisan Biases and Trust of Fact Checkers in the 2016 Election

In May of 2016, just a couple of weeks before the California Democratic primary, my colleagues and I conducted an experiment that exposed a representative sample of Californians to the statement: “Nonpartisan fact-checking organizations like PolitiFact rate controversial candidate statements for truthfulness.” We also exposed one randomized half of the sample to the following statement and image: “Each presidential candidate's current PolitiFact average truthfulness score is placed on the scale below.”

Average Truthfulness Score



The Politifact image validated the mainstream narrative about Donald Trump's disdain for facts, and also reinforced Bernie Sanders's tell-it-like-it-is reputation. But it contradicted conventional wisdom by revealing that Clinton had been the most accurate candidate overall (though the difference between the Clinton and Sanders ratings was not statistically significant).

What did we expect to find? Some observers presume that Republicans are the most impervious to professional fact-checking. But we understood that insurgent progressives may have little more faith in "the establishment" these days than do the most ardent Trumpists. Rejection of fact-checking from either the right or left might be most pronounced when the fact-checking casts the insurgents' pet boogeyman (or woman) in a positive light.

Our study reveals that Clinton supporters who saw the graphic increased assessments of her honesty by about nine percentage points relative to Trump and by about 12 percentage points relative to Sanders. Such boosts in perceptions of Clinton's honesty could, in theory, increase supporter enthusiasm and therefore

turnout.

Similarly, among those potential primary voters who were at that time still undecided, exposure to the PolitiFact graphic seemed to increase mean appraisal of Clinton's honesty by about 14 percentage points relative to Trump, and 13 percentage points relative to Sanders.

Unsurprisingly by contrast, among Republicans, exposure to the PolitiFact graphic had no effect on evaluations of either Clinton's or Trump's honesty. Perhaps more interestingly, the same pattern was found among Sanders supporters. They, like Republicans, were unmoved by the graphic.

All told, we conclude that fact-checking does not seem to persuade citizens to change their impressions of a political opponent – even when the opponent is in the same partisan family.

Perceptions of Fact-Checker Reliability

What about perceptions of fact-checker reliability? When exposed to a graphic that says Clinton is more truthful than her reputation suggests, the conclusion drawn by many of Clinton's critics was that the graphic must be "fake news." Specifically, among those who saw the graphic, Sanders supporters were about 13 percent less likely to view fact-checkers as reliable, and Republicans were about 35 percent less likely to do so.

Somewhat unexpectedly, Independents and undecided Democrats also tended to react quite negatively to the graphic. Compared to such respondents who did not see the graphic, they became about 33 percent less likely to view fact-checkers as reliable.

Fact-Checking is No Cure-All

Our experiment suggests that encountering surprises on PolitiFact's Truth-o-Meter might increase supporters' enthusiasm toward their candidate, and might even encourage undecided voters to take another look. Such exposure does not, however, prompt voters opposed to a candidate to make positive reevaluations.

The bottom line is discouraging for those who see fact-checking as a panacea. Whatever impact fact-checking might have on citizens' perceptions of candidates appears to be dwarfed by people's tendency to discredit fact-checking when they do not like the results. And this is true for Democrats as well as Republicans.

This finding implies that the fact-checkers may have waning influence over time, as more and more citizens encounter fact-checks that contradict their preconceived notion. Already committed citizens may simply discount the validity of "fact-checks" that do not align with their preconceptions about the honesty of given candidates. In due course, the entire exercise could become pointless. That possibility should worry those who have hoped that fact-checking can become a powerful tool to limit the advance of "post-truth" partisanship in American politics. Other reforms, it seems, will be necessary.

Read more in "The Role of Non-Partisan Fact Checkers in the Post-Truth Political Era," (with Kim L. Nalder and Danielle Joesten Martin) in *One Nation, Two Realities: Polarized Facts Perceptions and the American Square* (with Morgan Marietta) (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).