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Partisanship and Perceptions of Fairness: Ignoring the Facts

Barbara Allen,^{*} Eric Lawrence,[†] Daniel Stevens[‡] and John Sullivan[§]

Abstract

This paper employs survey experiments to examine how contextualizing the claims made in negative political advertising affects perceptions of their fairness. This has implications for the components of fairness judgments, e.g., if “truth” is a component of fairness, being informed that a claim is untrue should undermine perceptions of its fairness, as well as for the efficacy of “fact-checking.” Our experiments on a random national telephone sample show some effects of being informed that a claim is untrue but few if it is characterized as taken out of context or as irrelevant. These findings imply that: (a) while evaluations of the truth of claims appear to be a component of fairness, considerations such as whether claims are the “whole story” or “relevant” to the decision at hand do not, and (b) contextualizing of the claims of ads in fact-checks has very little impact on perceptions of their fairness.

Keywords: Survey experiment, negative advertising, fairness, fact-checking.

When do people decide that negative rhetoric has gone too far? The stakes in the answer to this question are high if, as Stevens et al. (2008) contend, perceptions of the fairness of campaign claims are at the heart of why some negative campaigns appear to stimulate turnout while others have the opposite effect. Previous research has focused on three, non-mutually exclusive, possibilities: that negativity is deemed unfair if the claims are (a) untrue (Stevens et al. 2008, 2015), (b) taken out of context (Cappella and Jamieson 1994), or (c) deemed irrelevant (Fridkin and Kenney 2011; Jamieson and Hardy 2012).¹ In this article, we present the results of an experiment designed to assess the importance of these three considerations in evaluations of

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¹A fourth possibility, that negativity is seen as unfair when it is “uncivil” (Brooks and Geer 2007; Maisel 2012) is not explored here. Civility refers to the language in which a claim is couched, as opposed to its veracity or relevance. We could not examine civility in the experiment we outline—incivility cannot be fact-checked.

the fairness of negative claims. In the process, we also shed light on the impact of “fact-checks.” We find little evidence that context or relevance are components of fairness but some evidence that the truthfulness of claims is a consideration.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

While there is consensus about what negativity in campaign communication is (e.g., Geer’s (2006, 29) description of a negative appeal as, “any criticism or reason to vote against the opposition”), research has consistently found that people do not see the various claims characterized in this minimal definition as equally acceptable (e.g., Kahn and Kenney 1999). Scholars suggest that to understand what constitutes legitimate or illegitimate negativity, we must distinguish between negative claims that are perceived to contain fair rather than unfair criticisms (Bartels 1998; Jamieson 2000; Kahn and Kenney 1999). Fridkin and Kenney (2011) combine the dimensions of civility and *relevance* in their research, arguing, “the relevance of the message is paramount” (309), while Jamieson and Hardy (2012) add that accepted “rules of argument” require that relevant evidence be presented in its context.

Fairness surely matters, but the current research suffers from three limitations. First, such studies have generally ignored how partisanship is likely to moderate judgments. Our own research (Stevens et al. 2015) shows that while individuals hold principles about what is fair and unfair in advertising, partisans systematically regard criticism of their preferred party’s candidate as unfair and criticism of her opponent as fair, regardless of their fairness standards—conforming to what we term a “strong partisan bias” model. Second, previous research findings tend to refer to unmediated negative messages, although contemporary exposure to political advertising is increasingly characterized by media deconstruction, contextualization, and examinations of claim accuracy (Geer 2012; Ridout and Franz 2011). Third, none of this research has examined different dimensions of fairness simultaneously in a controlled experiment.

THEORY: FACT-CHECKING AND FAIRNESS

We begin with the assumption, consistent with previous research (e.g., Freedman and Lawton 2000), that individuals hold principles about what constitute fair and unfair political ad claims. These principles interact with partisan predispositions, which can be either congruent or non-congruent with the target of the criticisms, such that partisans’ judgments of a claim’s fairness tend to be consistent with partisanship (Stevens et al. 2015). This conjecture implies four combinations of principles and partisanship that may occur with exposure to a negative claim in an ad. For individuals in the Unfair-Non-congruent group, partisan motivations point

