Partisan Targets of Media Fact-checking: Examining President Obama and the 113th Congress

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ABSTRACT An analysis of statements by President Obama and by Democratic and Republican members of Congress selected for analysis by PolitiFact.com and Washington Post Fact Checker reveals that PolitiFact was more likely to find greater deceit in Republican rhetoric and that the Fact Checker was more negative overall in its assessments. Legislators who had more than one statement analyzed during the study period were disproportionally likely to be influential members of the House or Senate leadership or likely 2016 presidential candidates. The lawmakers selected for greater scrutiny were also more likely to be more ideologically extreme than the median members of their party caucuses.

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INTRODUCTION

Media fact-checking organizations have stepped into the political maelstrom of today's contentious politics, in effect trying to serve as umpires adjudicating disputes over the accuracy of political statements. These operations, first deployed extensively as the 2008 presidential campaign began in earnest, were outgrowths of the "ad watches" that had been commonly employed in previous election cycles to challenge the claims contained in campaign advertising (cf., Cunningham 2007; Frantzich 2002; Graves 2016).

Two key pioneers in this real-time fact-checking effort were PolitiFact, developed by the parent company that owned both Congressional Quarterly and the St. Petersburg Times, and The Fact Checker, produced by the Washington Post (Cunningham 2007). In addition to extensive discussion of claims made during the presidential campaigns of 2008 and 2012 (as well as the 2016 campaign and the presidency that followed), PolitiFact has engaged in extensive state-level campaign analysis in a number of states (Cassidy 2012).

Our content analysis examines 212 evaluations of statements by leading political figures by these two organizations during the first five months of President Obama's second term. This project examines the findings of these two fact-checking organizations in terms of their patterns of partisan evaluations. It also examines whether there are differences between PolitiFact and The Fact Checker in their treatment of executive and legislative branch officials. These comparisons explore the performance of each of these fact-checking organizations and can help address lingering doubts about the fairness of these fact-checking enterprises in the context of different branches of government as well as different partisan orientations. (This paper does not examine a third comparable accountability research project, Factcheck.org, because it offers narrative commentary of statements rather than comparable ratings for the relative truthfulness and dishonesty of the remarks analyzed).

EVALUATIONS OF MEDIA FACT-CHECKING OPERATIONS

For all their importance in contemporary political discourse, and their importance to journalists themselves (Elizabeth et al. 2015), these fact-checking organizations have been subject to relatively little scholarly analysis when compared to political news coverage generally (Farnsworth and Lichter 2011; Patterson 1994, 2013, 2016).

Some of the most important examinations of the fact-checking enterprises examined here have concentrated on media incentives to undertake this process of calling false information to account. In an innovative field study of newsroom practices, Graves et al. (2016) found that fact-checking operations were becoming increasingly popular at news organizations more because of professional motivations (including status concerns) than because of commercial concerns, like perceived audience

demand. Studies that have focused on self-perceptions of the media business by reporters have found that journalists worry that the contemporary social media environment sacrifices accuracy for speed in news delivery, which increases the need for this form of accountability journalism (Weaver and Willnat 2016).

Studies that have focused on content of the fact-checking reports have raised some questions about the enterprise. One key issue raised by experts concerns possible selection bias: some fact-checking studies find that Republicans receive more critical notices, while others finds more even-handed assessments of claims across party lines.

A content analysis of 511 PolitiFact statements from January 2010 through January 2011 found that current and former Republican office-holders received harsher grades for their statements than Democrats (Ostermeier 2011). "In total, 74 of the 98 statements by political figures judged 'false' or 'pants on fire' over the last 13 months were given to Republicans, or 76 percent, compared to just 22 statements for Democrats (22 percent)," the report concluded (Ostermeier 2011).

The disparity in these evaluations came despite roughly equally attention paid to statements made by representatives of the two parties: 50.4 percent for the GOP, versus 47.2 percent for the Democrats, with 2.4 percent attention paid to statements from other political actors not identified as partisan (Ostermeier 2011).

These results might result from greater deceit on the part of Republicans, or from the items chosen for analysis by the fact-checkers. In his report, Ostermeier (2011) observed that the PolitiFact organization was not transparent about how the comments were selected for analysis and raised the possibility that the more negative evaluations of Republican comments might be the result of the specific comments selected for examination.

