

Both Judge and Party? Investigating the Political Unbiasedness of Fact-checkers

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Joe Biden

stated on February 11, 2020 in a campaign event in South Carolina:

“I had the great honor of being arrested with our U.N. ambassador on the streets of Soweto trying to get to see (Nelson Mandela) on Robbens Island.”



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JOE BIDEN

- ▶ Fact-checking is a form of journalism that emerged in the U.S. in the 2000s.
- ▶ Assesses public claims based on facts. Follows strict principles: should be objective and unbiased.
 - ▶ Commitment to non-partisanship and fairness; should not concentrate fact-checking on any one side.
- ▶ Uses reputation for objectivity to evaluate political debates. Plays key role in the U.S., U.K., and France; growing in many other countries.
- ▶ Opponents of fact-checking challenge claims of objectivity.
- ▶ **Are fact-checkers truly non-partisan?**

Relevance of Research Question

- ▶ Fact-checking is key in combating disinformation.
 - ▷ Example of Facebook: After Trump's election in 2016, announced partnership with fact-checkers to combat misinformation on its platform.
 - ▷ 2024: Suspended the partnership, citing political bias among fact-checkers.
- ▶ Fact-checkers' content is used in academic literature to analyze which groups are exposed to disinformation and which politicians spread it.
 - ▷ Conclusions rely on the assumption that fact-checkers are unbiased.

An Example

- ▶ Studying fake news in the 2016 U.S. election, Allcott and Gentzkow document 156 false election-related news stories identified by fact-checkers.
 - ▶ 115 are pro-Trump,
 - ▶ 41 are pro-Clinton.

Question

What does it reveal?

An Example

- ▶ Studying fake news in the 2016 U.S. election, Allcott and Gentzkow document 156 false election-related news stories identified by fact-checkers.
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Question

What does it reveal?

- ▷ Explanation 1: Trump lies more / his lies are more worthy of fact-checking.
 - ▷ Explanation 2: Fact-checkers have a pro-Clinton slant.
- ▶ From total distribution alone, we cannot identify which explanation is correct.

Cross Fact-Checker Variation

- ▶ Content variation across fact-checkers can help assess whether fact-checkers have a slant.
- ▶ Suppose we observe the content of multiple fact-checkers. If all are unbiased, they must exhibit the same Trump/Clinton ratio.
- ▶ If distributions differ, at least some fact-checkers are slanted.
 - ▷ Remark: If the ratio is the same, we cannot conclude that there is no slant — all fact-checkers could share the same slant.
- ▶ **This paper compares the content published by different fact-checkers to determine whether they have a slant.**

Two Dimensions of Slant for Fact-Checking

- ▶ We explore two dimensions of fact-checkers' content that plausibly summarize their slant:
- ▶ **Selection:** Fact-checkers may predominantly scrutinize one side of the political spectrum.
 - ▷ Since fact-checking often highlights false claims, fact-checkers might focus more on politicians with whom they do not align.
- ▶ **Assessment:** Fact-checkers may exhibit different probabilities of agreement, i.e., concluding that a statement is correct, depending on the political side of the politician.
 - ▷ Fact-checkers might be more likely to agree when aligned with a politician.
- ▶ We will first consider selection, then assessment.

- ▶ Analysis of articles published by six French general-interest fact-checkers.
 - ▷ Focus on written articles (print and online).
 - ▷ Exclude joint projects, which are generally short-lived.
- ▶ Selection of articles fact-checking politically affiliated entities.

- ▶ A particularity of French fact-checkers is that most are affiliated with larger media outlets.
- ▶ Fact-checking sections are supposed to be unbiased, but their affiliated media often have a political stance.
 - ▷ **Le Figaro**: right-wing newspaper
 - ▷ **Le Monde**: center-left newspaper
 - ▷ **20 Minutes**: neutral newspaper
 - ▷ **Libération**: left-wing newspaper
 - ▷ **AFP**: press agency, partly connected to the government
 - ▷ **France Medias**: platform for fact-checkers from public television and radio, indirectly controlled by the government
- ▶ Do fact-checkers share the bias of their affiliated media outlets?

- ▶ We collect all articles published by fact-checkers since their inception, totaling approximately 10,000 articles.
- ▶ Through manual annotation, we identify 2,405 articles fact-checking an entity with a clear political affiliation.
- ▶ 2,114 are French politicians, the rest are partisan media outlets or internet sources.
- ▶ For each article, we record:
 - ▷ The name and political affiliation of the entity fact-checked.
 - ▷ The statement being fact-checked.
 - ▷ Whether the statement is correct.
 - ▶ French fact-checkers do not use rating scales.
 - ▶ Focus on seemingly wrong statements: 90% are considered wrong.
 - ▷ Additional details such as the date and author of the fact-check.

