

Fact-Checking Politicians

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Unique experiment

- Randomized field experiment
 - Fact-checking 55 actual mid-level Italian politicians (10 treated and 45 control) with Twitter accounts
 - In cooperation with the leading Italian fact-checker Pagella Politica
- Sixteen weeks
 - 3 pre-intervention, 10 intervention and 3 post-intervention
- Treatment:
 - public message by Pagella Politica that the politician's statement was false
 - following the dissemination campaign of the message
- Methodology: diff-in-diff
 - Change in political statements of treated vs. non-treated
- Novelty:
 - Only related paper Nyhan and Reifler (2015) but very different experiment (not in the field and not social media)

Results

- Treatment does reduce false statements
 - Magnitude: -0.38 statements (with mean pre-treatment 0.67)
- The effect is persistent
 - Lasts at least for 2 months after the treatment
- Find no spillovers on other “similar” politicians
 - “Similar” defined as same party/chamber
- Treatment reduces the number of “verifiable” statements
- Analyze mechanisms
 - Accountability: stronger effects in single-member districts
- Robustness: same results in the pilot study

Comments

- Very important and very convincing paper
 - Lab in the field experiment, rare in political economy
 - Significant results in a small sample
- Methodological innovation
 - Likely to become a standard for the followers
 - Design assures external validity
- Intriguing discussion of potential mechanisms

Questions/Suggestions

- Spillovers:
 - Need to look at politicians working on similar issues and coming from similar districts
 - And associated with the treated politicians in the past
 - Check a similar period on Pagella Politica a year before and year after
- Will the effect remain in place once politicians have read the paper?
 - Especially given the ambiguity results
- Discussion of mechanisms is confusing
 - Need a structural model to distinguish between channels and carry out counterfactual analysis

Smaller concerns

- What drives PP's choice of politicians/statements to fact-check outside the experiment?
 - May help understand the experimenter demand effect?
- Fact-check one statement of politicians with at least one verifiable false statement
 - Analyze the difference between politicians with many and few statements before treatment
- Don't understand persistence analysis (Figure 4):
 - Standard errors are too small