PolitiFact Editor Bill Adair responded to that study by noting: "We're accustomed to hearing strong reactions from people on both ends of the political spectrum. We are a news organization and we choose which facts to check based on news judgment. We check claims that we believe readers are curious about, claims that would prompt them to wonder, 'Is that true?'" (quoted in Brauer 2011). In addition, PolitiFact focuses on claims that are newsworthy, verifiable, significant and likely to generate questions and comments from readers (Adair 2013). Glenn Kessler, the Fact Checker columnist at the Washington Post, likewise argues the statements selected for analysis are based primarily on newsworthiness, not a partisan agenda. "While some readers in both parties are

convinced we are either a liberal Democrat or a conservative Republican, depending on who we are dinging that day, the truth is that we pay little attention to party affiliation when evaluating a political statement" (Kessler 2012). Citizen input is an important factor, as Kessler estimates that roughly one-third of the assessments conducted stem from reader suggestions (quoted in Marietta, Barker and Bowser 2015). Kessler (2016) also notes: "we do not play gotcha, and so avoid scrutiny of obvious misstatements, particularly if a candidate admits an error."

Kessler, who routinely does his own over-time analysis of his Fact Checker findings, concludes that specific events, like the GOP presidential primaries of early 2012, impact the results to a considerable degree. During the first six months of 2012, for example, "we had 80 Fact Checker columns that rated Republican statements, for an average rating of 2.5 Pinocchios, compared to 56 that rated statements of Democrats, for an average rating of 2.11. For the last half of the six-month period, after the GOP primary contest was decided, the number of columns rating Democrats and Republicans was about the same -- 31 columns focused on Democrats, and 34 on Republicans. In that period, the average ratings were 2.13 and 2.47, respectively" (Kessler 2012). The most important finding, he observed, was that "both parties will twist the facts if they believe it will advance their political interests" (Kessler 2012).

Preliminary analysis of Fact Checker columns during the 2016 presidential primaries found Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump frequently disregarded the truth, far more often than any other major political figure subjected to a Fact Checker evaluation. "The ratio of Trump's Four Pinocchios ratings is sky high. In fact, nearly 85 percent of Trump's claims that we vetted were false or mostly false," wrote Kessler (2016).

Apart from presidential campaigns, a study of PolitiFact assessments during the early months of the 2009 debate over President Obama's health care initiative found that Republican claims received more negative scores than Democratic ones and Obama's statements received more positive evaluations than those of other Democrats (Sides 2009). These results were consistent with the pattern identified with Ostermeier (2011). Using Ostermeier's findings, some conservatives have alleged an ideological bias on the part of PolitiFact (Cassidy 2012). In particular, many conservatives argue that much of the assessments and commentary about the material being studied is itself opinionated, with selective inclusion and exclusion of information. As a result, they view with suspicion PolitiFact's statement that it engages in unbiased adjudication (Cassidy 2012)
.
The consequences of these media umpires upon the larg-

er political discourse are likely to be relatively modest, research indicates. Some politicians, particularly those who view themselves as electorally vulnerable, may tailor their remarks to reduce the number of "Pinocchios" or avoid PolitiFact's dreaded "pants on fire" rating (Nyhan and Reifler 2015). After all, lawmakers are quite concerned about matters that may undermine their electoral success (Mayhew 1974).

Some news consumers may also be affected by these evaluations, becoming more critical of politicians earning negative evaluations for truthfulness (Fridkin, Kenney, and Wintersieck 2015; Pingree, Brossard, and McLeod 2014). But most news consumers are likely to weigh these fact checking efforts in light of their own personal ideological and partisan preferences, discounting the criticisms of their ideologically favored representatives (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Meirick 2013; Nyhan and Reifler 2012).

Other researchers have also raised significant questions about the utility of fact-checking organizations for news consumers. Clear differences among the evaluators in terms of the questions asked, the methodology employed and the answers offered may limit their usefulness to voters (Marietta, Barker and Bowser 2015; Uscinski 2015; Uscinski and Ryden 2013).

Furthermore, selective news exposure by consumers may limit the impact of these evaluations on the public. The first and/or most significant exposure some viewers and readers receive relating to the fact-checkers may have come from the partisan media sources criticizing those issue adjudicators (cf., Feldman 2011; Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Nir 2011; Stroud 2008; Taber and Lodge 2006). Elected officials and candidates may also be able to discount the sources of negative evaluations by attacking the attackers (Corn 2012). Or politicians, particularly if they do not already possess a national reputation, may take a calculated risk that financially struggling news organizations will be unlikely to monitor their comments closely (Cunningham 2003; Jamieson and Waldman 2002).

