



Fact-checking, reputation and political falsehoods in Italy and the US

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Abstract:	<p>This paper develops a reputational theory of political falsehoods. Politicians are motivated by the desire to build a positive reputation, therefore they will be more likely to deliver false statements (incurring the risk of being fact-checked) when the potential benefit outweighs the cost. This happens as new elections come closer, since the electoral benefit of falsehoods increases along with the probability of being checked too late (after the election day). Politicians are less likely to issue falsehoods in detailed statements and in scripted communication, since the reputational cost are higher because such falsehoods would be considered intentional. Conversely, the stronger trust that voters attribute to politicians on issues they own, allows politicians to lie on such topics. Statistical analysis of almost 8000 statements released by politicians and assessed by fact-checkers, in the United States and Italy (2007-2018), supports the hypotheses. The results hold irrespective of party affiliation.</p>

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Abstract

This paper develops a reputational theory of **political falsehoods**. Politicians are motivated by the desire to build a positive reputation, therefore they will **be more likely to deliver false** statements (incurring the risk of being **fact-checked**) when the **potential** benefit outweighs the cost. This happens as new elections come closer, since the electoral benefit of **falsehoods** increases along with the probability of being checked too late (after the election day). Politicians are less likely to **issue falsehoods** in detailed statements and in scripted communication, since the reputational cost are higher **because such falsehoods would be considered intentional**. Conversely, the stronger trust that voters attribute to politicians on issues they own, allows politicians to lie on such topics. Statistical analysis of almost 8000 statements released by politicians and assessed by fact-checkers, in the United States and Italy (2007-2018), supports the hypotheses. The results hold irrespective of party affiliation.

Keywords

lying, reputation, fact-checking, electoral campaign

Introduction

The last few years witnessed a constant growth in the attention to misinformation in the political discourse. This matter received substantial consideration during the campaign for the 2016 US Presidential election (Bastos and Farkas, 2019; Nelson and Taneja, 2018), when Republicans and Democrats accused each other of spreading misinformation in order to win the race.

The recent attention to fake news, misinformation and deception does not only pertain to the US. As citizens' trust in institutions declines, undermining the credibility of official information in the news, more and more democratic countries are experiencing higher levels of disinformation (Bennett and Livingston, 2018). In Italy too there have been rumors concerning the role of false statements in boosting the success of populists parties, such as Matteo Salvini's League (LN) or the Five Star Movement (M5S).¹

The analysis of political lies² across time and space is therefore important. The literature has mainly studied this subject from a theoretical perspective, due to a lack of empirical data on politicians' statements, and on the accuracy and truthfulness of such statements.

In this regard, fact-checking agencies can partially provide a contribution. After the spike in the attention to truth in politics, several independent organisations called "fact-checkers" have picked up the watchdog role, analyzing and evaluating, on a daily basis, whether a set of more or less questionable declarations delivered by politicians tend to correspond to the truth or not. These data can now be used to study political falsehoods. Although the selection of claims checked by fact-checkers is non-random, and such claims do not constitute a representative sample of all politicians' statements (Graves, 2016),³ they have been recently used in a variety of studies to investigate deception and misrepresentation (Braun et al., 2015; Buccioli and Zarri, 2013; Nyhan and Reifler, 2015; Woon, 2017).

The present paper analyzes these claims to shed light on politicians' propensity to deliver questionable statements that turn out to be false, according to fact-checking agencies. For this purpose,

