

Research Paper

# THE EFFECTS OF FACT-CHECKING THREAT

## Results from a field experiment in the states

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### Executive summary

Politicians in the United States are coming under increasing scrutiny from fact-checkers like PolitiFact, Factcheck.org, and the Washington Post Fact Checker, who examine the accuracy of public statements that are often reported without challenge by traditional news organizations. However, we know little about the effects of this practice, especially on public officials. One possibility is that fact-checking might help to deter the dissemination of misinformation, especially for candidates and legislators at lower levels of government who receive relatively little scrutiny and are sensitive to potential threats to re-election.

To test this hypothesis, we conducted a field experiment during the 2012 campaign evaluating the effects of reminding state legislators about the electoral and reputational threat posed by fact-checking. Our experimental sample consisted of nearly 1200 legislators in nine states with state PolitiFact affiliates. We found that legislators who were sent reminders that they are vulnerable to fact-checking were less likely to receive a negative PolitiFact rating or have the accuracy of their statements questioned publicly than legislators who were not sent reminders. These results suggest that the electoral and reputational threat posed by fact-checking can affect the behavior of elected officials. In this way, fact-checking could play an important role in improving political discourse and strengthening democratic accountability.

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## Introduction

In the United States, organizations like PolitiFact, Factcheck.org, and the Washington Post Fact Checker are bringing new scrutiny to the statements made by public officials. Too often, traditional news organizations report what public officials say without evaluating the accuracy of their statements or attempting to arbitrate between competing factual claims, which allows elites to make misleading comments in the press without challenge. By contrast, fact-checkers carefully scrutinize the claims made by candidates and elected officials and weigh them against the available evidence.

This sort of journalistic fact-checking has become much more common in recent years, but we know very little about the effects of this expansion.<sup>1</sup> One possibility is that fact-checking helps members of the public become better informed, but people often avoid or reject unwelcome information about politics. As a result, it is often difficult to correct misperceptions about controversial issues.<sup>2</sup>

Fact-checking might have other benefits, however. In particular, it might help to deter the dissemination of misinformation, particularly among candidates and legislators below the presidential level. Politicians may avoid making inaccurate claims that would attract the attention of fact-checkers to prevent damage to their electoral prospects or political reputation.

Previous research suggests that elected officials tend to be risk-averse and concerned about threats to re-election, including critical media coverage.

To test this hypothesis, we conducted a field experiment (an experiment conducted in a real-world setting rather than the laboratory) to evaluate the effects of being reminded about the threat posed by fact-checking. Specifically, our study compared the behavior of a group of state legislators who were sent letters warning of the reputational and electoral threats from fact-checking with a comparable control group of legislators. This experimental design allows us to make credible causal inferences about the effects of these reminders on legislators' behavior.

The results of our experiment indicate that politicians who were sent reminders that they are vulnerable to fact-checking were less likely to receive a negative PolitiFact rating or have the accuracy of their statements questioned publicly. These findings, which we describe further below, suggest that fact-checking can play an important role in improving political discourse and increasing democratic accountability.

## Methods and measures

In our field experiment, a total of 1169 state legislators in Florida, New Jersey, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wisconsin were

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randomly assigned to one of three groups. The treatment group ( $n=392$ ) was sent a series of letters between August 23 and October 12, 2012 alerting them to the potential consequences of being caught making incorrect statements by fact-checkers. The treatment mailings to legislators had several key elements. First, we reminded the legislators that there was a PolitiFact affiliate in their state to establish the credibility of the threat that they could be fact-checked. Second, we highlighted the potential electoral and reputational consequences of negative fact-check ratings by asking questions like “Do election campaigns use ‘false’ or ‘pants of fire’ verdicts in their advertising to attack their opponents?” and “Will state legislators lose their seats as a result of fact-checkers revealing that they made a false statement?” Finally, we included two examples of PolitiFact “pants on fire” fact-checks from another state as examples.

Another group of legislators were randomly assigned to what is known as a placebo condition ( $n=386$ ). These legislators were sent a series of letters during the same period noting that we were conducting a study evaluating the accuracy of politicians’ statements that excluded any language about fact-checking or the consequences of inaccurate statements. We included this additional condition to make sure that any effects of the treatment mailing were not the result

of participants’ awareness that they were being studied.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, legislators in the control condition ( $n=391$ ) were not sent any mailings or contacted in any way.