in the same direction as principles and we expect, predominantly, criticisms will be considered unfair. Similarly, for individuals in the Fair-Congruent group, partisan motivations point in the same direction as principles and we expect criticisms to be judged fair. However, individuals in the Unfair-Congruent and Fair-Non-congruent groups are cross-pressured. In the Fair-Non-congruent group, the claim concerns a topic they consider to be fair grounds for criticism but it has been made of the candidate whose partisanship they share. In the Unfair-Congruent case, criticisms violate their principles but are congruent with their partisan sympathies. We have previously shown that cross-pressured individuals will exhibit strong bias, turning to partisanship rather than principle for a guide (Stevens et al., 2015), if for no other reason, we argue, than their ignorance of the truthfulness of the ad claim. When the veracity of a criticism is uncertain partisans tend to fall back on the cue of partisan identification.

Fact-checks may disturb these tendencies, however. Even among the putatively unpressured cases (Unfair-Non-congruent and Fair-Congruent), we may generally expect individuals to be less likely to judge a criticism as fair if they are told its accuracy has been challenged by an “independent organization” (Stevens et al. 2015). In fact, we have found the effects of fact-check disconfirmation are most pronounced on partisans for whom the criticism is congruent, particularly those in the Fair-Congruent group, although partisan bias is reduced rather than eliminated. Such findings suggest that the truthfulness of claims is one component of fairness judgments: even partisans for whom the subject matter is usually considered fair game struggle to conclude that an actual claim, leveled at the opposition, is fair, when its truthfulness is brought into question. If truthfulness were irrelevant, judgments of the fairness of the criticism would be unaffected.

We employ a similar logic to test three hypotheses about the meaning and importance of truthfulness in evaluations of fairness. H1 “Fairness is equated with bare factual accuracy”: partisan bias in judgments of the fairness of criticisms will therefore be reduced if the accuracy of those criticisms is questioned. H2 “Fairness is equated with providing the complete context for an accurate claim”: even if the bare facts of a criticism are accurate, taking acts or words of an opponent out of context may distort the truth to a degree that citizens judge as equally unfair—or even more unfair—than a bare-facts falsehood. If not being taken out of context is a component of fairness, we would expect that highlighting the content of a criticism as “not the whole story” would undermine perceptions of its fairness. H3 “Fairness is equated with relevance for an accurate and context-specified claim”: criticisms may be deemed unfair because they are *irrelevant* to the judgment at hand (Fridkin and Kenney 2008, 2011). The latter conjecture suggests one reason why pundits argue that voters object more to personal than to issue-based criticism of candidates: the facts may be accurate but the claim is objectionable because the voter finds that it has no bearing on a candidate’s ability to serve in office. If relevance is a component of fairness, we would expect that undermining the relevance of a criticism would diminish perceptions of its fairness.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We conducted survey experiments on a random national telephone sample of 500 respondents during the 2008 US election campaign, along with 200 respondents we re-interviewed from earlier surveys (for more details, see online Appendix). We pool the two samples. Excluding the panel respondents makes no difference to our substantive conclusions.

Respondents were initially asked about the fairness of criticisms by one candidate of another (the Fair-Unfair dimension above) for their “voting record,” “sources of campaign contributions,” and for being “out of touch with ordinary Americans,” without reference to specific candidates or parties, i.e., in principle. We then provided some specific examples of criticisms on the same topics, made by the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates (the Congruent-Non-congruent dimension above) and their supporters in 2008 and randomly varied the text that followed.

- The control group was simply presented with the negative message (e.g., for “criticizing an opponent for taking campaign contributions from certain special interests” the text was “Barack Obama claims to get most of his money from middle class donors in small amounts, but Republicans say he receives the majority of his funds from trial lawyers and other special interests. According to the Republican National Committee, Barack Obama also has several lobbyists on his campaign staff and has accepted in kind contributions from many others. Is this a very fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair, or very unfair criticism of Obama?”).
- The treatment groups were presented with the negative message followed by a statement that an “independent organization” had checked the facts and found them to be: (a) *Untrue (H1)* (e.g., “But after this ad was run, an independent organization checked the facts. They found that claims about PAC funding for Obama are untrue today and applied only to his earlier campaigns. Obama has returned funds from lobbyists and PACs since declaring his candidacy for President”), (b) true but *Not the Whole Story (H2)* (e.g., “But after this ad was run, an independent organization checked the facts. They found that although the information presented by Republicans is generally correct, claims about PAC funding for Obama applied only to his earlier campaigns. Obama has returned funds from lobbyists and PACs since declaring his candidacy for President”), or (c) true but *Irrelevant* to the candidate’s ability to govern (H3) (e.g., “But after this ad was run, an independent organization checked the facts. They found that although the information presented by the Republicans is generally correct, no modern presidential campaign has been possible without contributions from a variety of donors, including lobbyists.”).²

²We referred to an “independent organization” in order to avoid responses to the fact-checks based on their source rather than their content. All other question wordings are available in the online Appendix.