In recent years researchers have found considerable public disagreement over factual matters, ranging from whether President Obama is a Muslim to the objective state of the economy (Gerber and Huber 2010; Pew 2009, 2010). Given the persistence of factually incorrect views among significant portions of public opinion on such questions, and the fact that political figures frequently offer false statements, it appears that fact checking is likely to remain an important part of media discourse for the near future (Spivak 2011). Indeed, the exceptionally large number of untrue statements uttered by President Trump during his first years in office have kept the fact-checkers

very busy and have made the reports of their evaluations a central part of the political conversation (Farnsworth 2018; Kessler et al. 2019).

This project aims to advance the growing scholarly literature relating to this latest media project of adjudicating politicians' factual claims and assertions. As a kind of "natural experiment" in assessing the reliability of fact-checking conclusions, we conducted a comparative analysis of the two leading fact-checking organizations. If these two outlets independently produce the same or similar results, this would counter complaints that their results are too subjective to be trustworthy or useful to voters.

A more controlled experiment, one where both organizations examined the same political statements at the same, of course would offer a more effective comparison between Politifact and the Fact Checker. In practice, each organization examined a very different set of statements during the study period.

The analysis also provides additional information on claims of partisan bias in fact checking, which have come mainly from conservatives. Previous research on PolitiFact assessments during an earlier period (cf., Ostermeier 2011) found consistently more negative evaluations of Republicans than of Democrats. If the results here show that evaluations of claims by Democrats are more negative than the evaluations relating to Republicans, the paper would provide empirical evidence that undermines conservative charges of a consistently liberal bias. If the results reinforce previous findings that Republican claims receive evaluations that are more negative more negatively, they would increase the possibility either that the fact-checking organizations are biased or that Republicans are in fact consistently more deceitful than Democrats are.

HYPOTHESES

We examine both the comparison of the evaluation organizations and of the assessments of the different partisan messengers.

H1: The Fact Checker will be more critical of political statements than PolitiFact.
We expect this given the reputational aspects of this high-visibility profile of this operation in the Washington Post, discussed in research discussed above, particularly its commitment to accountability journalism (Weaver and Willnat 2016).

H2: Democratic members of Congress will receive greater criticism than will President Obama.
We expect this given the more extensive policy research and political communication operations in the modern

White House, which can reduce the possibility of false statements for an administration interested in maintaining its credibility.

H3: Republican lawmakers will receive more critical assessments than President Obama and Democratic legislators.

We expect this given the differential patterns found in previous fact-checking research discussed above.

DATA AND RESULTS

The study analyzes the content of 212 fact-checks available online produced by PolitiFact and the Washington Post Fact Checker during roughly the first five months of Obama's second term, from January 20 through June 26, 2013. PolitiFact produced a majority (128 or 60 percent), with the remaining 84 produced by the Fact Checker. President Obama was the subject of 39 of the evaluations, roughly 18 percent of the total, while other Democratic officials were the subject of 49 assessments. Representatives of Democratic-aligned groups, like labor unions, were the subject of nine assessments. Republicans in Congress received 86 assessments, with another 23 directed at Republican aligned organizations, like the National Rifle Association.

Taken together, all Democrats and Democratic loyalists were the subject of 97 assessments as compared to 109 directed at Republicans and Republican loyalists. Another six assessments involved comments from nonpartisan voices – like the Chair of the Federal Reserve Board – that we excluded from the partisan portion of this analysis.

We compare the analysis systems of the Fact Checker and PolitiFact in the manner suggested by Kessler (2016). A zero Pinocchio (also known as a "Geppetto Checkmark") corresponds to True, one Pinocchio corresponds to Mostly True, two Pinocchios as Half True, three Pinocchios as Mostly False, Four Pinocchios corresponds to False (which in the PolitiFact system includes both the False and "Pants on Fire" categories). This comparative analysis system was employed in previous research to compare these two organizations (Marietta, Barker and Bowser 2015).