Descriptive Statistics

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics, French Fact-checkers

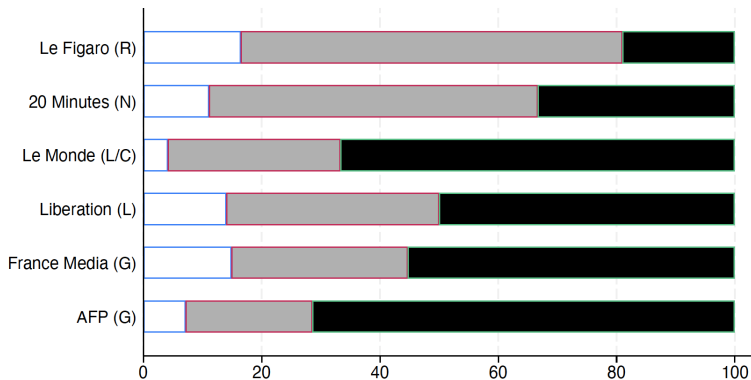
	Figaro	20Min.	Monde	Libé.	Fr. M.	AFP	Total
Slant	Right	Neutral	Left-Center	Left	Neutral	Neutral	
Related to gov.	No	No	No	No	Yes	Partly	
First article	03/2020	11/2017	03/2014	09/2009	03/2018	10/2018	
Articles	248	224	249	1,066	509	109	2,405
Type							
Person	247	180	195	968	458	66	2,114
Internet/Media	1	44	54	98	51	43	291
Orientation							
Far Left	12	15	11	100	43	2	183
Left	16	14	27	162	38	2	259
Green	10	7	7	30	26	10	90
Centre	149	76	49	146	165	29	614
Right	43	30	32	419	102	13	639
Far Right	18	82	123	209	135	53	620
Correct (%)							
Far Left	16.7	20.0	9.1	18.0	11.6	50.0	16.4
Left	12.5	35.7	0.0	6.2	15.8	0.0	8.9
Green	0.0	42.9	0.0	13.3	23.1	0.0	14.4
Centre	12.1	22.4	4.1	18.5	18.2	6.9	15.6
Right	55.8	26.7	0.0	1.2	5.9	0.0	6.7
Far Right	11.1	6.1	0.0	5.3	2.2	1.9	3.5
Average	19.4	18.3	1.2	7.0	11.0	3.7	9.4
Elections	34	37	45	211	90	16	436
Topics 20-21 (%)							
Covid	31.8	28.2	38.8	29.6	27.8	21.6	29.8
Economy	14.8	7.7	6.1	2.0	4.8	5.4	8.1
Health	17.1	19.2	14.3	16.3	11.2	16.2	15.5
Secu./Imm.	14.8	14.1	14.3	19.4	21.4	18.9	17.4
Education	1.8	3.8	0.0	3.1	2.7	5.4	2.5
Env./Trans.	7.8	8.9	4.1	4.1	8.6	10.8	7.5
Society	4.2	5.1	2.0	4.1	7.5	5.4	5.2
State	6.5	3.8	12.2	13.3	7.5	10.8	8.1
Other	1.4	9.0	8.2	8.2	8.6	5.4	6.0

► The dataset is available at: <https://zenodo.org/records/14792133>

Political Partitions

- ▶ Construct political partitions using the Chapel Hill Expert Survey.
- ▶ Define two classification schemes:
 - ▷ **Six-category:** Far-left, left, green, center, right, far-right.
 - ▷ **Three-category:** Left, center, right.
- ▶ Assign politically affiliated entities based on these partitions.
- ▶ Both partitions are used in the paper, but the slides primarily focus on the three-category classification.

- ▶ If fact-checkers are non-partisan, the political distribution of entities checked should be similar across all fact-checkers.
 - ▷ If they monitor all political sides equally, they should fact-check left-wing, right-wing, and center politicians in similar proportions.
- ▶ The next slide plots these distributions, focusing on false statements.



(A) All articles, last sample year

- Distributions differ, some fact-checkers have a slant.