We did not remind respondents that criticisms of Obama and McCain were on the same topics whose fairness in principle they had previously been asked to assess.³

The experiments covered all three treatments for criticisms of Obama and McCain for the sources of their campaign contributions, the *Untrue* (H1) and *Not Whole Story* (H2) treatments on the topic of their voting records—that candidates' voting records on energy policy were irrelevant to the election was not credible—and the *Not Whole Story* (H2) and *Irrelevant* (H3) conditions for criticisms of the candidates as out of touch.⁴

Although the primary purpose of the experiments was to examine different components of perceptions of the fairness of criticisms, they also speak to the efficacy of fact-checking. While the language of exposé sometimes assesses the basic truth of a claim, it frequently fails to label a claim so straightforwardly as “false,” offering instead a judgment of “misleading” or “not the whole story.” Fact-checks less often characterize the claims in ads as “irrelevant,” but attributing such critique to them is in keeping with their style and allows us to examine relevance as a criterion in judgments of fairness.⁵ Previous research has offered mixed findings on the effectiveness of fact-checks. However, it has tended to conflate different kinds of assessments, e.g., criticisms that are “false” and criticisms that are “not the whole story” (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Cappella and Jamieson 1994; McKinnon and Kaid 1999; O’Sullivan and Geiger 1995; Pfau and Louden 1994).

RESULTS

We model perceptions of the fairness of specific criticisms of the presidential candidates as a function of three variables, partisanship (congruent/non-congruent)⁶, perceptions of the fairness of the criticism in principle (fair/unfair), and the treatment. Partisanship is congruent with the criticism if the respondent identifies as Republican and the criticism is of Barack Obama, or if the respondent is a Democratic identifier and the criticism is of John McCain. We also include interactions between each of these variables.⁷

³If respondents recognized the connection, we might expect them to try to make their judgments of the fairness of specific criticism consistent with their earlier answers, rendering our findings conservative.

⁴There was no dispute that McCain owned many houses, nor that Obama had made his comments about small town Americans.

⁵The language we use is similar to the agree-disagree statements used by Fridkin and Kenney (2008) to gauge perceptions of relevance, e.g., “I think the topic of the advertisement was irrelevant for politics.”

⁶Leaning partisans are coded as partisans, with pure independents, about 9% of the sample, excluded from the analysis.

⁷We do not control for additional variables because we assigned subjects randomly to treatments. We examined the treatments in a series of models in which we predicted assignment as a function of whether or not a criticism was judged fair in principle, partisanship, trust in government, political knowledge, and the number of days per week a respondent read a newspaper, each of which could affect perceptions of fairness and for which non-random assignment to treatment could therefore be a problem. If assignment

Our main interest is in the effects of the conditions and their interactions with congruent partisanship and viewing a criticism as fair in principle. Does having a criticism characterized as untrue, not the whole story, or irrelevant render partisans less likely to regard it as fair? [Table 1](#) presents the estimates from logit models for the three kinds of criticisms—of campaign contributions, voting record, and being out of touch—of the two candidates, making six models in total.

To ease interpretation, we present the average predicted effects from the models of the different combinations of partisan congruence, fairness principles, and experimental conditions on the probability of judging each of the criticisms to be fair in three figures. In each figure, the predicted probability that the criticism is fair defines the vertical axis. Each group is represented by a marker. When a marker is higher vertically, the predicted perceived fairness is higher for that group. The horizontal axis is defined by whether a criticism is congruent. Differences within lines moving from left to right are the partisan congruence effects; the distances between markers of the same shape—circle or diamond—represent the effects of fairness principles for non-congruent and congruent partisans; the distance between markers of the same fill—solid or hollow—represents the effects of the experimental conditions for non-congruent and congruent partisans.⁸