We examined the effects of our letters on the behavior of state legislators in our sample using two outcome measures for the study period (August 24–November 6, 2012). First, did the legislator in question receive a PolitiFact rating of Half True or worse? If our treatment letter was successful in encouraging legislators to be more careful, then we should expect this group, on average, to have better ratings from PolitiFact. Our second outcome measure measured whether the accuracy of a claim made by the legislator was questioned in one or more articles or blog posts appearing in the Lexis/Nexis news database during the study period. Again, these sorts of questions should be raised less frequently if the treatment letter had the intended effect. Finally, we combine these measures into a composite indicator of whether the legislator received a negative PolitiFact rating or had the accuracy of a claim questioned publicly.<sup>4</sup>

## Results

Before we turn to the results of our experiment, it is worth noting just how rare it is for state legislators to be fact-checked. Among the 1169 legislators in our sample, only 23 received ratings from PolitiFact

state affiliates (2.0%). In particular, the distribution of state legislator fact-checks varied substantially across states. Figure 1 presents the number of legislators who received one or more fact-checks by state.

The states that were the most competitive in the presidential race (Florida, Ohio, and Virginia) did not publish any fact-checks of state legislators during this period, suggesting that the ad wars being waged in the states by the Obama and Romney campaigns diverted the focus of fact-checkers away from lower-level officials.

While it is not possible to examine the accuracy of the statements that were not rated directly, we can examine the distribution of ratings across the 27 PolitiFact fact-checks of state legislators in our sample during the study period (one legislator was rated five times).

As Figure 2 indicates, 19 of the 27 statements checked were rated Half True or worse (70%), suggesting that the ratings that were published were relatively negative.

