



Bryan White <zebrafactcheck@gmail.com>

"Southern strategy" fail

1 message

Bryan White <zebrafactcheck@gmail.com>
To: truthometer@politifact.com

Tue, Apr 16, 2019 at 1:37 AM

Dear Truth-O-Meter,

Your [April 10, 2019 PunditFact item](#) on the "Southern strategy" makes a number of methodological errors as well as two unequivocal errors of fact. A reconsideration of the entire work is likely in order.

Methodological errors:

- The fact check treats an apparently compound statement as a simple statement
- The author apparently chose the pool of experts (consulted and otherwise) on the basis of Twitter activism against the claim in question (that's a recipe for non-neutrality)
- The fact check self-confessedly relies on the aforementioned pool of experts together with news reports for its finding of fact.
- The fact check ignores revisionist scholarship questioning the popular understanding of the "Southern strategy"

How does that set of procedural flaws get past a team of editors?

Errors of fact:

Of Candace Owens, the fact check claims "On [Twitter](#), she said she was referring to the "myth" that the Republicans and Democrats in Congress switched parties." That's false. Owens said she was referring to the parties switching without specifying Congress. And used an illustration from Congress to illustrate the point (which is a fair technique). Perhaps PolitiFact was swayed toward its interpretation by the ham-handed riposte by historian Kevin Kruse that PolitiFact quoted in the following paragraph (not a good excuse). The mistake is hard to understand in light of the fact that Owens cited a PragerU video for more information on her position. That video likewise does not suggest it was talking about Congress only.

The second error is the key error.

In trying to make the case that the Southern strategy existed contrary to Owens' claim, PolitiFact cited partisan columnist Joseph Alsop (calling him "an influential syndicated newspaper columnist" without identifying him as a liberal partisan) from an article published in 1962.

Yes, you read that correctly. The column was published in 1962. PolitiFact defined the "Southern strategy" thus:

The "[Southern strategy](#)" refers to efforts by the Republican Party to appeal to Southern white voters who were turned off by the Democratic Party advocating for civil rights.

The supporting embedded link is more specific, saying the "Southern strategy" emerged in 1964. If PolitiFact believes the Democratic Party stood out prior to 1963 for its advocacy of civil rights then it should specify by example what it has in mind.

PolitiFact tries to prove the existence of a strategy that supposedly emerged in 1964 using evidence from 1962. Most obviously that counts as a fallacy of anachronism. But the real problem occurs because the quotation of Alsop hints at a potentially competitive alternate explanation for the facts.

For that reason, it would not be appropriate for PolitiFact to simply banish the anachronism from the fact check. Instead, journalistic curiosity ought to compel exploration of the way "Southern strategy" was understood before the strategy supposedly existed (that is, before either iteration of the Civil Rights Act was passed). The answer to that question likely affects the subsequent understanding of the term, and may upend the contemporary narrative about the "Southern strategy" completely or in part.

4/16/2019

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We look forward to PolitiFact's open and honest attempts to address the problems with this fact check.

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Sincerely,

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