[Figure 1](#) begins by showing the probability of judging criticisms of Obama and McCain's voting records and sources of campaign contributions to be fair, in the control and *Untrue* conditions (H1) from the first four columns of results in [Table 1](#). [Figure 1](#) shows, as we would expect, that congruent partisans were more likely to judge the criticisms as fair, although we see variation due to fairness principles: if congruent partisans said a topic was fair in principle they were generally more likely to see it as fair in practice. We also see some signs of effects of the treatment among congruent partisans: the circles that represent the control conditions show congruent partisans tending to perceive the criticisms as fairer than when the accuracy of the criticisms is brought into question. If the experimental treatment actually reduced partisan bias in perceptions of fairness we should see flatter lines between non-congruent and congruent partisans than in the control condition. We see some of that in [Figure 1](#)—in [Table 1](#) all of the three-way interactions *Congruent partisan* \times *Untrue condition* \times *Fair in principle* are negative, i.e., in the expected direction, though none of them are statistically significant (the p -value for McCain's voting record is 0.27 and for Obama's campaign contributions it is 0.17). This is in keeping with our previous finding that undermining the factual accuracy of claims may attenuate but does not eliminate partisan bias (Stevens et al. 2015). It provides at most weak evidence in support of H1, however, although we note that while the interactions with partisanship are not statistically significant being told that the

is random, we still expect some statistically significant relationships, which is what we find, but the number of these relationships is within the bounds of chance.

⁸Differences in the slopes of the lines are the interaction effects. In all cases, we can test whether the differences are statistically significant, but we do not emphasize those (non)-differences here. A leading reference on this approach is Gelman and Pardoe (2007).

Table 1
Perceptions of the Fairness of Criticisms of Candidates Given Different Factchecking Judgments (Logits)

	Voting record		Campaign contributions		Out of touch	
	McCain (1)	Obama (2)	McCain (3)	Obama (4)	McCain (5)	Obama (6)
Congruent partisan	1.12 (0.67)**	0.42 (0.64)	1.50 (0.62)*	0.78 (0.65)	1.76 (0.47)*	2.17 (0.56)*
Untrue condition	-0.10 (0.83)	0.13 (0.53)	-2.38 (1.12)*	-0.92 (0.65)		
Congruent partisan × Untrue condition	-0.30 (0.96)	-0.35 (0.87)	0.96 (1.25)	1.28 (0.98)		
Not whole story condition	0.17 (0.72)	-0.08 (0.51)	-0.66 (0.67)	-0.45 (0.56)	-0.16 (0.49)	0.16 (0.62)
Congruent partisan × Not whole story condition	-0.98 (0.86)	-0.28 (0.86)	-0.41 (0.88)	0.16 (0.87)	-0.35 (0.65)	-0.48 (0.75)
Irrelevant condition			-0.23 (0.70)	-0.14 (0.52)	0.47 (0.48)	-0.58 (0.76)
Congruent partisan × Irrelevant condition			-0.72 (0.89)	0.68 (0.89)	-1.09 (0.63)**	1.40 (0.88)
Fair in principle	0.28 (0.64)	-0.31 (0.43)	0.95 (0.53)**	0.36 (0.44)	0.48 (0.46)	0.49 (0.57)
Congruent partisan × Fair in principle	1.04 (0.76)	2.08 (0.73)*	-0.12 (0.79)	1.61 (0.82)**	0.47 (0.63)	0.45 (0.71)
Untrue condition × Fair in principle	-0.25 (0.90)	-0.23 (0.64)	0.63 (1.20)	-0.19 (0.77)		
Not whole story condition × Fair in principle	-0.78 (0.80)	-0.04 (0.62)	-0.44 (0.78)	-0.25 (0.69)	-0.07 (0.63)	-0.47 (0.78)
Irrelevant condition × Fair in principle			-0.71 (0.81)	-0.03 (0.64)	-1.00 (0.64)	1.25 (0.87)
Congruent partisan × Untrue condition × Fair in principle	-1.20 (1.07)	-0.10 (1.00)	-1.13 (1.40)	-1.61 (1.18)		
Congruent partisan × Not whole story condition × Fair in principle	1.26 (1.01)	-0.07 (1.00)	0.29 (1.08)	-0.53 (1.10)	0.59 (0.89)	0.33 (0.97)
Congruent partisan × Irrelevant condition × Fair in principle			0.76 (1.08)	-1.17 (1.09)	1.21 (0.86)	-2.36 (1.06)*
Constant	-0.92 (0.59)	-0.82 (0.36)*	-0.56 (0.44)	-0.78 (0.36)*	-1.06 (0.37)	-2.13 (0.47)*
N	684	687	673	669	679	676

Notes: Estimates are from logit models. *Congruent partisan*, *Fair in principle*, *Untrue*, *Not Whole Story*, and *Irrelevant condition*, are dummy variables with a value of one indicating that a respondent was exposed to information undermining the accuracy of the criticism, and zero the control group.