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2
3 almost 8000 declarations released by politicians and tested by fact-checkers have been collected and
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5 analyzed to investigate politicians' likelihood of **delivering false statements**.
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8 While the literature on fact-checking and misrepresentation is overwhelmingly focused on the
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10 US context alone (for a review: Nieminen and Rapeli, 2019), here we offer a comparative perspective
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12 by comparing the outcomes in two different countries: Italy and the United States. We built two new
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14 datasets gathering 6003 statements released by US politicians (between 2007 and 2018), checked by
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16 the "PolitiFact" agency, and 1668 declarations made by Italian politicians between 2011 and 2018,
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18 evaluated by "Pagella Politica".
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21 Politicians **can be** motivated by the desire to build a positive reputation and maximize their
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23 electoral support taking advantage of such reputation. Indeed, a study on French and US politicians
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25 revealed that 60-70% of them thought their personal reputations was decisive for their re-election
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27 prospects (Converse and Pierce, 1986).
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30 Given the **theoretical** importance of reputation, we argue that politicians will deliver
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32 questionable or patently false statements incurring the risk of being debunked when the expected
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34 benefit is positive. This occurs when the potential gain of making a non-truthful declaration is higher
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36 than the expected cost of being contradicted by mass-media or fact-checkers. As such, we claim that
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38 politicians deliver more **false** statements, and therefore are more often caught lying (**intentionally or**
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40 **not**), as new elections come closer, since the electoral benefit of misinformation increases along with
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42 the probability of being checked too late (after the election day).
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46 Furthermore, we hypothesize that politicians are more likely to **tell falsehoods** when they
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48 deliver live and impulsive declarations in interactive contexts, whereas more accuracy is used in
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50 spreading scripted (prepared and unsolicited) statements as the cost of being caught purposely lying
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52 would be too high. Analogously, detailed and easily verifiable statements will more likely produce
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54 positive true ratings. Finally, we argue that politicians hold higher levels of reputation on the policy
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56 issues they "own", therefore they will take advantage of such heightened trust granted by voters to
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3 deliver **false** statements on those issue. The results support our hypotheses and hold for all politicians,
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5 no matter their party affiliation or ideology.
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10 **Theoretical Framework**