Note: Distributions of political entities fact-checked. Top panel: articles published between July 2020 and July 2021 concluding that a statement is wrong. Bottom panel: articles published less than 8 weeks before the regional elections of June 2021. Media outlets slant are indicated between parentheses: (R) right, (L) left, (N) neutral, (L/C) left-center, and (G) government-affiliated. Political partition left/center/right adapted from the Chapel Hill survey, details in Table B.2. Number of articles: *Le Figaro*: 149 articles in panel (a), 33 in panel (b). *20 Minutes*: 65 articles in panel (a), 16 in panel (b). *Le Monde*: 47 articles in panel (a), 6 in panel (b). *Libération*: 81 articles in panel (a), 29 in panel (b). *France Media*: 158 articles in panel (a), 41 in panel (b). *AFP*: 37 articles in panel (a), 8 in panel (b).

Weekly Measure of Coverage

- ▶ We proceed to the formal analysis. To account for the effects of the news, we construct weekly measures of coverage on the different political orientations for each fact-checker.
- ▶ For each fact-checker i , compute the weekly ratio:

$$s_{i,t,p} = \frac{\text{\#Articles by fact-checker } i \text{ in week } t \text{ on orientation } p}{\sum_p \text{\#Articles by fact-checker } i \text{ in week } t \text{ on orientation } p}.$$

- ▶ $s_{i,t,p}$: share of articles from fact-checker i fact-checking political orientation p in week t .
- ▶ Focus on articles concluding that a statement is false—provides a clear measure of negative coverage.
- ▶ For each political orientation, obtain 888 weekly shares across all fact-checkers.

Measuring Selection Bias, Pooled Results

- ▶ How does the share of articles dedicated to a political orientation compare between media outlets affiliated with that orientation and those that are not?
- ▶ We pool all shares for the six political orientations, ranging from far left to far right.
- ▶ We estimate:

$$s_{i,t,p} = \beta \cdot \text{Aligned}_{i,p} + \gamma_t \times \gamma_p + \epsilon_{i,t,p}.$$

- ▶ $\gamma_t \times \gamma_p$ represent week-orientation fixed effects, capturing the impact of news events that affect the different orientations.
 - ▷ Example: A political scandal or a primary election for orientation p should increase the weekly shares of all fact-checkers.
- ▶ $\text{Aligned}_{i,p}$ is a dummy variable equal to 1 if fact-checker i aligns with political affiliation p .
 - ▷ Example: A right-wing newspaper aligns with the right; government-related media align with the ruling party.

Measuring Selection Bias, Disaggregated Results

- ▶ We also analyze a model that does not assume alignment.
- ▶ For each political orientation p , estimate:

$$s_{i,t,p} = \gamma_i + \gamma_t + \epsilon_{i,t,p}.$$

- ▶ γ_t are week fixed effects.
- ▶ γ_i are fact-checker fixed effects, which are the parameters of interest.
 - ▷ Estimate the differences in the probability of fact-checking a given political orientation across fact-checkers.

Results: Selection

	3-categories partition			
	Pooled	All Left	Center	All Right
Aligned	-0.05** (0.02)			
Figaro(R)		0.20*** (0.03)	0.11** (0.04)	-0.31*** (0.07)
Monde(L/C)		-0.00 (0.05)	-0.08* (0.04)	0.08 (0.07)
Libe.(L)		0.10* (0.05)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.07 (0.08)
Fr.M.(G)		0.09*** (0.02)	-0.10*** (0.03)	0.00 (0.02)
AFP(G)		0.01 (0.04)	-0.15*** (0.05)	0.14** (0.05)
Observations	5,328	888	888	888
Mean	0.17	0.20	0.23	0.57
R^2	0.61	0.57	0.54	0.56

► Note: Reference is 20 Minutes (neutral) in Columns 2-4.

- ▶ **Column 1:** If a media outlet is aligned with a political orientation, its fact-checker exhibits a share 0.05 lower than other fact-checkers on that orientation.
- ▶ **Columns 2-4:**
 - ▷ Le Figaro (Right) fact-checks the right less than other fact-checkers.
 - ▷ France Media and AFP fact-check the center less, which was the orientation of the government.
 - ▷ However, Liberation (Left) does not fact-check less the left.
- ▶ **Conclusion:** Fact-checkers are less likely to fact-check politicians aligned with their media outlet. This provides evidence for selection bias.

- ▶ So far, we have been focusing on false statements. However, fact-checkers also sometimes conclude that statements are correct.
 - ▶ Only 10% of correct statements, as fact-checkers primarily focus on false information.
- ▶ Fact-checkers can exhibit different probabilities of concluding that a statement is correct.
- ▶ In particular, they might be more likely to agree with politicians aligned with their media outlet.