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.10$ (two-tailed test).

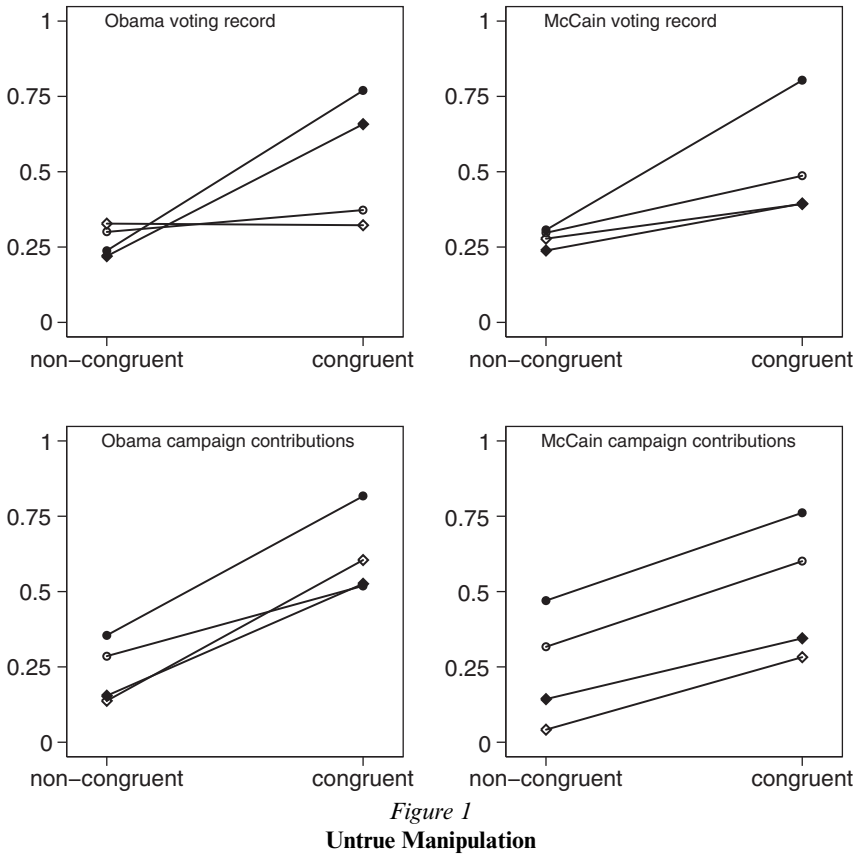


Figure 1

Untrue Manipulation

Predicted probability of perceived fairness.

Partisan congruence x untrue manipulation x perceived fairness in abstract.

Circles randomized to control condition, diamonds randomized to untrue condition.

Hollows perceived critique fair in abstract, solids perceived critique unfair in abstract.

criticism of McCain for the sources of his campaign contributions was factually inaccurate diminished perceptions of the fairness of this claim for congruent *and* non-congruent partisans alike, which supports the notion that the veracity of claims is a component of fairness judgments.⁹

Turning briefly to the results for non-congruent partisans in the other three examples—Obama's campaign contributions, Obama's voting record, McCain's voting record—Table 1 and Figure 1 show that neither fairness principles nor the experimental conditions made much difference: all the probabilities in Figure 1 are below the 0.5 threshold and there is relatively little variation. Thus, even if a topic of

⁹This appears partly due to Republicans being untypically willing to accept this criticism of John McCain. When given information that undermined the truth of the claim the likelihood that Republicans would judge the criticism to be fair decreased dramatically.

