Facts are for losers?

The effect of fact-checking on trust in politicians and trust in media sources during the US presidential campaign 2016.

Hannah Werner
University of Amsterdam / University of Leuven
h.i.werner@uva.nl / hannah.werner@kuleuven.be

Paper presented at the
WAPOR conference for Political Trust in Contemporary Representative Democracies
Barcelona, Spain
November 24-25, 2016

Preliminary draft. Please do not cite or circulate

"*Honesty, RIP*" (Sedensky, 2016)

An alarming lack of honesty in political speech has become a major concern within the US American public debate. According to some observers, political candidates bend the truth and openly lie to the electorate to both polish their own image as well as demolish the opponents. Especially in the latest presidential election campaigns, journalists seemed astonished about the absence of truthfulness and the brazenness with which misinformation is spread. As Ruth Marcus comments in the Washington Post, "When it comes to lying, Trump is in a class by himself" (Marcus, 2016). With general resignation, Charles Blow summarizes the presidential campaign of 2012 „honesty is a lost art. Facts are for losers. The truth is dead" (Blow, 2012). As a reaction to such observations, a new journalistic practice and medium has emerged: political fact-checking is on the rise in the US and other Western democracies (Fridkin, Kenney, & Wintersieck, 2015; Graves, 2016). The self-stated goal of prominent fact-checkers such as politifact, factcheck.org or The Factchecker (Washington Post) is to emancipate the voter, provide her with unbiased facts and enable her to make a reasonable voting decision (Dobbs, 2012; Fridkin et al., 2015).

Yet, apart from correcting misinformation, disclosing untruthful claims also reveals important information about the politician that made the respective inaccurate statement. Deliberately misleading the public is quite obviously a violation of the ethical value of honesty. How do citizens evaluate candidates that were found guilty of spreading misinformation?

The first research question of this study asks: *To what extent and under which conditions does disclosed dishonesty via fact-checks exert a negative effect on trust in political candidates?* Following the theoretic idea that such detected lies violate the moral assumption of honesty, negative fact-checks should be detrimental for the trustworthiness of a candidate. Across disciplines, the perceived moral integrity of a person is identified as the crucial aspect in trust relationships (Barber, 1983; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Simmel, 1999).

Yet, whereas the theoretical literature is rather consistent in their expectation, it remains unclear whether this hypothesis still holds true in the context of fact-checks of political candidates. Research on the potential of corrective information to reduce misperceptions repeatedly showed strong partisan biases when it comes to processing, remembering and using political information and their corrections. Thus, corrective information seem to have a rather limited potential in updating misbeliefs when they were in line with party preferences or prior

beliefs and may even result in reinforcement of misperceptions (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Although this line of research does not account for effects on attitudes towards the sender of misinformation, it is likely that such motivated reasoning effects occur as well for impacts on trust in candidates. However, fact checks present a rather exceptional journalistic medium. Their direct, in-your-face judgement about the accuracy – or lack thereof – of political claims may be too blunt to dismiss and hence even overcome partisan bias in processing of political information. To date, empirical work on the impact of fact-checks has not found conclusive evidence for motivated reasoning yet (Fridkin et al., 2015; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015).

Second, we investigate the effect of fact-checking on trust in the media source. Do citizens value the critical assessment of political claims, even when it disconfirms their prior preferences? Or do they instead distrust media that criticize their own positions? These questions become especially relevant in an increasingly fragmented media landscape. Outside of traditional mass media there are no gatekeepers anymore to control the accuracy of information, such as in online blogs or social media. This creates an information environment were nearly every statement can be backed up by a "fact". Accordingly, individuals can simply belief in their own truth and trust those media outlets that confirm their prior beliefs. Hence, a media source that confirms prior beliefs about the dishonesty of the opponent may be rewarded with high trust. Yet exposure to a fact-check that is incongruent with prior preferences may result in the rejection of the media source as untrustworthy as a result of counter- arguing. Hence, our second research question asks: *to what extent and under which condition does fact-checking exert an effect on trust in the media source?*

To investigate these questions on the impact of disclosed dishonesty on trust in candidates and trust in the media source, we employ an experimental design during the US presidential election 2016. A 2 (candidate: preferred, opponent) by 2 (corrective judgement: fact check, no fact check) design is employed.

The scarce number of studies that have investigated the effects of fact-checks focused solely on effects on factual misperceptions. This present study extends the scope and advances our understanding of the role of honesty and facts during election campaigns in two ways. First, it investigates the influence of disclosed dishonesty on fact checks on evaluations of the respective politicians and therefore reassesses honesty as a driver of trust in candidates in changing campaign environments. Second, the study provides insights into the evaluation of media sources

that present counter-attitudinal information which is crucial in assessing the future potential of fact-checks as a corrective institution. This study integrates research on norm violations and political trust with insights from political psychology research on motivated reasoning to identify whether traditional theoretical assumptions about the nature of political trust still hold in contemporary election campaigns.

Theory

The large body of scholarly work on political trust is remarkably unified in pointing out the crucial role of moral integrity and especially honesty for judgements of trust (Barber, 1983; Levi & Stoker, 2000). Based on sociological work by (Luhmann, 1968), Simmel (1999) and Kohring (2004), trust is defined as a mechanism to bridge uncertainty about a contingent future. It is an expectation that a trustee, in this case a politician will fulfill a certain, predefined function. As this definition shows, trust only becomes necessary because of contingency, of 'not-knowing' as Simmel describes it. Not-knowing refers first and foremost to a lack of knowledge about the person to be trusted. In this context, the disclosure of dishonest behavior does reveal crucial information about the trustee. As Simmel (1999) points out: "every lie, no matter how objective its topic, engenders by its very nature an error concerning the lying subject" (Simmel, 1999, p. 388). A lie clearly violates moral standards of honesty and integrity and therefore could have detrimental effects on trust. As Luhmann describes it, „A lie can destroy trust entirely; especially the small blunders and presentation errors through their symbolic value expose their „true character" with unsparing sharpness" (Luhmann, 1968, S. 30, own translation). Yet, does this mechanism hold true in the context of election campaigns?