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13 Political lies date back in time, but they are related to several different topics that currently attract the
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15 attention of political communication scholars. Political lies stand at the crossroad with concepts such
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17 as misinformation, disinformation (Bennett and Livingston, 2018), deception, propaganda (separated
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19 into white, gray and black propaganda depending on the identifiability of the source: Bastos and
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21 Farkas, 2019) and fake news (Tandoc et al., 2018). This latter term emerged as a global buzzword
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23 and a floating signifier (Farkas and Schou, 2018) up to the point that journalists now refer to it in a
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25 ubiquitous way, beyond its traditional connotations of disinformation or politicians' attacks against
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27 news media (Egelhofer et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the concept of fake news also includes propaganda
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29 contents, built with the immediate intention to deceive the audience (Tandoc et al., 2018).
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31 Accordingly, the study of political **falsehoods** can contribute to the vivid debate around these subjects
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33 and to the wide related streams of literature.
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39 This paper will develop and test a reputational theory of **political falsehoods**. Several studies
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41 have provided theoretical models to investigate strategic communication with a focus on political lies.
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43 **The Truth Default Theory considers lies as a purposive act and argues that, overall, deception is a**
44
45 **quite rare phenomenon driven by some prolific liars (Levine, 2020).** Nevertheless, to promote their
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47 argument and persuade the audience, **we argue that many** politicians sometimes **can** raise dubious and
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49 questionable claims.
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53 These claims can be viewed as suspicious by the audience, and later can turn out to be true or
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55 false. In principle, the richness of natural language offers to politicians room for vagueness allowing
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57 to exaggerate or to prevaricate without directly contradicting the evidence (Woon, 2017). **As such,**
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59 **the production of deceptive messages could be better understood as a multidimensional phenomenon:**
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3 besides manipulating information, deception can also be obtained by distortion, ambiguity or by
4
5 deflecting the conversation (McCormack, 1992; McCormack et al., 2014). Still, despite these
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7 expedients, sometimes politicians can be caught lying. Such lies, or falsehoods, can be intentional or
8
9 not. Sometimes politicians can simply make genuine mistakes, sometimes they don't know if they
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11 are lying and may unintentionally say something false in an off-the-cuff or exaggerated remark,
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13 sometimes they may also truly believe in what they say, even against the available evidence (the
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15 mechanism of self-deception: Galeotti, 2015).
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19 While using a questionable argument for propaganda can be a profitable strategy, when
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21 politicians are caught lying the effect of being debunked can be damaging (Armstrong-Taylor, 2012)
22
23 as manipulating information and/or releasing false claims can backfire (no matter whether the
24
25 falsehood was intentional or not).
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28 Indeed, experimental studies suggest that citizens are generally able to discern untruthful
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30 political claims (Woon, 2017) and have an intrinsic aversion to lying (Gneezy, 2005; Hurkens and
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32 Kartik, 2009); furthermore, the potential ex-post verification of statements can give rise to political
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34 scandals (Ekström and Johansson, 2019) that damage the reputation of the politician caught lying in
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36 public (Buccioli and Zarri, 2013; Croco et al., 2021; Davis and Ferrantino, 1996; Kartik, 2009; Nyhan
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38 and Reifler, 2015). Such public scrutiny of politicians' messages, performed by fact-checkers, mass
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40 media, political rivals or directly by common citizens, can increase the reputational costs of spreading
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42 misinformation (Nyhan, 2010). If the potential reputational costs associated with lying can destroy
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44 credibility and favorability, endangering a politicians' career and damaging a party's electoral
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46 performance (Agadjanian et al., 2019; Armstrong-Taylor, 2012; Nyhan and Reifler, 2015), why do
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48 politicians publicly lie to voters through mass media and social media?
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53 Given that lying entails both benefits and costs, to persuade voters and to win the electoral
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55 competition, politicians could strategically deliver questionable or patently false statements trading-
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57 off the immediate benefits with expected costs (Davis and Ferrantino, 1996; Hample, 1980). The
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59 main benefit of this strategy is ensuring their re-election and the electoral success of their party,
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3 altering voters' preferences or mobilizing partisan supporters to get out and vote. Indeed, theoretical
4 studies suggest that politicians more willing to lie are favored in elections (Callander and Wilkie,
5 2009).