While time and funding constraints prohibit the content analyzing of all executive and legislative branch statements during the study period, we do employ the DW-Nominate scores for the 113th Congress to see how the partisan commentators the fact-checking organizations selected for analysis differ from the other members of their chambers (Lewis et al. 2019). This is not an ideal measure, as senators and members of Congress who plan to run for president in the next election cycle are likely to be especially vocal and to be of particular interest to

fact-checkers. The DW-Nominate scores are an effective measure of the representativeness of the elected officials whose comments drew the attention of these two fact-checking organizations.

Most items selected for fact-checking involved fleeting controversies. Some topics, though, did receive sustained attention from the two research organizations, including the nine fact checks related to the Benghazi controversy. Republicans have long alleged that the Obama administration -- and particularly then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton -- did not do everything possible to protect the US Ambassador who died in an assault on a US compound in Libya (Schmitt 2016). Similarly, eight fact-checks during the study period related to a long-running scandal involving the Internal Revenue Service, where Republicans alleged that the Obama administration discriminated against conservative organizations in approving requests for tax-exempt status (Rein 2016). The fact that these two controversies were both promoted by Republican elected officials concerned about the possible 2016 presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton, who served as Obama's first secretary of state, suggests that newsworthiness is indeed a key component of the items selected for fact-checking.

In Table 1, we examine basic differences in the ratings released by the two organizations. As noted above, PolitiFact conducted significantly more evaluations. The PolitiFact evaluations overall were significantly more positive than assessments by the Fact Checker (chi-square significance .045). More than half of the items selected for analysis by the Fact Checker received ratings of either three or four Pinocchios, equivalent to "mostly false," "false," or "pants on fire" under the PolitiFact grading system. In contrast, roughly 40 percent of the PolitiFact ratings were in these most negative assessment categories.

These differences may reflect differing selection choices (the two organizations rarely evaluated the exact same statement), different rating criteria or both. As Kessler (2016) notes: "We also do not assess obviously true statements, but prefer to focus on claims that are surprisingly true."

These results in Table 1 support H1, which predicted that the Fact Checker would be more critical than PolitiFact
.
Note: Some percentages may not add to 100 percent because of rounding

Table 2 shows PolitiFact's assessments of political leaders. We compare the percentage of statements judged for President Obama, other Democrats, and Republicans. A total of 66 Republican statements were evaluated, as compared to 36 for other Democrats and 22 for President

Obama. There were significantly more "true" ratings for Obama and other Democrats than there were for Republicans. Far more Republican statements were found in the False category (which includes "pants on fire" assessments) than there were for either Obama or the other Democrats. Only 24 percent of Republican statements were rated True or Mostly True, while 30 percent were rated False. A total of 53 percent of Republican statements were rated either false or mostly false, compared to 22.7 percent of statements by Obama and. 30.5 percent of those by other Democrats.

One might expect that a second-term president, with a large staff or researchers and no need to run for office again, might be less tempted to engage in hyperbole and falsehood than would Democratic legislators, some of who would face the voters in two years. PolitiFact found that the plurality of Obama's statements were rated Half True, while a plurality of other Democratic statements were Mostly True. Obama had fewer statements in the two most negative categories than did the Other Republicans, but both were dwarfed by the Republicans, who had more than half their statements rated as Mostly False if not entirely so.

The differences among the three groups were statistically significant (chi-square significance .027). A separate comparison (results not shown) that combined the Democrats and Obama and compared the all-Democratic group to the Republican group was statistically significant as well (chi-square significance .011).

These results provide partial support for H2, that Congress would be treated more critically than Obama, and solid support for H3, that Republicans would receive more critical notices than did Democrats.

Table 3 shows the corresponding results for assessments made by the Washington Post Fact Checker. These include assessments of 42 statements made by Republicans, 17 made by President Obama, and 21 made by other Democrats (a total of 38 Democratic statements). Once again, a large proportion of the most negative assessments involved Republican statements. Nearly 62 percent of the assessments of Republican statements earned three or four Pinocchios, the mostly false and false categories. For the Democrats other than Obama, 57 percent of the statements fell into the two most negative categories, a modest difference from the Republican assessments. In sharp contrast, less than 20 percent of President Obama's assertions were placed in the two most negative categories.