This question draws special relevance due to the rise of political fact-checking as journalistic medium. Since 2004, fact-check organizations have formed and expanded throughout the US but also in Europe and Canada and have become a constant provider of information, both directly on their websites but also as a source for mainstream media and even political campaigns (Dobbs, 2012; Graves, 2016). Fact-checks constitute a novel journalistic medium in their sole focus on assessing the factual accuracy of political information. They further provide an "in-your-face" judgement which clearly classifies a statement as wrong or true. Their commitment to almost scientific practices and strict guidelines to reporting illustrates their strong desire to remain non-partisan. It has to be noted that fact-checks are not interested in denouncing anyone as a liar

(Graves, 2016). They are primarily interested in enriching the debates with factual information, not calling politicians out as morally misbehaving. Hence, Fact-checkers try to fray away as much as possible from normative judgement. They try to establish a sense of objectivity and non-partisanship by checking statements as independently from the person that voiced it as possible. This desire to detach a statement from the sender of the statement has also guided research on the phenomenon. To date, the only two existing studies have investigated the effects of fact-checking primarily on misperceptions of facts (Fridkin et al., 2015; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). Yet, fact-checks do not only provide information about the statement itself but also about the sender of such an untruthful statement. Fact-checks do convey without a doubt a rather clear message about the politician which is awarded a pants-on-fire judgement. In the professionalized campaign context, most of political statements are previously scripted and well thought through. Despite errors being possible, it is still likely that citizens would perceive incorrect statements as a rather deliberative deception than an honest mistake. Exposing a candidate as providing misinformation is most likely considered a deliberate attempt to mislead the public and therefore classifies as a violation of norms. The effect of such disclosure by fact-checks on trust in politicians have however not been studied to this date.

Theorizing about such potential effects opens two contrasting arguments, one of which is rooted in political and sociological theory about trust, the other in political psychological research on information processing.

Specifically within political science, the violation of moral norms is argued and shown to diminish trust in politicians (Halmburger, 2015). Empirically, there are strong indications that dishonest behavior would indeed have negative influences on trust in political candidates. Various survey studies. Especially within the literature on candidate traits, report that individuals state honesty as a crucial reason to trust a politician (Aaldering & Vliegenthart, 2016). For instance, Funk (1996) showed that information about a politician's immoral behavior affected a trustor's global evaluation of the respective politician. Further research suggests that information about a person's integrity (i.e., dishonesty) is more likely to be attributed to that person's character than information about a person's competence (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Additionally, research by Birch and Allan (2010) investigates the expectations of citizens towards politicians. They find that more than half of their participants in a British sample would not only expect the same standards of moral integrity and honesty for politicians than for average citizens

but actually have even higher expectations of their adherence to moral norms. Thus, honesty is not only a crucial element in evaluating a politician, the high level of expectations makes a violation of the honesty principle potentially even more detrimental to judgements of trustworthiness.

Transferring these arguments and findings to a dichotomous election campaign, we can assume that negative effects of disclosed dishonesty should be largest for the candidate in which voters have based their trust. Drawing on findings by Birch and Allan (2010), the expectations of a trusted candidates in regards to his or her moral behavior is relatively high. Since the citizen has placed his or her trust in one candidate or party over another, this trust relationship is naturally far more vulnerable than already low levels of trust in the opponent. Based on arguments of the trust literature, we would therefore expect a more detrimental effect of fact-checks on trust in the own candidate.

However, research on corrective information provides a strong argument why this relationship should be exactly reversed. The psychological mechanism at play is termed motivated reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006). It is based on the idea that information processing is always motivated – either by accuracy goals or partisan goals. If the latter is present, individuals try to protect and defend their prior conclusions which induces automated, affective processing and eventually leads to biases in selecting and processing information (Taber and Lodge, 2006). This is evident both on micro and macro levels: democrats and republicans hold very different factual beliefs about unemployment rates, crime rates, public deficit, inflation or immigration (Redlawsk, Civettini, & Emmerson, 2010).

Several studies on corrective information support the motivated reasoning hypothesis, implying that citizens are less likely to update their incorrect beliefs if they are congruent with their priors (Bartels, 2002; Blais et al., 2010; Gaines, Kuklinski, Quirk, & Peyton, 2007; Jerit & Barabas, 2012; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Far less conclusive evidence exists about the processing of fact-checks. To date, only two studies have been conducted and both address only effects on misperceptions and knowledge. The discussed strand of literature on corrective information focuses primarily on the statements itself and accordingly the biased updating of beliefs about the world. It seems very plausible that motivated reasoning effects are also present regarding the effects on political trust. If corrective information is rejected and not used to update ones factual beliefs, it is probably also not used to update trust judgements.

This leaves us with two conflicting assumptions. On the one hand, individuals may be more likely to be disappointed by their own candidate in whom they placed their trust than by the already mistrusted opponent. Yet, according to the motivated reasoning hypothesis, individuals may also simply reject information that denounces the own candidate and therefore only punish the opponent with a further withdrawal of trust.

Both arguments are brought together by novel research on the so-called tipping point by Redlawsk, Civettini and Emmerson (2010). The rationale is that while individuals prefer to confirm and reinforce they prior preferences for a candidate, there is a certain point when incongruent information becomes too dominant and convincing to be dismissed and therefore leads to rational updating. The authors expect affective intelligence to come into play in situations of threat to one's existing beliefs. These are especially threatened when strong and convincing arguments are encountered. Redlawsk and colleagues (2010) conducted an experiment during an election campaign and find empirical support for their assumption of a tipping point. However, the authors only test candidate's policy preferences that run counter to participants preferences – not violations of moral norms such as dishonesty. Such violations have, as outlined in the beginning, specific detrimental power for trust judgements.

Subsequently, the question arises whether fact-checks provide such unescapable information. Can the counter-attitudinal information travel across the tipping point and actually lead to updating instead of counter-arguing the information?