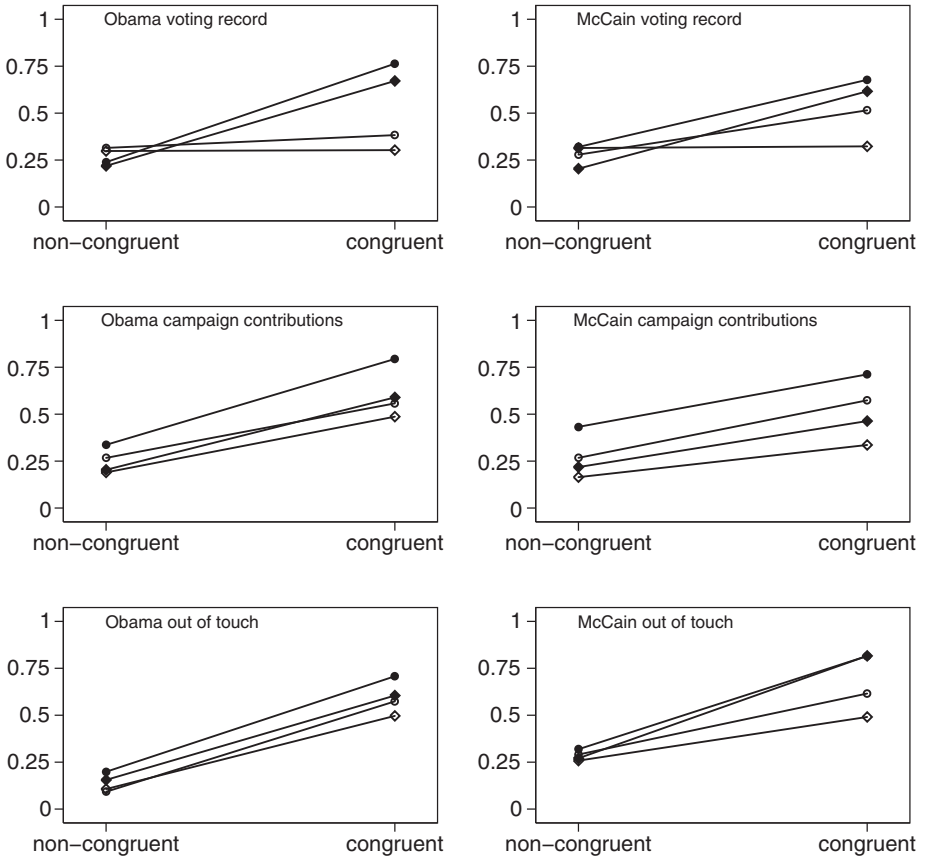


Figure 2
Not Whole Story Manipulation

Predicted probability of perceived fairness.
 Partisan congruence x not whole story manipulation x perceived fairness in abstract.
 Circles randomized to control condition, diamonds randomized to not whole story condition.
 Hollows perceived critique fair in abstract, solids perceived critique unfair in abstract.

criticism had been deemed fair in principle by non-congruent partisans, they were no more likely to judge actual examples of that criticism as fair in practice when it was of their favored candidate. Hearing that an independent organization had said the facts behind the criticism were untrue made little difference.

All six models in Table 1 include estimates of the impact of the *Not Whole Story* condition, while Figure 2 shows the average marginal effects on perceptions of fairness that are implied by these estimates (H2). They illustrate modest effects of the *Not Whole Story* condition on perceptions of the fairness of criticism of the candidates' voting records both on congruent and non-congruent partisans: the lines throughout Figure 2 tend to be of similar slope and the distance between markers of the same fill modest. Thus, while the effects on perceptions of the fairness