As was the case in the assessments by PolitiFact, the Fact Checker placed a plurality of Obama's statements for

the middle category (2 Pinocchios, which is equivalent to Politifact's Half True category). The sharpest contrasts between the two assessments were found for the other Democrats, which were assessed notably more negatively by the Fact Checker than by PolitiFact. For Republicans, in contrast, the findings were relatively negative in both evaluations, and Obama fared relatively well with both the Fact Checker and PolitiFact.

Overall, the differences among Obama, other Democrats and Republicans in assessments by the Fact Checker were not statistically significant (chi-square n.s.). A separate analysis that combined Obama and other Democrats and compared that group with the Republicans was also not significant.

Notes: Only members of Congress with more than one evaluation are included. DW-Nominate ranks cover the entire 113th Congress, from January 2013 through January 2015. The higher the score, the more conservative the member compared to his or her colleagues. Senate ranks range from 1 to 104 and House ranks range from 1 to 443 to take account of all members who served during that Congress. Worst refers to the total number of False, Pants on Fire or Four Pinocchio ratings.

In Table 4, we offer an examination of possible selection bias by the two fact-checkers. Table 4 lists every member of Congress who received at least two evaluations during the study period (10 senators and 6 representatives), together with the party ID of the lawmaker and whether they served in the House or Senate. Subsequent columns identify the number of evaluations made by PolitiFact (PF) and the Fact Checker (FC) and the number of evaluations that were in the worst categories (4 Pinocchios, False, and Pants on Fire). Finally we include the widely used DW-Nominate scores (Lewis et al. 2019; Poole and Rosenthal 1985) for each lawmaker who received at least two evaluations. The DW-Nominate rankings range from 1 for the most liberal Senator to 104 for the most conservative one. (Because the rankings cover the two years of the entire 113th Congress, there were a total of 104 senators who served at least part of the session.) The comparable numbers for the House range from 1 to 443, again a number larger than the 435 members of the lower chamber because of mid-session special elections to fill vacancies.

Turning first to the Senate, seven of the ten lawmakers with multiple assessments were Republicans. Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) ranked first in the number of evaluations with ten, five from each organizations Paul, who would go on to run for president in 2016, had two assessments in the worst category. DW-Nominate rankings mark Paul as the second most conservative senator in the 113th Congress (103 out of 104).

Not surprisingly, senators who planned to run for president in 2016 (or were expected to do so as of 2013), received a lot of attention from fact-checkers. Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.), another 2016 hopeful, received five assessments, with one rated in the worst category. Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), also received five assessments, with none in the worst category. Expected presidential candidates may receive additional scrutiny, and the potential candidates may stretch the truth to make dramatic assertions that might be noticed by the media or by partisan voters seeking a champion. The results here do not allow us to rate the relative importance of these two factors. The three candidates all had conservative records (Rubio ranked 95 and Cruz 101, just ahead of Paul), but they might as easily have been selected for their national aspirations rather than their highly conservative voting records.

The other Republican among the four most evaluated members of the Senate was Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), then the Senate's Minority Leader. He received five evaluations, with one of them in the worst category. His DW-Nominate ranking places him roughly in the middle of the Republican senators who served in the 113th Congress. Four of the five assessments of McConnell were by the Fact Checker.

Four senators had three evaluations each, divided equally between Democrats and Republicans. The Republicans were again among the most conservative representatives of the chamber, while the two Democratic senators in the group were both more conservative than the Democratic average. One Republican and one Democratic senator had one "worst" rating from this group.

Overall, five of the seven Republican senators subject to more than one evaluation ranked among the chamber's 20 most conservative members; no Democrat ranked among the chamber's 20 most liberal members. However, this excludes Sen. Bernie Sanders, a Vermont independent who caucuses with the Democrats and ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016. Sanders ranked as the third most liberal member of the Senate during the 113th Congress – but he had no "worst" ratings among his two evaluations.

Turning to the House, three Democrats and three Republicans received at least two evaluations. Among representatives, Rep. Michelle Bachmann (R-Minn.) was in a class by herself. She had nine evaluations from these two groups and eight "worst" rankings. No other House member – Democrat or Republicans – with at least two evaluations had a single "worst" rating.
A variety of reasons might explain the unusual attention given to Bachmann. She was one of the more conserva-

tive members of the 113th Congress – she ranked 377 out of the 443 individuals who served at some point during that two-year session. She was briefly a Republican presidential candidate in 2012 and has long been a focus of media attention for sometimes-extreme statements (Wemple 2011).