There are some indication why this could be the case. Fact-checks operate at another level of information provision than an average news article as they present a direct, in-your-face judgement of the accuracy of a statement. Since fact-checks are so direct, obvious and conclusive, individuals may surpass their partisan congruence and actually update their existing beliefs about political candidates. This is certainly one of the hopes of the fact-checking movement: To provide corrective information that is impossible to overlook and dismiss. It mya therefore be possible that individuals will depart from motivated reasoning and update their beliefs about political candidates. The core question then is, however, whether fact-checks present such a strong correction that triggers accuracy goals. The first two studies that addressed the impact of fact checkers point towards this direction: Fridkin, Kenney and Wintersieck in their study of the impact of fact-checking during a senate race found no indication of a motivated reasoning effects as Democrats and Republicans did not differ in their reaction to fact-checks

about ads by Republican and Democratic candidates. Nyhan and Reifler (2015) studied the impact of fact-checks on misperceptions across time and could not detect a partisan bias. Their results, also in contrast to the authors previous work, showed that individuals update their beliefs based on fact checks in relative independence of whether those beliefs were congruent or incongruent with their partisanship.

However, fact checks have become a steady and omnipresent element of modern campaign coverage which raises doubt about its exceptionalism in regards to the presentation of political information. Since the overall evidence for motivated reasoning effect is strong across contexts of information, we also expect partisan bias in the impact of fact-checks on trust in candidates.

Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H1. The negative effect of disclosed dishonesty on perceptions of trustworthiness for a candidate is less pronounced for a preferred candidate than for an opposing candidate

Our expectations regarding the effects on our second variable of interest, trust in the media source, are strongly related to our previous argumentation. As Adair, a leaning journalist in the fact-checking movement outlined, “voters are hungry for fact-checking” (Adair, 2012). Equally illustrative is CBCs claim that “fact-checking is the new black”. Do citizens reward media sources with more trust when they provide fact-checks? Or are fact checks simply used to back up and reinforce prior preferences and are only evaluated favorably if they do so? Generally, mainstream media in the US continues to suffer from a low level of trust by the population (Lee, 2010). As Jackson and Jamieson (2004) and Graves (2015) argue, this is among other factors due to the media not fulfilling their role as watchdogs. Fact checking evolved specifically on the ground of such critique of ‘he-said-she-said journalism” which does not call politicians out for spreading misinformation. If indeed citizens desire a more critical assessment of the accuracy of political statements, fact checking should have a positive effect of trust in the media source.

However, as with trust in candidates, partisan bias may come into play as well when assessing the credibility of a media source. For instance, research on hostile media perception found strong indication that individuals perceive media as biased or fail to detect actual biases because of their partisanship (Feldman, 2011). Especially through the course of a polarizing campaign it is likely that individuals reject information that runs against their prior preferences (Taber & Lodge, 2006). If for instance, a democrat leaning citizen encounters a fact-check report

that classifies a statement voiced by a democrat as false, the citizen is not only likely to not belief the presented information but further also to not change his opinion about the democratic candidate. The individual is likely to engage in counter-arguing (Taber, Cann, & Kucsova, 2009). In this process, the person constructs arguments against the validity of the incongruent information. One plausible argument could be to denounce the source as not credible. Therefore rejecting the statement can result in rejecting the trustworthiness of the source at hand. Research on hostile media perception has shown that individuals are more likely to dismiss a source as untrustworthy if it presents counter attitudinal information (Feldman, 2011). Graves describes how fact-checks repeatedly report assaults from readers from both political camps accusing them of being clearly partisan in the way they operate and therefore not trustworthy (Graves, 2015). Especially in times of fragmented media landscapes and an availability of a multitude of contradicting “facts”, such an effect may occur. The illustrative term post-truth politics describes a situation where every political camp and any individual reader can create their own truth – with own experts, facts, and media. Hence, instead of changing one’s trust judgement about the preferred candidate, individuals may simply perceive the fact-checker that presented the counter attitudinal information as a less credible source. In contrast, fact-checks that undermine one’s prior preferences with factual arguments are likely to boost trust in the media source as they both scored on critically assessing politicians and reinforcing prior beliefs.

Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H3a. Disclosed dishonesty of a politician through a fact-check leads to an increase in trust in the fact checker if the exposed candidate is the opposing candidate

H3b. Disclosed dishonesty of a politician through a fact-check leads to a decrease in trust in the fact checker if the exposed candidate is the preferred candidate

Design

To put the outlined hypotheses to an empirical test, an experimental design is required.

As we are interested in the effect of exposure to fact-checks, a survey would only yield deficient results due to a lack of motivation and capability to recall media exposure, which has been repeatedly pointed out in communication research (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Thus, a controlled design is necessary to assess the effects of fact-checks on trust in candidates and media sources.

As with every experiment, a trade-off must be made between strong manipulations and experimental realism. We put specific emphasis on experimental realism in this study for two reasons. First of all, motivated reasoning relies on prior preferences that are deeply wired into individuals cognitive systems. Only real preferences can elicit such biased processing. Second, as Halmberger (2015) further makes the point in her research on political scandals that it is crucial to test the impact of norm violation with real politicians. Otherwise the only information about the politician is precisely the violation of a norm which is of course a strong signal in such an isolated scenario. In addition, we specifically aim at investigating a situation that occurs in individuals everyday lives – being exposed to a fact-check about a political candidate. Using real candidates in a design compared to fake candidates drastically limits the likelihood to find a potential effect – because of prior knowledge and the flood of previous information individuals were exposed to. However, we argue that it is crucial to assess real potential effects – after all, the average citizen will never encounter fact-checks in a vacuum of prior beliefs. This approach is in line with the existing research on fact-checks and corrective information that uses real statements to ensure the presence of real preferences to uncover partisan bias (Fridkin et al., 2015; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015).

Accordingly, our design contains a high level of experimental realism: We rely on real candidates and real statements made by these candidates in the course of the 2016 election campaign which have been checked and rated as false by one of the three prominent fact-checks. Thus, our design provides a strict test of our hypotheses and can therefore be considered a least-likely design.