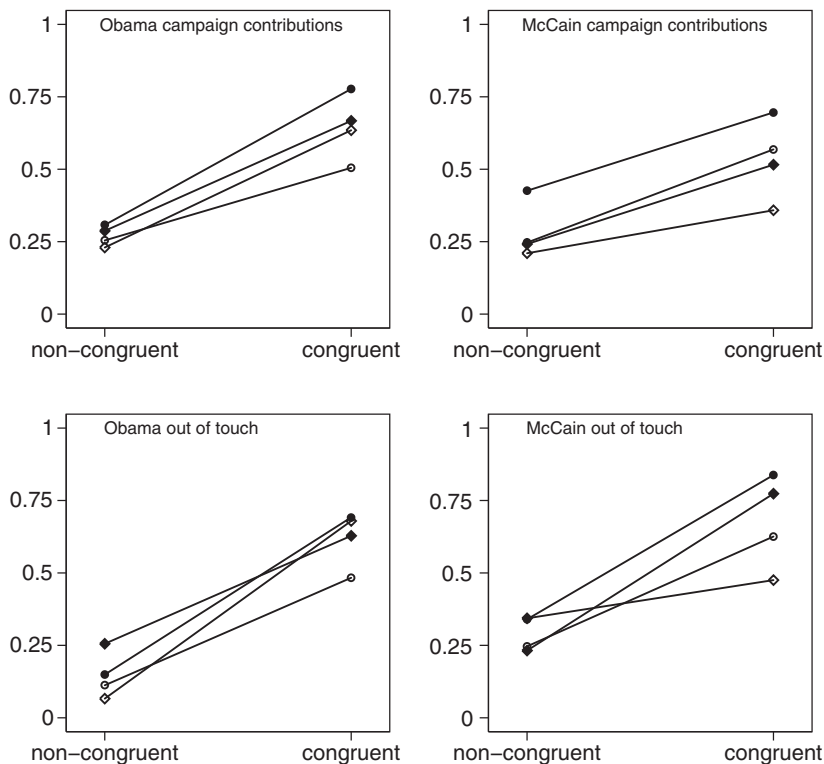


Figure 3
Irrelevance Manipulation

Predicted probability of perceived fairness.
 Partisan congruence x irrelevance manipulation x perceived fairness in abstract.
 Circles randomized to control condition, diamonds randomized to irrelevance condition.
 Hollows perceived critique fair in abstract, solids perceived critique unfair in abstract.

of criticism of the candidates’ campaign contributions, or for being out of touch, present the familiar pattern of partisan bias, there is little evidence of effects of the *Not whole story condition* on judgments of fairness, even of the size of the impact of the *Untrue condition*. Neither do we see any main effects of the treatment. These results provide no support for H2.

The estimates in columns 3–6 of Table 1 and the average marginal effects displayed in Figure 3 show the effects of the *Irrelevant conditions* on perceptions of the fairness of charges pertaining to sources of campaign contributions and being out of touch with ordinary Americans. The results for campaign contributions are underwhelming, indicating that contextualizing the criticism as irrelevant did little to alter partisan bias, but also that the manipulation was as likely to make congruent partisans view the criticism of Obama as *fairer* than in the control condition. For the more personal charge of being out of touch with ordinary Americans, the results for Obama also show that the condition left partisan bias in judgments of fairness

largely unaffected: regardless of whether they said such criticism was fair in principle, Republicans were inclined to see the specific charge as fair criticism of Obama and Democrats as unfair criticism; indeed Republicans who viewed the criticism as fair in principle were somewhat *more* likely than other groups to view the specific charge as fair given the experimental manipulation questioning its relevance. For McCain being out of touch, contextualizing the claim had little impact on non-congruent partisans, who were inclined to think the charge was unfair, but the condition reduced perceptions of fairness among Democrats who had said such criticism was fair in principle. On the other hand, it did not do so among those who had said it was unfair. In sum, the evidence in Figure 3 indicates that relevance does not appear to be at the core of perceptions of the fairness of criticisms (H3).

CONCLUSION

We have explored three possible components of perceptions of the fairness of campaign criticisms by examining the effects of characterizing criticisms of candidates as untrue, not the whole story or irrelevant in the guise of real world fact-checking. We have previously shown that one kind of fact-checking judgment—that a claim is inaccurate and in that sense untrue—may attenuate but does not eliminate what we refer to as “strong partisan bias” (Stevens et al. 2015). In this paper, we examined a broader range of fact-checking judgments over more claims and in a different election and found further evidence of strong partisan bias in the widespread absence of effects. Fact-checking judgments in our experiments sometimes had an effect on perceptions of the fairness of criticisms but more broadly their impact was minimal or even opposite to expectations. These findings yield two implications. First, while evaluations of the truth of claims appear to be a component of fairness (although even characterizing a claim as untrue also often has no impact on perceptions of its fairness) we found little evidence that fairness necessitates that a claim be placed in its context or be deemed relevant. Second, presenting the context for an ad claim provided with fact-checks will have very little impact on the perceptions of partisans. In less partisan times, perhaps, fact-checks alerting voters that they are getting less than the “whole story” may hold more sway, but in the contemporary period covered by our experiments, partisan considerations dominate.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this paper, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2015.6>.

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