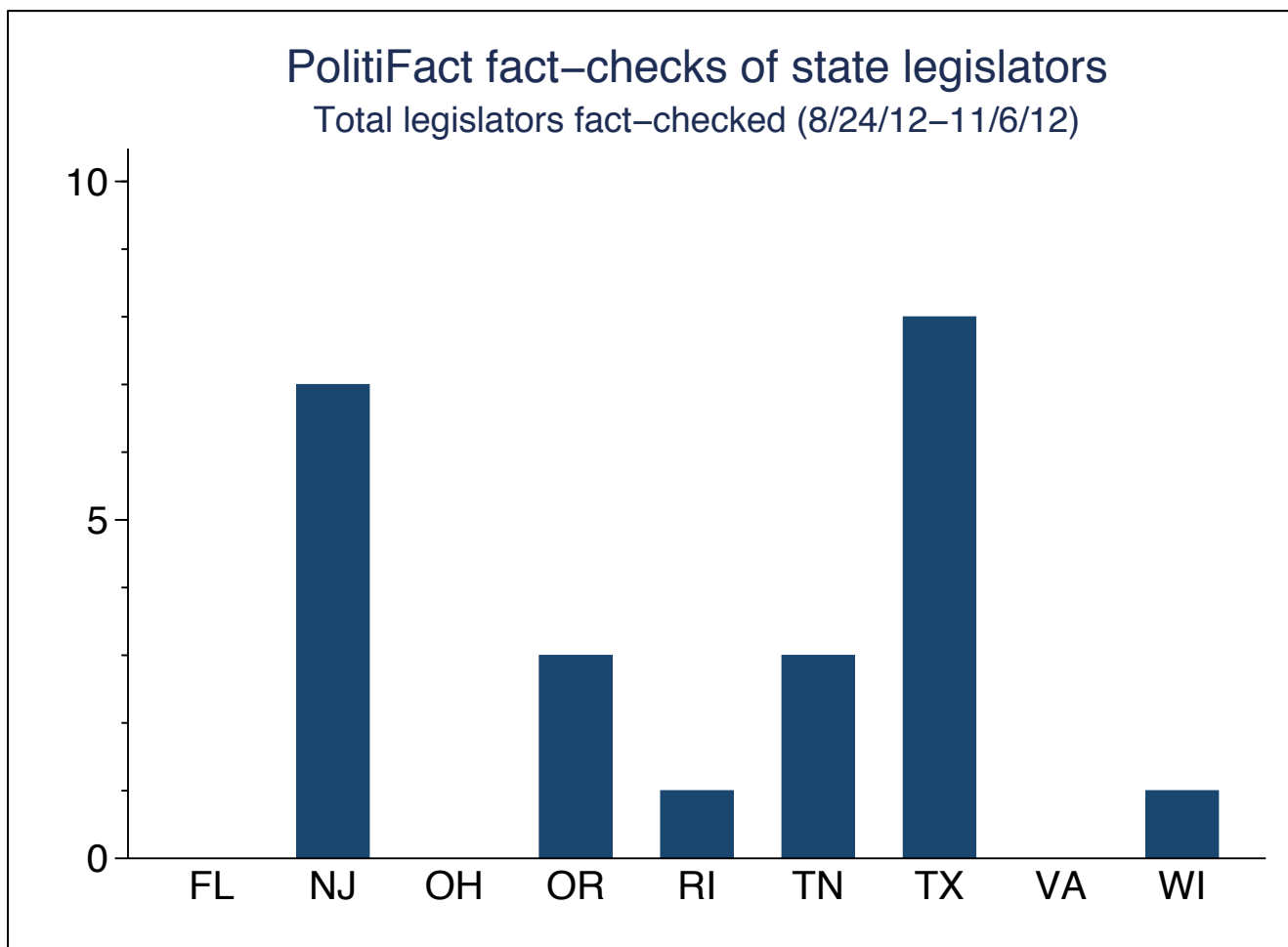
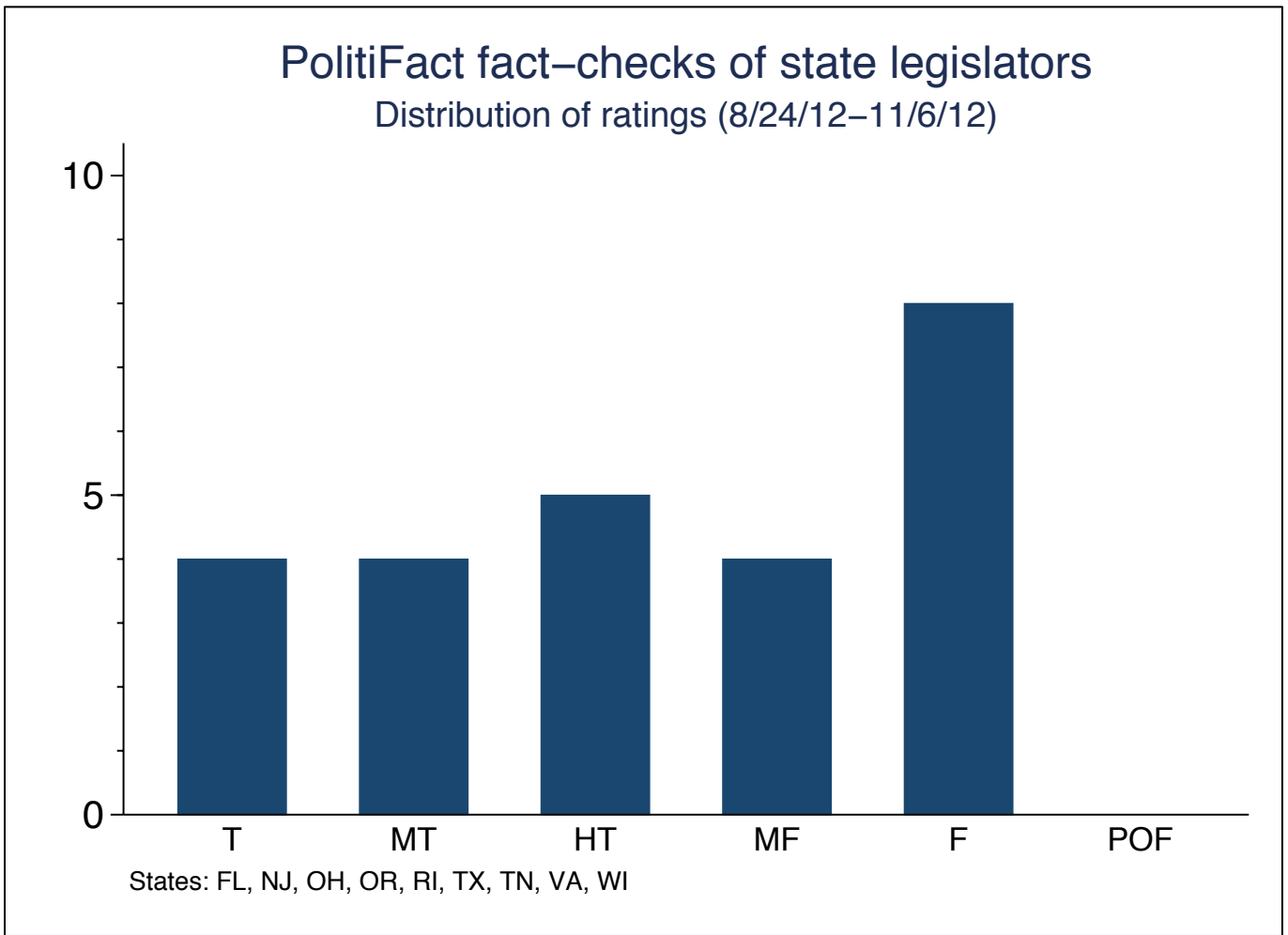