In the fall of 2016 we conducted an online-experiment in the United States prior to the elections. Specifically a 2 (disclosure of dishonesty: yes/no) by 2 (preferred candidate: yes/no) between subjects experiment was run.

Data and sample

We rely on the assistance of a certified online panel to conduct our research (Surveysampling). Various studies have assessed the quality of online panel experiments compared to lab research and the overall conclusion is that online panels show roughly the same estimates (Clifford & Jerit, 2014; Mullinix et al., 2016).

Our sample consists of 519 participants from the United States with an average age of 44 years, 52 percent are female and 45% hold a college degree.

Procedure

First, participants were informed about the procedure of the study and gave informed consent. Subsequently, participants were randomly exposed to a short report containing a statement of one of the vice presidential candidates of this year's presidential elections – Tim Kaine or Mike Pence. Depending on condition, they received either a neutral media report that simply reported the statement or a fact-check that exposed the statement as false. Participants were asked to read the report thoroughly. Afterwards respondents filled in a questionnaire with a distractor task, their trust in the two candidates, trust in the media source, partisanship, covariates and manipulation checks. Participants spend around 9 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Afterwards, participants were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Stimulus material

The stimulus material consisted of four short media reports, covering statements by the vice-presidential candidates of the two major parties, Mike Pence (Republican party) and Tim Kaine (Democratic party). As this year's set of *presidential* candidates was quite extraordinary in the sense that one candidate has been claimed repeatedly to not use accurate facts whereas the other candidate has apparently been rather accurate in the facts that she presented, this study might suffer from a misbalance in the presidential race[1]. Further, the sheer magnitude of the debate around Trump and Clinton makes it rather difficult to disentangle effects. Thus, despite interesting in and of itself, we chose to not use the presidential candidates for the purpose of this study. Instead we chose the vice-presidential candidates as they are politicians that play a role in the election campaign and whose names are known, yet are still relatively blank pages to the wider public and have not been in the center of attention throughout the campaign. Even more importantly, none of them has a reputation of being particularly honest or dishonest and their popularity scores were roughly equal prior to the election (Huffington Post).

[1] Although Clinton was perceived as being even more dishonest than Donald Trump by a large part of the electorate. Yet, still this makes the presidential candidates a difficult and exceptional case.

Hence, the vice-presidential candidates may present a good balance between popularity, relevance and preferences on the one hand and comparability and sensitivity to new information on the other hand.

One real statement was chosen per candidate. The statement as well as the correction are taken from the websites of the most prominent fact-checkers: Politifact, factcheck.org and the Fact Checker of the Washington Post. Both statements were voiced during the vice presidential debate and contained a negative claim about the economy as a consequence of the politics of a president of the other party. Specifically, Pence accused the Obama administration of increasing the number of Americans living in poverty by 7 million, whereas Kaine accused the Bush administration of causing the economic crisis with their tax cut policies.

The corrections included an introductory sentence that exposed the claim as being wrong, with further explanation about why it was wrong. In the control condition only the statement was presented without an assessment of accuracy. Drawing on the design by Fridkin and Kenney, we used an artificial fact-check as source, called PolitiCheck. Visually, the reports resembled the layout of fact-checks presented on politifact. Examples of the stimulus material can be found in the appendix.

Measures

Trust in candidates. We measure trust in candidates by the standard measure originally used in the ANES. This index, called trust-in-government index, includes four items that assess the functioning of government. This index received a substantial amount of critique in the past for not being specific about the object of trust that is measured (Bauer, 2014; Citrin, 1974; Craig, Niemi, Silver, & Niemi, 1990; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Miller, 1974) . As we adapted those items to measure trust in a specific candidate, we could tackle the problem of trust-objects. Further criticism was voiced because the items rather tap into reasons to trust, thus trustworthiness, than a specific trust judgement. We share this criticism, yet believe that in our study this may be less problematic as we are primarily interested in effects on general evaluations of candidates. Lastly, as the development of new measures presents a research project on its own, we rely on the most widely used and accepted scale. Item wording was for instance: *Time Kaine will waste a lot of money we pay in taxes.* Answers were assessed on a 7-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The scale yielded satisfactory reliability (cronbach's alpha=.76)

Trust in media source. The trust-in-news-media scale, developed by Kohring and Matthes (2007) is both well-grounded in theory as well as cross-validated for different topics and samples. The original scale consists of four factors, each measured with five items. Yet the authors suggest that for a short version of the scale, the best-testing item of each factor can be used. Items were for instance worded as *PolitiCheck reports facts truthfully* or *The commentary on PolitiCheck consists of well reflected conclusions.* Answers were assessed on a 7-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The scale yielded satisfactory reliability (cronbach's alpha=.93). Additionally, we included a measure of perceived bias of the media source which is a common measure of hostile emdia perception (Ho et al). Answers were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly biased towards the Democrats* to *strongly biased towards the Republicans*.

Partisanship. Measures of partisanship must fulfil the goal of tapping into participants' general preferences or affiliation to a political party independent of the current situation. Thus, measurement of partisanship has to contain an element of long-term attitudes (Converse & Pierce, 1985; Greene, 2002). We use the most prominently applied measurement of party identification used in the ANES: *Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?* Independents were further asked to which side they lean when they have the choice between the Republican and the Democratic party.

Compliance check. To grasp whether participants actually complied to the assigned treatment, we measured time spent on the entire survey, time spent on the page of the stimulus material and an open question which asked for participants' thoughts when reading the reports.

Manipulation check. Assessing whether a manipulation was successful is typically done by recall of the content of the stimulus material. Yet in this case we expect biased processing of the information which makes the use of recall as a check difficult. Nevertheless we assessed individuals recall of the candidates, the statements and their judgement of whether the claims were true or untrue.

Covariates. We included further measures to gain a deeper understanding on how individuals perceived and engaged with the stimulus material as well as measures about their political attitudes. Specifically, we asked participants about their knowledge and use of fact-checks and news media generally, interest in politics and the current election, trust in political institutions, expectations of moral integrity towards politicians, age, gender and education.