Beyond Bachmann, one's political standing is particularly important to determining which members of the House get the most attention from the fact-checkers. Given his role as the Republican vice presidential nominee in 2012 and as chair of the House Budget Committee in 2013, one might expect Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wisc.) to appear on this list, and he does with two evaluations (neither of them in the worst category). However, he is also one of the more conservative members of the House, with a DW-Nominate ranking of 360 out of 443 in the 113th Congress. Rep. Mike Rogers (R-Mich.) was head of the House Intelligence Committee during the 113th Congress and received three evaluations, none in the most critical category. (Then-House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, does not appear on the list because he had only one evaluation, which was rated False, during the study period.)

For the Democrats, three members received two evaluations each: House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), Debbie Wasserman-Schultz (D-Fla.), who was then chair of the Democratic National Committee, and Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), a senior member of Congress active in anti-poverty and anti-war efforts. Lee was identified as the most liberal member of the House in the DW-Nominate ratings for the 113th Congress, while Pelosi ranked 34th, which was notably more liberal than the Democratic caucus as a whole. Wasserman-Schultz was closer to the median Democratic member, identified as the 92nd most liberal in the DW-Nominate rankings.

The two fact-checking groups appeared to have particular interest in comments by members of Congress who were ideologically relatively extreme. This was true for both Republican and Democratic members, particularly in the House of Representatives. However, the same members shared another characteristic. Many held important institutional positions or seemed like potential presidential candidates. Their institutional or public prominence would make their assertions more newsworthy regardless of their ideological placement.

In the Senate, for example, the conservative Republicans subject to the most scrutiny (Paul, Cruz and Rubio) in early 2013 were already readying 2016 presidential campaigns. Other conservative Republicans selected repeatedly – such as Sessions and Coburn -- were prominent in the Senate organization as a senior member of the Judiciary Committee and as the ranking member of the Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee respectively.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of two prominent fact-checking organizations found at least some support for all three hypotheses: that the Fact Checker would be more critical, that Democrats in Congress received more negative evaluations than Presidential Obama and that Republicans received more critical notices than Republicans.

As expected, PolitiFact's selection process resulted in findings that were more critical of Republicans to a statistically significant degree. The *Washington Post* Fact Checker was also more critical of Republicans than Democrats, but the differences did not reach the level of statistical significance. This pattern is consistent with earlier studies that found the Fact Checker the more balanced of the two (Farnsworth and Lichter 2015). Previous studies of PolitiFact found that Republicans have received lower marks in a variety of policy and campaign contexts (Ostermeier 2011; Sides 2009).

We also found some differences between the two fact-checkers. The *Post*'s Fact-Checker was more likely to conclude that politicians' assertions were false, and somewhat less likely to fault Republicans than was PolitiFact. Finally, a case-by-case examination found that members of Congress who were subject to fact checking were more ideologically extreme than those who were not. Even so, fact-checked senators and representatives whose comments selected for analysis frequently had prominent positions in their respective parties. Thus, it may well be that these lawmakers were targeted simply because their prominence made their comments more newsworthy or deserving of heightened scrutiny.

In sum, our study supports previous findings (and complaints by conservatives) that Republicans are generally targeted more often by fact-checkers than are Democrats. News consumers who faithfully followed fact-checking newspaper articles might well conclude that the GOP is more deceitful than the Democratic Party. However, this is not to say that such differences result from the partisan predispositions of the fact-checkers. They may reflect the political reality that leading Republican politicians are more likely to deceive the public than their Democratic counterparts. Our study cannot resolve that question.

The lack of transparency from the organizations regarding their selection procedures, and the practical difficulties of content analyzing every controversial statement by every lawmaker, make it difficult to untangle the central question of whether partisan differences in fact-checking reflect the values of the fact-checkers or the behavior of their targets. In addition, greater transparency would allow us to come closer to answering such questions. If we knew what possible items were considered for evaluation but excluded from consideration, for example, we might have a clearer sense of the impact that internal procedures of these fact-checkers have on topic selection, and therefore on outcomes (cf., Uscinski and Ryden 2013).

As it is now, researchers cannot determine the extent to which the findings of these fact-checking organizations reflect primarily a larger political reality or are largely the result of the factors employed in the selection and evaluation process. In the absence of more compelling evidence for one conclusion or the other, there can be little doubt that many conservatives will attribute the differential focus on Republican politicians to media bias, while liberals will read the same findings as proof that the GOP is the party of greater deceit.