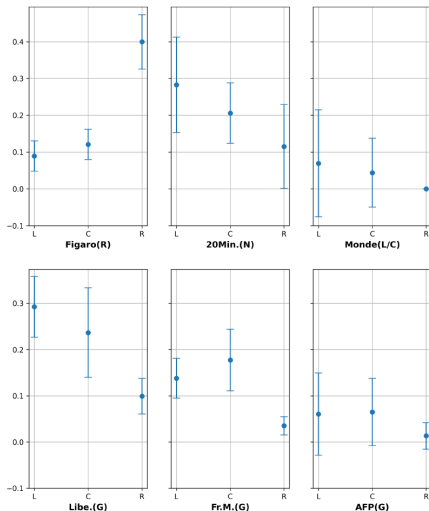
Estimating Agreement Probabilities

- ▶ We estimate:

$$y_{j,i,p} = \gamma_i + \gamma_i \times \gamma_p + \epsilon_{j,i,p}.$$

- ▶ $y_{j,i,p}$ represents the conclusion of article j . It equals 1 if the statement is correct and 0 if it is false.
 - ▶ Hence, this analysis is performed at the article-level, and not as the week-level as before.
- ▶ γ_i : Fact-checkers fixed effects; accounts for differences in the probabilities of concluding that a statement is correct.
- ▶ The parameters of interest are $\gamma_i \times \gamma_p$: How does the political orientation p affect the probability that fact-checker i deems a statement correct?

Result: Agreement Probabilities



- Reading: predicted agreement probabilities per fact-checker. Each dot corresponds to a political orientation: Left, Center, Right.

Figure Note

FIGURE 2. Predicted Agreement Probabilities.

Note: I estimate $y_{j,i,p} = \gamma_i + \gamma_i \times \gamma_p + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{j,i,p}$ (Model 5, logistic estimation) and predict agreement for left (L), center (C), and right (R) for each fact-checker. The predicted values are plotted with 95% confidence intervals. Observations are articles, the dependent variable is 1 if the statement is correct and 0 if it is wrong. γ_i , γ_p and γ_t are fact-checker, orientation, and year fixed effects. The sample includes articles fact-checking politically affiliated entities and concluding that the entity is correct or wrong. Standard errors are clustered at the fact-checkers \times *Elect* \times president level and 95% confidence intervals are reported. $N = 1,607$. Media outlets' slants are indicated between parentheses: (R) right, (L) left, (N) neutral, (L/C) left-center, and (G) government-affiliated. Detailed estimation results are in column 4 of Table B.6.

Interpretation of Differences in Agreement

- ▶ Fact-checkers are more likely to agree with politicians they are aligned with.
 - ▷ Le Figaro (Right) agrees more with the right.
 - ▷ Liberation (Left) agrees more with the left.
 - ▷ France Media and AFP agree more with the center.

- ▶ Two possible explanations:
 - ▷ Fact-checkers may adjust their evaluation standards to favor their aligned side.
 - ▷ Fact-checkers may selectively choose statements from their aligned side that are more likely to be true.

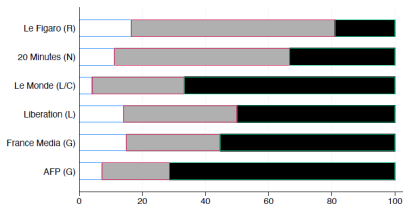
- ▶ To distinguish between these two explanations, we identify identical statements checked by multiple fact-checkers.

Assessments on Identical Statements

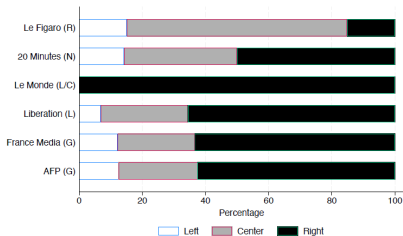
- ▶ 232 statements were checked more than once.
- ▶ We find only two cases where fact-checkers disagreed on the same claim.
- ▶ Assessments are largely consistent, suggesting that differences in agreement probabilities stem from statement selection rather than different evaluation standards.
- ▶ Caveats:
 - ▷ Fact-checkers may communicate, meaning conclusions are not fully independent.
 - ▷ Statements checked multiple times are likely the most clear-cut false information, agreement is therefore more likely on this non-random sample.

- ▶ Revealing a politician's falsehood plausibly reduces voter support.
- ▶ Fact-checking may play a crucial role close to elections.
 - ▷ Example: Mitt Romney was repeatedly fact-checked before the 2012 election for a claim about Jeep relocating to China.
- ▶ Credibility constraint: Fact-checkers may strategically increase their slant during elections.
 - ▷ Possible strategy: maintain moderate bias in normal times to build credibility, then leverage it during elections to influence outcomes.
- ▶ This would imply increased polarization of content before elections.