Results

The random allocation to the experimental conditions was successful. No significant associations between the moderating variable, partisanship, and the experimental condition could be found. Further, potential covariate variables such as political interest, education, vote intention, gender and age were evenly distributed across conditions. Lastly, non-compliance, which in this study took the shape of not spending sufficient time on the manipulation page to being able to read the text or not spending sufficient time on filling in the entire questionnaire to being able to read the questions and answer options, was also evenly distributed across conditions.

The dependent variables of interest, trust in political candidates (M=3.19, SD = 1.45, Skewness=.24; Kurtosis = 2.76 (scale: 1-7)) and trust in the media source (M=4.60, SD = 1.37, Skewness=.03; Kurtosis = 2.6 (scale: 1-7)), were fairly normally distributed.

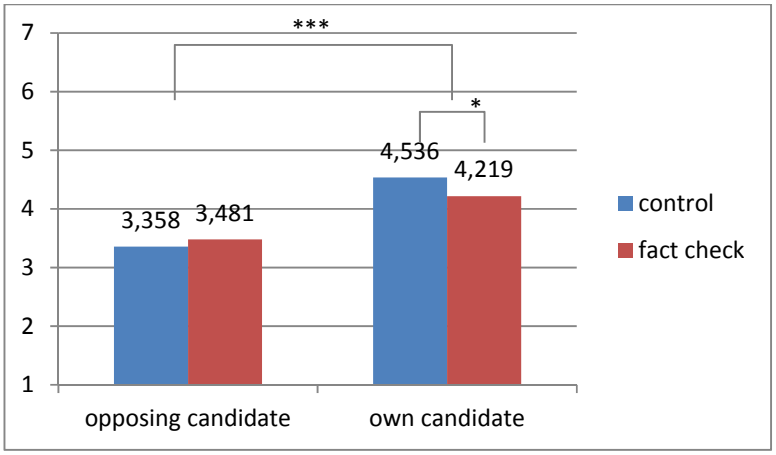
In the first part of the analysis, the effects of fact-checks and candidate preference on trust in candidates are investigated. We hypothesized that being exposed to a fact-check that denounces one's preferred candidate as being dishonest has less of a negative impact on trust in the candidate than being exposed to a fact-check about the opposing candidate. Our rationale, drawing on motivated reasoning, was that individuals are more likely to reject counter attitudinal information about the own candidate and therefore will also not change their trust level. Accordingly we expect an interaction effect between candidate preference and fact-check.

To analyze the impact of candidate preference, we compute whether people were exposed to their preferred or opposing candidate based on their indication of partisanship. This measure of partisanship included both decided commitment to one of the two parties and leaners. A thorough investigation of leaners as a specific group will follow later.

A first comparisons of mean scores of trust in candidates across experimental groups seems to contradict this hypothesis. Unsurprisingly, trust on the own candidate is significantly higher than trust in the opposing candidate. However, reading a fact check that discloses the dishonesty o the opposing candidate does not lead to a further decline in trust. Instead, reading a fact-check that exposes the dishonesty of one's own candidate has a negative effect on trust in the candidate which is significant at the .10 level. In stark contradiction to our expectations, it seems to be exactly the partisans that are more likely to perceive disclosed dishonesty as a violation of norms and therefore punish the candidate with a decline in trust. In particular, this means that

individuals that received corrective information about the candidate did not differ in their trust judgement from individuals that did not receive corrective information if the candidate was the opposing one. However, when being exposed to information about one's own candidate, corrective information significantly decreased trust in the candidate.

Figure 1. mean scores of trust in candidates across experimental conditions



Note: significance estimates are the result of two-tailed t-tests, N=519, *p>.10, ***p>.001

The linear regression model confirms these first findings. Turning first to the main effect, we first find the expected positive effect of candidate preference on trust in politicians. Being exposed to a fact-check compared to an uncommented statement does not exert a main effect on trust in candidates. Including an interaction term between fact-checks and candidate preference yields a negative, significant estimate (at the .10 level). Thus, reading about one's own candidate in combination with a fact-check results in a decrease in trust in this candidate whereas no such effect is present for the opposing candidate.

We run the same model only with individuals that held decided partisan preferences and obtained substantially the same results with a slightly stronger interaction estimate (β=-.16*), implying that stronger partisans reacted even more strongly to fact-checks about their own candidate.

Table 2: *Linear regression explaining trust in candidates*

	Main effect		Two way interaction	
	β	SE	β	SE
Fact-check	-.03	.12	.04	.17
Candidate preference	.33***	.12	.40***	.17
Interaction term: fact-check x candidate preference			-.14*	.24
R^2	.10		.12	
N	519		519	

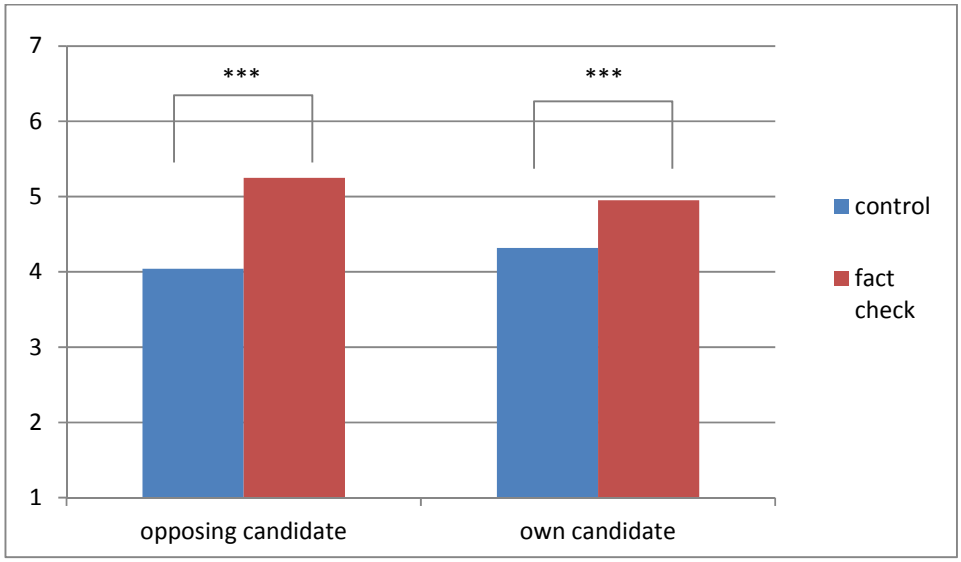
Note: *p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.01.