Figure 1: Very few state legislator fact-checks were published during the campaign.



**Figure 2: State legislators tended to receive relatively negative ratings.**

Most notably, however, we find striking differences in indicators of accuracy between legislators who were sent treatment letters about the electoral and reputational threats from fact-checkers and those sent placebo letters or no mail at all. As Table 1 shows, thirteen legislators who were not sent reminder letters about fact-checking received a negative rating from PolitiFact (1.7%) compared with only three legislators in the treatment group (0.8%). This difference represents a 55% reduction in the relative risk of receiving a negative PolitiFact rating. Similarly, eight legislators

who were not assigned to the treatment group had the accuracy of their statements questioned publicly in content indexed in LexisNexis (1.0%) compared with one in the treatment group (0.3%) a relative risk reduction of 75%. To maximize statistical power, we combine these measures. Figure 3 illustrates the differences between conditions for the combined measure, which are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). The rate of accuracy criticism decreased from 2.7% among those not sent reminder letters to 1.0% in the treatment group, a 63% reduction in relative risk.

	Control/placebo	Treatment	Letter effect	
			Absolute	Relative
Negative PolitiFact rating	13 (1.7%)	3 (0.8%)	-0.9%	-55%
Accuracy questioned	8 (1.0%)	1 (0.3%)	-0.8%	-75%
Combined measure	21 (2.7%)	4 (1.0%)	-1.7%	-63%

Table 1: Substantial decreases in indicators of inaccuracy among treated legislators.