Election Effect, Intuition



(A) All articles, last sample year



(B) Pre-election only, last sample year

- Distributions seem to become more polarized close to elections.

Testing the Election Effect: Pooled Specification

- ▶ We modify the pooled specification to test for polarization:

$$s_{i,t,p} = \beta_1 \cdot \text{Aligned}_{i,p} + \beta_2 \cdot \text{Aligned}_{i,p} \times \text{Elec}_t \\ + \beta_3 \cdot \text{NotAligned}_{i,p} \times \text{Elec}_t + \gamma_t \times \gamma_p + \epsilon_{i,t,p}.$$

- ▶ $\gamma_t \times \gamma_p$ are week-orientation fixed effects.
- ▶ Elec_t is a dummy variable indicating the 8 weeks before an election.
 - ▶ Considers all national elections from 2011 to 2021.
- ▶ Difference between β_2 and β_3 indicates whether alignment between fact-checkers and politicians has a stronger effect close to elections.

- ▶ We also test the effect of elections on each fact-checker separately.
- ▶ For each political orientation p , we estimate:

$$s_{i,t,p} = \gamma_i + \gamma_t + \gamma_i \times Elec_t + \epsilon_{i,t,p}.$$

- ▶ γ_t represents week fixed effects.
- ▶ Interaction term $\gamma_i \times Elec_t$: Examines how the share of fact-checker i on orientation p evolves before an election.

Results: Election Effect

TABLE 4. Election Effect

	3-categories partition			
	Pooled	All Left	Center	All Right
Aligned	-0.04* (0.02)			
Aligned × Elec.	-0.03 (0.02)			
NotAligned × Elec.	0.02 (0.02)			
Figaro(R)		0.14*** (0.02)	0.21*** (0.03)	-0.34*** (0.04)
Monde(L/C)		0.02 (0.05)	-0.06*** (0.01)	0.04 (0.07)
Libe.(L)		0.09** (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.08 (0.06)
Fr.M.(G)		0.07*** (0.00)	-0.07*** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.01)
AFP(G)		-0.02* (0.01)	-0.13*** (0.02)	0.15*** (0.02)
Figaro × Elec.		0.11*** (0.04)	-0.13** (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)
20Min × Elec.		0.08*** (0.03)	-0.19*** (0.04)	0.10*** (0.03)
Monde × Elec.		-0.05 (0.07)	-0.11 (0.09)	0.16 (0.11)
Libe × Elec.		-0.10* (0.05)	-0.10** (0.04)	0.20** (0.07)
Fr.M. × Elec.		0.03 (0.03)	-0.14*** (0.04)	0.11*** (0.03)
AFP × Elec.		0.05 (0.03)	-0.08** (0.04)	0.04 (0.02)
Observations	5,328	888	888	888
Mean	0.17	0.20	0.23	0.57
R ²	0.30	0.11	0.24	0.19
P($\beta_3 - \beta_2 \leq 0$)	0.07			

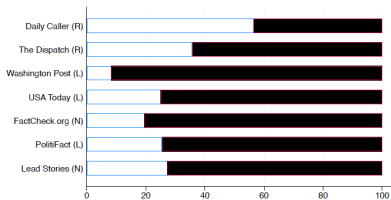
Election Effect: Interpretation

- ▶ Close to elections, the effect of alignment on fact-checking shares roughly doubles.
 - ▷ Share of aligned entities decreases by 0.03, while the share of non-aligned entities increases by 0.02.
 - ▷ Off-election effect of alignment is 0.04, increasing to 0.08 before elections.
- ▶ Disaggregated results: Most fact-checkers fact-check the right more frequently before elections, except for Le Figaro (Right).
 - ▷ Cannot determine whether fact-checkers adjust their coverage or if right-wing politicians make more false claims closer to elections.

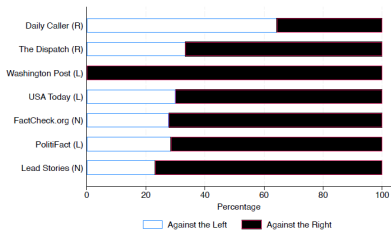
Conclusion

- ▶ Some fact-checkers exhibit ideological slant.
 - ▷ We observe only relative slants.
- ▶ The relative slant of a fact-checker reflects the political orientation of the affiliated media outlet.
- ▶ Content becomes more polarized before elections.
- ▶ These findings are not unique to France—the paper finds similar patterns among U.S. fact-checkers.
 - ▷ Different slants, but no significant polarization before elections.

U.S. Fact-Checkers



(A) All articles, 2020



(B) Pre-election only, 2020

► U.S. Fact-checkers also exhibit different content.