Turning to our second dependent variable of interest, we investigate the impact of fact-checking on trust in the news source. As formulated in H2, we expected individuals to counter argue when they are exposed to denouncing information about their own candidate and subsequently to reject the source of those counter-attitudinal information as being less trustworthy. In contrast, when a fact-check confirmed one's beliefs about the opposing candidate, we expected an increase in trust in the media outlet. Accordingly, we again predicted an interaction effect between candidate preference and fact-checking on trust in the media source.

Comparing the means scores of trust in the media source across conditions yields first indications that partly support and partly contradict our assumptions (figure 2). When being exposed to information about the opposing candidate, individuals exerted much higher trust to a news source that checks the accuracy of the claim and reveals dishonesty than leaving it uncommented. An independent t-test shows that this difference is highly significant. This first finding was in line with our expectation: Individuals approve of media outlets that call opposing candidates out for their wrongdoings. Yet, turning to the results for individuals that were exposed to information about their preferred candidate, we find an unexpected relation. We find trust in a news source to also be significantly higher than trust in media outlets that simply report a statement if the exposed politician is the preferred candidate. Thus, instead of rejecting a media source that provided counter-attitudinal information, such a media source is still rewarded with higher trust. Individuals do not only approve of fact-checks if they confirm prior beliefs but also

if they unveil dishonesty in one's own political camp. Nevertheless, we do see a difference in effect for opposing and own candidate, as the reward for fact-checking expressed through increased trust is greater for the opposing candidate than for the own candidate.

Figure 2: *mean scores of trust in the media source across conditions*



Note: significance estimates are the result of two-tailed t-tests, N=519, ***p>.001

To further assess the effects and the possible interaction at hand, we run a linear regression model (table 3). A first inspection of the main effects shows indeed a positive effect of fact-checking in trust in the media source. Further, candidate preference did not exert a main effect.

Turning towards our hypothesis of an interaction between fact-check and candidate preference, we do find the expected negative interaction. Indeed, the positive effect of fact-checking on trust in a media source is less pronounced for the own candidate than for the other candidate. However, the effect does not turn negative as we expected in our hypothesis.

A further interesting effect in the interaction model is the positive main effect of candidate preference. Thus, when there was no fact check (baseline), candidate preference exerts a small, but significant positive effect on trust in the media source. This finding implies that individuals generally approve of media outlets that present their own candidates, whereas there are less trustful if the opposing candidates claim is presented without critical assessment.

Table 3: *Linear regression explaining trust in media source*

	Main effect		Two way interaction	
	β	SE	β	SE
Fact-check	.33***	.11	.44***	.17
Candidate preference	.00	.12	.10*	.16
Interaction term: fact-check x candidate preference			-.19**	.23
R^2	.11		.13	
N	519		519	

Note: *p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.01, estimates are standardized regression coefficients

Accordingly, it seems that there is no partisan bias in the way that individuals perceive fact-checks. To further address this finding, we test whether individuals that were exposed to fact-checks about their own candidate perceived the fact-check as more biased than individuals that were exposed to a fact-check about the opponent. In line with the findings from the previous analysis, individuals seem to approve of fact-checks, even if they expose one's own candidate's dishonesties.

Drawing on the results of our models, partisan biases do not seem to be present in the formation of trust judgements a reaction to exposed dishonesty on fact-checks. This is highly interesting as it contradicts previous research on corrective information.

If we further investigate some other indicators often accessed in the motivated reasoning literature, we also find no proof for motivated reasoning effects. Fact-checking exerted a negative effect on misperceptions regardless of whether they were voiced by the own or opposing candidate. Further, the attention that individuals devoted to the information, approximated by the time spent on the respective page, did not differ between preferred and opposing candidates.

Discussion

The results reported in this paper are rather astonishing. Both hypotheses that expected individuals to reject counter attitudinal information and subsequently develop biased judgements of trust in political candidates and in media sources according to their partisan preferences were

not confirmed – exactly the opposite seems to be the case. First of all, individuals are not more likely to dismiss corrective information about their own candidates. When confronted with a fact check that denounces a candidate as being dishonest, it turns out to be exactly the citizens that identify with this candidate's party that lower their trust judgement whereas the opposing camp does not show any change in trust in the candidate. Seeing that the mean for the opposing candidate ranged somewhere around 3, we can rule out a bottom-effect due to measurement to explain these results. This finding confirms the thesis rooted in theories about candidate traits and political trust: violations of the norm of honesty are more detrimental for the own candidate than for the opponent. Obviously, this mechanism follows a convincing logic: individuals already hold some level of distrust in the other candidate and do not have high expectations regarding his or her ethical behavior. Thus, a fact-check did not provide any new information. In contrast, the preferred candidate already received a judgement of trust, a trust credit as Luhmann would call it. As such judgements are based on certain expectations about the candidate, disclosed dishonesty truly disappoints the partisan citizen. Accordingly, motivated reasoning effects could not be detected in this study. Referring back to research on the tipping point of motivated reasoning, it might well be that fact checks do constitute such a blunt and direct form of delivering corrective information that it surpasses motivated reasoning effects. Fact-checks that position themselves as being neutral and apply scientific standards may be difficult to reject if one does not want to go all the way to question the legitimacy of scientific evidence. These findings are in line with previous research on fact-checks that similarly did not find any motivated reasoning effects in the processing of political information. Here we further show that when assessing the effects on trust in candidates we do find a partisan moderation, yet not in the form of a rejection of incongruent information but rather in the form of rational updating about one's trust choice.

