



Bryan White <zebrafactcheck@gmail.com>

Correction/Clarification request: Amplifying a PolitiFact error Inbox3 messages

Bryan White <zebrafactcheck@gmail.com>

Mon, Feb 5, 2024 at 8:00 AM

To: corrections@slate.com

Dear Slate editors,

The interview of PolitiFact's Louis Jacobson by Molly Olmstead published Feb. 2, 2024 amplifies a falsehood promulgated by PolitiFact (bold emphasis added):

But I think one of the standout findings for us was that if you look at the median rating of Trump claims that we rated, the median is False. If we do rate a statement, it'll be rated on a 6-point scale: our Truth-O-Meter, which includes True, Mostly True, Half True, Mostly False, False, and Pants on Fire. Most politicians whom we rate frequently, from both parties, typically hover around Half True for the median. There are a few politicians—Ted Cruz is one; Ron Johnson is another; Newt Gingrich, the third—who have a median rating of Mostly False. But **Trump is the only one that we've looked at who has a median of False.**

Readers will tend to think Jacobson is saying Trump is the only politician PolitiFact has fact checked who has a median rating of "False." But it's not true. [Ben Carson](#) and [Lauren Boebert](#) both have "Truth-O-Meter" records with a median rating of "False" and their average ratings are lower than Trump's (not to exclude the potential existence of other [examples](#)). Back in 2022 PolitiFact published a story claiming Trump had the worst "Truth-O-Meter" record, but other politicians could beat out Trump for each point PolitiFact used in evidence, except for the sheer number of ratings.

It would seem appropriate to get back in touch with Jacobson, remind him of the existence of examples such as those I've shared and get him to clarify what he's trying to say about Mr. Trump. To me, it seems like opinion at best. After getting Jacobson's explanation, publish a revised version of the article that doesn't mislead readers. I'm sure making Trump look bad can still be accomplished without misrepresenting the truth.

Bonus: It's a potential story idea to examine the question of how PolitiFact came to believe something at odds with its own data. And declined to run a correction [when somebody pointed out the mistake](#). Olmstead's interview appears to have Jacobson saying he was likely the one who read my correction request ("... part of my job was to read every email that came in from our readers. I did that from 2009 until late last year").

Thanks for your attention to this matter.

If you decline to act to clarify or correct the story, I hope you will do me the courtesy of explaining your reasoning for the record.

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Sincerely,

Bryan W. White
editor
zebrafactcheck.com

Bryan White <zebrafactcheck@gmail.com>

Tue, Feb 6, 2024 at 11:36 AM

To: corrections@slate.com

Dear Slate team,

I apologize for not noticing earlier **another glaring falsehood** from interviewee Jacobson (bold emphasis added):

Trump, in a speech in New Hampshire, said Democrats "used COVID to cheat" in the 2020 election. It is kind of

appropriate, I suppose, in a sense, in that it's about elections, which has been a huge topic for Trump in the past couple years. And it ended up with a Pants on Fire [rating]. And, you know, he's had a **Pants on Fire percentage of 18.4 percent. Which**, not counting Facebook posts and stuff—back in the day, we had a category called “chain emails,” and those tend to get even worse ratings than the human politicians—**was the highest of anybody we fact-check.**

As with the other claim I highlighted from Jacobson, it's easy to find counterexamples.

Donald Trump Jr.(!): 35%
Tucker Carlson: 31%
Michele Bachmann: 25%
Lauren Boebert: 25%
Louie Gohmert: 21%

Get the picture? Neutral and objective fact checker guy Jacobson is full of baloney, and unless you inform your readers he was wrong, you're assisting the deception. Even the lowest figure from the list above (21%) is higher than what Jacobson claimed as the highest not counting social media claims (like "[Facebook Posts](#)").

Please note I have **not** compiled an exhaustive list with the above. **Do not rely on my list** to identify the political figure with the highest percentage of "Pants on Fire" ratings.

I repeat my request that Slate inform me of any justification for not informing its readers that the interviewee made clearly false and misleading claims.

Thanks again for your attention to this matter.

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Bryan White <zebrafactcheck@gmail.com>
To: corrections@slate.com

Thu, Feb 22, 2024 at 3:13 PM

Dear Slate team,

I appreciate your efforts to make your report of the Louis Jacobson interview more accurate. Unfortunately, it appears that some wires were crossed when you updated the editor's note (bold emphasis added) and corrections ([apparently without any new update notice](#)):

Update, Feb. 6, 2024: This article has been updated to clarify that although Trump has a PolitiFact median rating of False, he is not the only politician with that rating. It has also been updated to clarify that among major politicians frequently fact-checked by PolitiFact, Trump has the highest percentage of Pants on Fire ratings.

My earlier email requesting the second correction includes the example of Michele Bachmann, whose record shows 25 percent "Pants on Fire" ratings out of a total of 72 fact checks.

You've got "major politicians frequently fact-checked by PolitiFact " doing some heavy lifting, there.

Was it on Jacobson's word that you issued that update? Or did you do your own research? If the latter, what is the floor for "major politicians frequently fact-checked by PolitiFact" and how many exceed that level?

Seventy-two is a pretty big number of fact checks, especially for a politician whose state lacks a PolitiFact franchise.

I'm embedding from PolitiFact.com its latest menu list of "People" it has fact checked. Each on the list is a politician. I've included my own notation of whether those figures have greater or fewer than 72 fact checks.



PEOPLE

[All People](#)

[Joe Biden](#) >72

[Kamala Harris](#) <72

[Donald Trump](#) >72

[Mitch McConnell](#) <72

[Hakeem Jeffries](#) <72

[Ron DeSantis](#) <72

MEDIA

[PunditFact](#)

[Tucker Carlson](#)

[Sean Hannity](#)

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I'd appreciate an email in response explaining your new update. Thanks.

And if a correction is in order, as I suspect, then I hope you will take care of that as well. Thanks for your attention to this matter.

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