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10 However, politicians must take into account the costs associated with the probability of a loss
11 in reputation due to being debunked.
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14 Consequently, we can expect that politicians will more frequently **spread falsehoods** the
15 higher the net benefit of lying; i.e. the higher the actual benefit of telling a **falsehood** (which should
16 get larger when stakes are high or when persuasion gets easier) compared to an alternative behavior,
17 and the lower the expected cost of being caught lying. In turn, such expected cost is lower, for instance,
18 when politicians are telling "innocent lies" and the related loss in reputation is not so huge, as well as
19 when the likelihood of being debunked decreases, namely when the probability of having their
20 statement scrutinized becomes lower or inspecting their statement gets harder.
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30 Scholars did not examine the effect of the electoral cycle or that of peculiar time periods on
31 politicians' propensity to lie. The timing of events such as the election day or electoral campaigns
32 can affect benefits and costs of lying. Lies might be detected at some point in the future, producing a
33 costly loss of reputation (Davis and Ferrantino, 1996). Accordingly, during the election campaign
34 concerns over potential reputational threats can increase (Nyhan and Reifler, 2015).
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42 However, as new elections come closer, the benefits of delivering false statements increase
43 too because, at that time, influencing voters becomes crucial. Additionally, when elections are closer
44 politicians can be affected by the belief that other candidates are lying more to get some advantages
45 (Woon and Kanthak, 2019) and, in turn, this reasoning could increase their deception rate too.
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51 **We contend that, at a theoretical level,** politicians weigh the immediate benefit of **falsehoods**
52 with the expected costs of being debunked in the near future. When the election day approaches, the
53 expected cost of being debunked drops because, due to time constraints, there is a higher probability
54 that politicians' statements will be checked too late (after the election day) and will not produce
55 immediate negative consequences. Conversely, when information is released distant from an election,
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3 there is room for a meticulous scrutiny by other actors who have plenty of time to conduct checks
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5 (Gratton et al., 2018), therefore politicians should avoid sending untruthful messages.
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8 For instance, the release of fake presidential scandals is more frequent as the election
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10 approaches because the probability of being exposed before the election day decreases (Gratton et al.,
11
12 2018). Accordingly, we hypothesize that politicians will send more deceptive messages closer to the
13
14 election day hoping that some of these **falsehoods** will not be debunked on time. Such higher rate of
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16 misrepresentation increases the likelihood of detecting a **falsehood** when questionable statements are
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18 scrutinized.
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24 *H1*: As the election day comes closer, politicians are more likely to tell a **falsehood**.
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29 Lying becomes less attractive as the probability that the lie will be detected increases (Armstrong-
30
31 Taylor, 2012). Consequently, lies are more costly when statements are easily testable and verifiable.
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33 Liars, compared to truth-tellers, include less verifiable details in their statements, and avoid
34
35 information that can be easily verified (Kleinberg et al., 2018). Due to their intrinsic ambiguity,
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37 statements based on a subtle distortion of the reality (so-called ‘gray lies’: Bucciol and Zarri, 2013)
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39 can hardly ever be detected. Conversely, if a politician supports his/her claims using multiple
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41 empirical data and exact numbers, it becomes easier to scrutinize such statements: “**Fact-checkers**
42
43 **always seek official data**” (Graves, 2016: 94) and **establishing the truthfulness of statements is easier**
44
45 **when politicians mention statistics**. The lower effort required to test these claims increases the
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47 easiness of making a proper (negative) evaluation, enlarging the expected cost of lying. Such higher
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49 cost brings politicians to be more honest when making statements that contain a lot of easily verifiable
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51 information, such as numbers and values.
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3 *H2*: Politicians are less likely to tell a falsehood when they produce statements containing more data
4 and detailed numbers.
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11 The likelihood to lie could also depend on the communication context: a statement “produced ‘on the
12 fly’ or in response to a difficult question from a reporter differs from a statement that is carefully
13 assembled in an environment of high asynchronicity and editability” (Braun et al., 2015, p. 17).
14 Accordingly, we distinguish between interactive (solicited) and scripted (i.e. prepared and unsolicited)
15 forms of communication.
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23 We consider as scripted and unsolicited communication those situations in which a statement
24 is prepared and reviewed before its diffusion, so that the politician has plenty of time to plan the
25 message and meditate the content, like in written documents or in speeches delivered at a party rally
26 or conference. Conversely, we use the term solicited to indicate synchronous, interactive and real-
27 time communication (for instance, a debate or an interview), in which the speaker can practice and
28 rehearse, but nevertheless any declaration can be subjected to (or stimulated by) unknown live
29 questions or rivals’ interruptions made to contradict and attack the speaker; these can change the
30 content of politicians’ messages, generating a reaction based on solicited statements whose exact
31 wording was not preordained in advance (Braun et al., 2015).
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44 Lying in an unsolicited situation bears a higher reputational cost as it indicates that the
45 politician was lying consciously with the planned intent of deceiving the audience. Conversely, in a