Despite being entirely contradictory to the hypotheses voiced in the theory section of this paper, these results are certainly good news for a democracy and our understanding of the impact of fact-checking. If fact-checks are indeed used to hold preferred politicians accountable and punish them for norm violations, they can certainly contribute to a more informed vote choice. Even more important, they do not further polarize an electorate by simply reinforcing prior beliefs. We can draw two important lessons from these findings. First, in line with other recent work done in the field of corrective information, we can conclude that individuals may actually be less likely to react to information primarily on the basis of their partisanship but are actually

able and willing to update their beliefs. Individuals may be even more driven by accuracy goals than partisan goals when it comes to forming trust judgements. Second, honesty and violations thereof have not become irrelevant to American voters. If citizens place their trust in a party, they also hold moral expectations and are willing to punish political candidates of their own camp if they violate these expectations. Accordingly, honesty can still be considered a core expectation of the American electorate.

Our findings regarding trust in the media source can be interpreted with similar optimism. Across partisan lines we find a robust positive effect of fact-checking on trust in the media source. This supports the assumptions of journalists and scholars of the fact checking movement that citizens desire a critical journalistic practice that calls politicians out when they violate moral principles of honesty. We do find a moderation by partisanship to the extent that the positive effect of trust in a media source is more pronounced when it exposed the opposing candidate and therefore reinforced prior judgements than when it called out the own candidate as being dishonest. Nevertheless, counter to the cynical assumptions of the author, individuals do not seem to reject media sources when they provide counter-attitudinal information. In fact, quite the opposite: individuals even have a higher trust in a news source that critically assessed the statements voiced by their own preferred candidates compared to one that simply reported the statements. Thus, citizens across partisan lines seem to desire fact-checking and understand journalism as a tool to regain control over lying politicians.

The findings from both analyses confirm each other's implications: individuals are interested in critical information about political candidates, even if it is the candidate from their own camp, and are willing to update their trust judgement based on such correction.

As with every study, ours does not come without its limitations which requires a careful interpretation of the results. First of all, we only find a rather small effect of fact-checking on trust in the candidate for the own political candidate which is significant at the .10 level. Thus, the certainty about the true existence of the effect is somewhat smaller than one would wish for.

Further, it may be possible that our specific case selection drives the results and we would actually find motivated reasoning effects in other election campaigns. This year's presidential election may indeed be considered as rather exceptional due to the campaign run by Donald Trump. Trump and his supporters have often been claimed to hold a rather lax relationship with the truth and treat facts as opinions that can be adapted to one's personal wishes. Yet this

polarized campaign were truth and factuality were repeatedly called out to be irrelevant to the success of the candidates actually presents an even harder case to find the results presented in this study. Previous research has actually found similar effects. The 'Trump-factor' has also been accounted for in the study by Wood and Porter: "This study also tested two items from Donald Trump, a candidate whose rejection of fact checkers and the judgment of the national political establishment is central to his appeal. Yet when Trump alleges a complicated political conspiracy to hide the true extent of unemployment, a correction which cites the very federal agency implicated by Trump (the Bureau of Labor Statistics) is accepted by our subjects" (p.

Additionally, we used a very strict design to increase experimental realism which would facilitate motivated reasoning effects. We used real candidates in the contexts of a rather polarized campaign and exposed our candidates to rather weak manipulations: statements about the economic situation of the country. Naturally, there are other statements that would evoke much more controversy, such as claims about Barack Obamas birth certificate or migration. Same holds true for claims about the political opponent which are even more morally questionable because they slander another person.

In light of the strict test that we conducted to test our hypotheses, it is even more remarkable to find such positive effects. Naturally some questions remain. First of all, we do not know whether individuals update because they surpassed the tipping point or whether motivated reasoning simply never plaid a role. Redlawsk and colleagues (2010) make an interesting point in this regard by asking: "is the atmosphere of the modern campaign already so negative that most voters are pushed way past the tipping point months before Election Day?" Or is it indeed the strong persuasive power of fact-checks that results in rational updating? Future research could explore these questions by testing the impact of fact-checks with different levels of credibility or comparing corrective information by fact checks to corrective information provided by the opposing candidate.

References

Aaldering, L., & Vliegenthart, R. (2016). Political leaders and the media. Can we measure political leadership images in newspapers using computer-assisted content analysis? *Quality and Quantity*, *50*(5), 1871–1905. http://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-015-0242-9

Barber, B. (1983). *The logic and limits of trust*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Bartels, L. (2002). Beyond the Running Tally. *Political Behaviour*, *24*(2), 117–150.

Bauer, P. C. (2014). Conceptualizing and Measuring Trust and Trustworthiness. *Political Concepts – Committee on Concepts and Methods Working Paper Series*, *61*, 1–30.

Bennett, W. L., & Iyengar, S. (2008). A new era of minimal effects? The changing foundations of political communication. *Journal of Communication*, *58*(4), 707–731. http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.00410.x

Birch, S., & Allen, N. (2010). How honest do politicians need to be? *Political Quarterly*, *81*(1), 49–56. http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-923X.2010.02066.x

Blais, A., Gidengil, E., Fournier, P., Nevitte, N., Everitt, J., & Kim, J. (2010). Political judgments, perceptions of facts, and partisan effects. *Electoral Studies*, *29*(1), 1–12. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2009.07.001

Citrin, J. (1974). Comment: The Political Relevance of Trust in Government. *American Political Science Review*, *68*(3), 973–988. http://doi.org/10.2307/1959141

Clifford, S., & Jerit, J. (2014). Is There a Cost to Convenience? An Experimental Comparison of Data Quality in Laboratory and Online Studies. *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, *1*(2), 120–131. http://doi.org/10.1017/xps.2014.5

Converse, P., & Pierce, R. (1985). Measuring Partisanship. *Political Methodology*, *11*(3/4), 143–166.

Craig, S. C., Niemi, R. G., Silver, G. E., & Niemi, G. (1990). Political Efficacy and Trust: A Report on the NES Pilot Study Items. *Political Behavior*, *12*(3), 289–314.

Dobbs, M. (2012). *The rise of political fact-checking: How Reagan inspired a journalistic movement: A reporter's eye view*. *New America Foundation*.