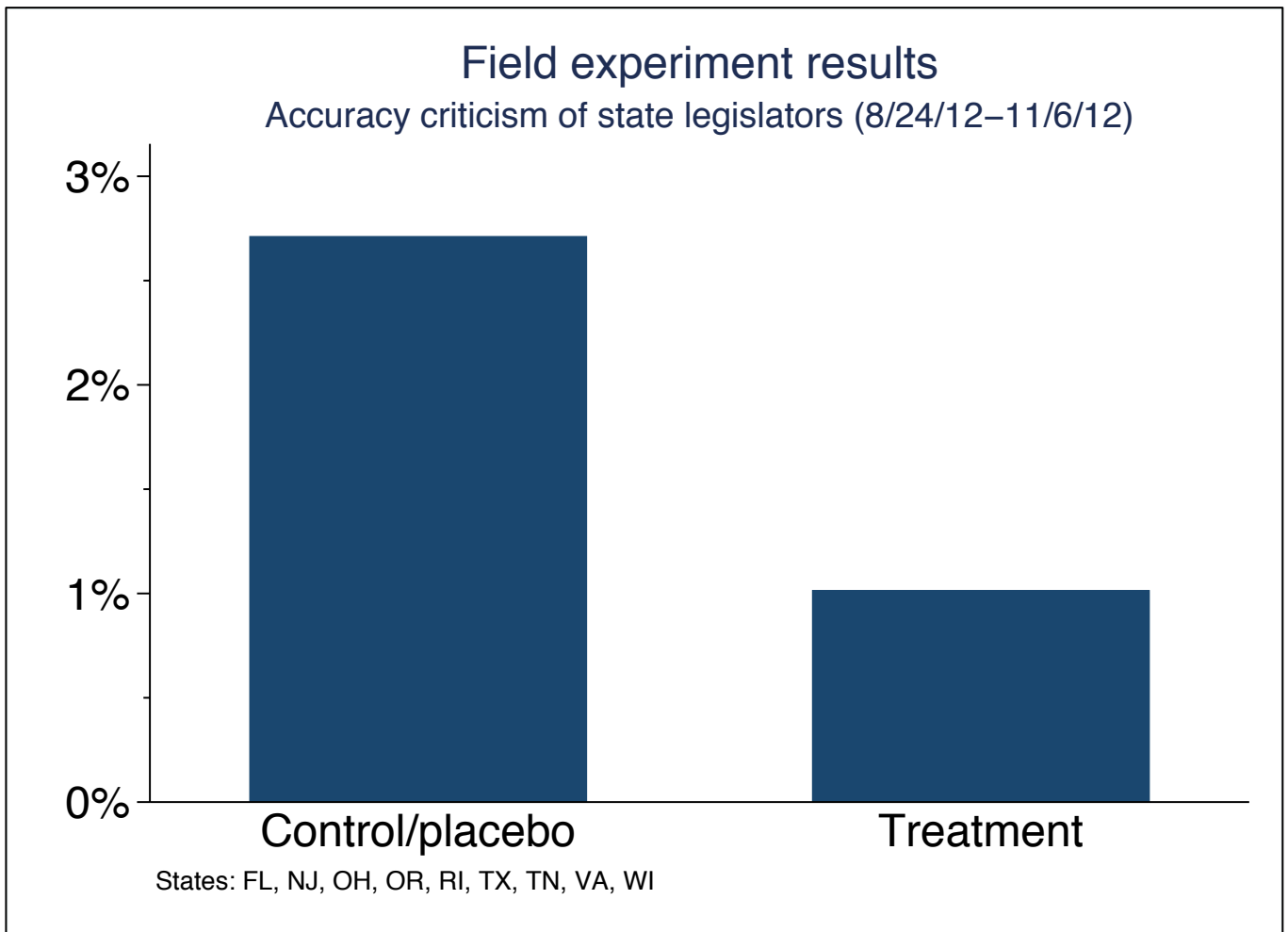


Figure 3: Dramatic reductions in relative risk of accuracy criticism for combined measure.

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## Conclusions and recommendations

While fact-checking of state legislators is still regrettably rare, these results suggest that state legislators who are reminded of the electoral and reputational threat from fact-checking do change their behavior. Our field experiment substantially reduced the likelihood that PolitiFact or other sources would criticize the accuracy of their public statements. These results suggest that the effects of fact-checking extend beyond providing information to motivated citizens who seek out these websites. Given the difficulties of changing the minds of voters or the behavior of candidates at the presidential level, fact-checking other state and federal officials may be a better approach for the movement going forward.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the history and growth of the fact-checking movement, see the following New America Foundation Media Policy Initiative research papers:

“The Rise of Political Fact-checking: How Reagan Inspired a Journalistic Movement: A Reporter’s Eye View.” Michael Dobbs. February 24, 2012.

[http://mediapolicy.newamerica.net/publications/policy/the\\_rise\\_of\\_political\\_fact\\_checking\\_1](http://mediapolicy.newamerica.net/publications/policy/the_rise_of_political_fact_checking_1)

“The Fact-Checking Universe in Spring 2012: An Overview.” Lucas Graves and Tom Glaisyer. February 28, 2012.

<http://mediapolicy.newamerica.net/publicat>

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[ions/policy/the\\_fact\\_checking\\_universe\\_in\\_spring\\_2012](http://mediapolicy.newamerica.net/publications/policy/the_fact_checking_universe_in_spring_2012)

<sup>2</sup> For more on the psychology of misinformation and corrections, see the following New America Foundation Media Policy Initiative research paper:

“Misinformation and Fact-checking: Research Findings from Social Science. Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler. February 28, 2012.

[http://newamerica.net/publications/policy/misinformation\\_and\\_fact\\_checking](http://newamerica.net/publications/policy/misinformation_and_fact_checking)

<sup>3</sup> We find no evidence of such an effect and thus combine the control and placebo groups in the analyses below; see our academic working paper for further discussion:

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/fact-checking-elites.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> See our academic working paper at <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/fact-checking-elites.pdf> for more details on the methods and measures used in this study.



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