While this study does not examine fact-checking during the Trump presidency, the findings here suggest the utility of Trump's attacks on alleged media bias on Twitter and elsewhere (Farnsworth 2018). By attacking what he calls "fake news" so consistently, Trump may be seeking to defang the news reporters and the fact-checking organizations that so frequently call the president to account for failing to provide the nation with accurate information.

This study also provides an interesting opportunity for further research. Obama and his administration told far fewer lies than his successor and his team. A comparable study of Trump and the 115th Congress might offer interesting comparisons and whether the patterns found here across partisan lines, and across the branches of government, would be found in the very different political environment of more recent years.

Notes: Only members of Congress with more than one evaluation are included. DW-Nominate ranks cover the entire 113th Congress, from January 2013 through January 2015. The higher the score, the more conservative the member compared to his or her colleagues. Senate ranks range from 1 to 104 and House ranks range from 1 to 443 to take account of all members who served during that Congress. Worst refers to the total number of False, Pants on Fire or Four Pinocchio ratings.

Table 1
Assessment Scores of Truthfulness by Outlet

	PolitiFact		Fact Checker	
0P/True	20		8	
	15.6%		9.8%	
1P/Mostly True	29		8	
	22.7%		9.8%	
2P/Half True	28		23	
	21.9%		28.0%	
3P/Mostly False	24		25	
	18.8%		30.5%	
4P/False & Pants-On-Fire	27		18	
	21.1%		22.0%	
Total	128		82	

Chi-Square significance (2-sided): .045

Source: CMPA
Note: Some percentages may not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

Table 2
PolitiFact Evaluation of Statements from Political Figures

	Obama	Other Democrats	Republicans
True	4	7	7
	18.2%	19.4%	10.6%
Mostly True	6	14	9
	27.3%	38.9%	13.6%
Half True	7	4	15
	31.8%	11.1%	22.7%
Mostly False	2	7	15
	9.1%	19.4%	22.7%
False/Pants-On-Fire	3	4	20
	13.6%	11.1%	30.3%
Total	22	36	66

Chi-Square significance (2-sided): .027

Source: CMPA
Note: Some percentages may not add to 100 percent because of rounding

Table 3
Fact Checker Evaluation of Statements from Political Figures

	Obama	Other Democrats	Republicans
0 Pinocchio	4	1	3
	23.5%	4.8%	7.1%
1 Pinocchio	3	2	3
	17.6%	9.5%	7.1%
2 Pinocchio	7	6	10
	41.2%	28.6%	23.8%
3 Pinocchio	1	8	15
	5.9%	38.1%	35.7%
4 Pinocchio	2	4	11
	11.8%	19.0%	26.2%
Total	17	21	42

Chi-Square significance (2-sided): n.s.

Source: CMPA
Note: Some percentages may not add to 100 percent because of rounding

Table 4
Politifact Versus the Fact Checker: Selection of Congressional Voices for Analysis

Total	Elected Official	Party	H/S	PF	FC	Worst	DW-Nominate Rank
10	Paul	R	S	5	5	2	103 (of 104)
5	Cruz	R	S	2	3	1	101
5	McConnell	R	S	1	4	1	78
5	Rubio	R	S	4	1	0	95
3	Coburn	R	S	1	2	1	100
3	Feinstein	D	S	3	0	1	39
3	Gillibrand	D	S	3	0	0	35
3	Sessions	R	S	1	2	0	91
2	Grassley	R	S	1	1	1	66
2	Sanders	I	S	2	0	0	3
9	Bachmann	R	H	5	4	8	377 (of 443)
3	Rogers , Mike	R	H	2	1	0	284
2	Lee, Barbara	D	H	1	1	0	1
2	Pelosi	D	H	2	0	0	34
2	Ryan, Paul	R	H	1	1	0	360
2	Wasserman-Schultz	D	H	1	1	0	92

Notes: Only members of Congress with more than one evaluation are included. DW-Nominate ranks cover the entire 113th Congress, from January 2013 through January 2015. The higher the score, the more conservative the member compared to his or her colleagues. Senate ranks range from 1 to 104 and House ranks range from 1 to 443 to take account of all members who served during that Congress. Worst refers to the total number of False, Pants on Fire or Four Pinocchio ratings.
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