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PolitiFact's claim about Trump needs support or an "opinion" label

1 message

Bryan White <zebrafactcheck@gmail.com>

Wed, Nov 16, 2022 at 4:32 PM

To: truthometer@politifact.com

Cc: mramirezuribe@poynter.org

Dear Truth-O-Meter,

You published an article on Nov. 14, 2022 promoting the notion Donald Trump counts as "the least accurate politician we've ever covered." But the evidence supporting that claim counts as equivocal to the point where your claim can only count as an opinion. Yet the article presents the claim as fact and not opinion.

Let's review.

PolitiFact offers no explicit justification for its judgment. But the article makes a number of statements a reader might interpret as supporting evidence.

(Trump) has spread conspiracy theories, repeated baseless false claims and has been thrice "awarded" PolitiFact's Lie of the Year.

Plenty of politicians have spread conspiracy theories and repeated "baseless" false claims. What makes Trump stand out? As for the "Lie of the Year," is that not a subjective editorial judgment? As such, the latter cannot count as objective evidence that Trump counts as the least accurate politician PolitiFact has ever rated.

His record on the Truth-O-Meter started with a [Pants on Fire! ruling](#) in February 2011 after claiming that people who went to school with then-President Barack Obama "never saw him."

Hopefully we can agree that simply starting with a rating carrying the worst possible rating carries very little weight in judging the least accurate politician. The same principle applies to the most recent rating or ratings.

This paragraph carries the greatest promise for offering supporting evidence:

Trump has the worst record of any politician fact-checked by PolitiFact. Around 75% of Trump's claims have landed on the bottom half of our rating scale — [Mostly False](#), [False](#) and [Pants on Fire!](#)

At least three politicians PolitiFact has fact-checked have records with 100% of the claims landing in the bottom half of the "Truth-O-Meter" rating scale. Why are they more accurate than Trump?

[False](#) is his most common rating, with 356 claims rated that way.

Again, Trump is not the only politician where "False" counts as the most common rating.

Your collected ratings of [Kevin McCarthy](#) show that 19 of 24 claims rated "Mostly False" or worse. That's 79% compared to Trump's 75%. And 54% of McCarthy's ratings are "False" ratings compared to Trump's paltry 37%. How does Trump best McCarthy as the least accurate?

In terms of average rating, [Michele Bachmann](#) seems to have the advantage over Trump at first blush. Who did the PolitiFact math showing otherwise?

Your fact check misleads your audience in two respects when it presents as fact the notion that Donald Trump is the least accurate politician you've rated. As shown above, it's entirely unclear the claim follows from "Truth-O-Meter" ratings. Second, the statement promotes the false premise that selection bias plus subjective ratings can coherently result in an objective "worst."

How to fix it?

Don't trick readers into thinking you've made an objective determination. Either label your current judgment clearly as opinion, or make it supportable by rewording it. Changing it to "one of the worst" might work.

Either clarify that the claim amounts to PolitiFact's opinion, or else come up with a way to unequivocally support the claim with solid evidence. I can't help you with the latter.

Of course, seek as far as possible to ensure that those who read the apparently objective claim that Trump is the least accurate see a correction moving that statement into the realm of opinion.

Thanks for your attention to this matter.

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Sincerely,

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