Feldman, L. (2011). Partisan Differences in Opinionated News Perceptions: A Test of the Hostile Media Effect. *Political Behavior*, *33*(3), 407–432. http://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-010-9139-4

Fridkin, K., Kenney, P. J., & Wintersieck, A. (2015). Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire: How Fact-Checking Influences Citizens' Reactions to Negative Advertising. *Political Communication*, *32*(1), 127–151. http://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2014.914613

Funk, C. L. (1996). The impact of scandal on candidate evaluations: An experimental test of the role of candidate traits. *Political Behavior*, *18*(1), 1–24. http://doi.org/10.1007/BF01498658

Gaines, B. J., Kuklinski, J. H., Quirk, P. J., & Peyton, B. (2007). Same Facts, Different Interpretations: Partisan Motivation and Opinion on Iraq. *The Journal of Politics*, *69*(4), 957–974.

Graves, L. (2016). *Deciding what's true:The Rise of Political Fact-Checking in American Journalism*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.

Greene, S. (2002). Social-Psychological Measurement of Partisanship. *Political Behavior*, *24*(3), 171–197.

Halmburger, A. (2015). *Trustworthiness of Politicians - Understanding the Different Levels of Perceived Trustworthiness and their Interrelations*. University of Kolenz-Landau.

Jackson, B., & Jamieson, K. H. (2004). Finding Fact in Political Debate. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *48*(2), 229–237. http://doi.org/10.1177/0002764204267268

Jerit, J., & Barabas, J. (2012). Partisan Perceptual Bias and the Information Environment. *The Journal of Politics*, *74*(03), 672–684. http://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381612000187

Kohring, M. (2004). *Vertrauen in Journalismus: Theorie und Empirie*. Konstanz: UVK.

Kohring, M., & Matthes, J. (2007). Trust in News Media: Development and Validation of a Multidimensional Scale. *Communication Research*, *34*(2), 231–252. http://doi.org/10.1177/0093650206298071

Lee, T.-T. (2010). Why they don't trust the media: An examination of factors predicting trust. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *54*(1), 8–21. http://doi.org/10.1177/0002764210376308

Levi, M., & Stoker, L. (2000). Political Trust and Trustworthiness. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *3*(1), 475–507. http://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.475

Luhmann, N. (1968). *Vertrauen: ein Mechanismus der Reduktion sozialer Komplexität*. Stuttgart: F. Enke.

Miller, A. H. (1974). Political Issues and Trust in Government: 1964-1970. *The American Political Science Review*, *68*(3), 951–972.

Mullinix, K. J., Leeper, T. J., Druckman, J. N., Freese, J., Mullinix, K. J., Leeper, T. J., … Freese, J. (2016). The Generalizability of Survey Experiments. *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, (2015), 109–138. http://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2015.19

Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2010). When corrections fail: The persistence of political misperceptions. *Political Behavior*, *32*(2), 303–330. http://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-010-9112-2

Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2015). Estimating Fact-checking's Effects Evidence from a long-term experiment during campaign 2014. *American Press Institute*.

Redlawsk, D. P., Civettini, A. J. W., & Emmerson, K. M. (2010). The Affective Tipping Point: Do Motivated Reasoners Ever "Get It"? *Political Psychology*, *31*(4), 563–593. http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2010.00772.x

Simmel, G. (1999). *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*. (O. Rammstedt, Ed.) (11th ed.). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Skowronski, J. J., & Carlston, D. E. (1989). Negativity and extremity biases in impression formation: A review of explanations. *Psychological Bulletin*, *105*(1), 131–142. http://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.105.1.131

Taber, C. S., Cann, D., & Kucsova, S. (2009). The motivated processing of political arguments. *Political Behavior*, *31*(2), 137–155. http://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-008-9075-8

Taber, C. S., & Lodge, M. (2006). Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs. *American Journal of Political Science*, *50*(3), 755–769. http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2006.00214.x

Appendix

Figure 1-4: *Stimulus material*

POLITICHECK

TIM KAINE

"**Massive tax cuts** is exactly what the Bush administration did 10 years ago and it **put the economy in the deepest recession** since the 1930s"

- *PolitiCheck* on Tuesday, October 4 2016

Tim Kaine, the vice presidential candidate for the Democratic Party, talked about tax policy at the vice presidential debate.

Kaine has repeatedly made this claim but it is **wrong**. Kaine tries to suggest income inequality, exacerbated by tax cuts, led to the stagnation of the middle class and spurred excess borrowing and leverage. But the **key trigger for the crisis was a housing bubble.** Therefore experts across the board agree that it is **wrong** to claim that Bush's tax cuts were a main driver of the recession.

Therefore, Kaine's statement receives the rating: **FALSE**.

POLITICSWEEKLY

TIM KAINE

"**Massive tax cuts** is exactly what the Bush administration did 10 years ago and it **put the economy in the deepest recession** since the 1930s"

- *Tuesday, October 4 2016*

Tim Kaine, the vice presidential candidate for the Democratic Party, talked about tax policy at the vice presidential debate.

POLITICHECK

MIKE PENCE

"Today there are more than **7 million Americans more living in poverty** than the day that Obama became president of the United States"

- *PolitiCheck* *on Monday, September 1, 2016*

Mike Pence, the vice presidential candidate for the Republican Party, talked about poverty at the vice presidential debate.

Pence has repeatedly made this claim but it is **wrong**. Compared with the number in poverty in 2008, the difference is about **3 million**, so less than half the 7 million figure Pence **wrongly** claims. Further, population numbers have been growing as well and therefore the poverty rate has only increased by **0.3%** since 2008. Therefore experts across the board agree that it is **wrong** to imply a substantial increase in poverty under the Obama administration.

Therefore, Pence's statement receives the rating: **FALSE**.

POLITICSWEEKLY

MIKE PENCE

"Today there are more than **7 million Americans more living in poverty** than the day that Obama became president of the United States"

- *Monday, September 1, 2016*

Mike Pence, the vice presidential candidate for the Republican Party, talked about poverty at the vice presidential debate.