46 solicited context, the cost of being caught lying is lower because one could justify itself saying that it
47 was a genuine mistake due to misspeaking or live poor judgement (Buccioli and Zarri, 2013): this line
48 of defense would weaken the accusation, reducing the reputational costs associated with debunking.
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56 In an interactive context, the reputation cost can be lower also for other (related) reasons.
57 During a debate or an interview, a politician can face challenging questions. If the politician decides
58 to lie, s/he will get an immediate benefit while facing probabilistic (i.e. not certain) ex post costs in
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3 the future, when his/her honesty can be questioned. Conversely, if the politician fails to give any
4 answer, the politicians will immediately suffer a cost due to showing a self-evident lack of
5 competence in handling the question. The choice to lie can be evaluated as the most efficient solution
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8 (Levine, 2020) suitable to avoid an immediate certain cost. The act of lying can be considered by the
9 audience as a mechanism of self-defense in a challenging situation (Hample, 1980). Consequently,
10 politicians should pay more attention when spreading scripted unsolicited statements and should try
11 to avoid falsehoods.
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21 *H3*: Politicians are less likely to tell a falsehood when using scripted unsolicited forms of
22 communication.
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30 Due to selective exposure to political news, the effectiveness of lies and debunking (e.g. fact-checking)
31 can be issue dependent (Hameleers and van der Meer, 2019). Some studies point to the role of
32 controversial (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010), technical (Buccioli and Zarri, 2013), or new (non-traditional)
33 issues (Broockman and Kalla, 2016), while the impact of campaign strategies linked with issue
34 ownership has been neglected (for an exception: Hameleers and van der Meer, 2019).
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41 Issue ownership can be defined as a positive attribute that citizens associate with certain
42 political parties; this refers to issues on which parties have built a reputation so that they are deemed
43 competent on, according to the overall judgement of voters. When people believe that a certain party
44 is better able to handle that issue than other parties, we say that the party owns that issue (Petrocik et
45 al., 2003).
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52 Parties can emphasize peculiar issues that work in their favor to improve their electoral
53 performance by mobilizing their core voters and by attracting the support of persuadable voters, i.e.
54 those who are attracted by electoral campaigns mainly fought around certain issues on which that
55 party is deemed particularly competent (Budge and Farlie, 1983).
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3 This is particularly crucial given that persuasion is usually hard, particularly when citizens
4 hold strong partisan beliefs, as the literature on confirmation bias and motivated skepticism suggests
5 (Hameleers and van der Meer, 2019; Lewandowsky et al., 2012). This applies to both information
6 and misinformation: “political claims in line with people’s political ideology, regardless of its
7 veracity, are more likely to be accepted” (Hameleers and van der Meer, 2019, p. 4; Walter et al.,
8 2019). When the divergence between citizens’ and politicians’ preferences is wide, citizens exhibit
9 skepticism and discount what politicians say (Crawford and Sobel, 1982; Minozzi, 2011; Woon,
10 2017); conversely, a stronger congruence between the preferences of politicians and those of their
11 audience generates increased trust and confidence in the speaker’s credibility (Woon, 2017).
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24 Consequently, issue ownership can make the difference in terms of persuasion. When
25 politicians make claims on an issue they own, they benefit from a stronger degree of reputation given
26 that voters commonly recognize them as competent to handle that issue. This generates stronger trust
27 and confidence in what politicians are saying on that topic. In turn, politicians can exploit such
28 advantage to make untruthful statements that the audience will still accept as true.
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35 Additionally, in order to debunk these **falsehoods**, political rivals and mass media need to
36 emphasize the issue owned by these deceitful politicians, increasing the salience of it and setting the
37 agenda of the campaign in a direction that can favor the liars. Even if a politician’s statement is
38 debunked and labelled as misleading, due to confirmation bias (Braun et al., 2015), some voters that
39 appreciate the liar with regard to the issue at stake (owned by that politician) can discard the new
40 (disconfirming) information and will still trust the liar (Thorson, 2016). Summing up, the net benefit
41 of **falsehoods** could be higher when dealing with issues owned by the liar.
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53 *H4*: Politicians are more likely to tell a **falsehood** on issues they own.
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Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we gathered fact-checkers data comparing the results in two countries, the US and Italy. In both countries the issues of politicians' **falsehoods** and fake news have been highly relevant in the public debate, especially after the rise of non-mainstream parties and candidates, such as Donald Trump, or the M5S and LN.

However, from an institutional point of view, the two countries are very different. Italy is a parliamentary multiparty democracy that predominantly adopted proportional electoral systems and experienced coalition governments, while the US are a presidential democracy with two parties competing in a majoritarian electoral system. In terms of media systems, Italy and the US are different too (although in both countries there is an ongoing debate about potential media bias: Ceron et al., 2019). The US belongs to the North Atlantic/Liberal model (market-driven, with a strong professionalization, and a neutral-commercial press), while Italy belongs to the Mediterranean/Polarized Pluralist model, based on a strong political parallelism and weaker professionalization of journalists (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Reporting similar results in such different contexts would strengthen our findings, extending the generalizability of our argument.

We collected politicians' fact-checks from PolitiFact (<https://www.politifact.com>) and Pagella Politica (<https://pagellapolitica.it>), creating two different datasets, one for the US and the other for Italy.

The selection of sentences to be evaluated by fact-checkers is non-random (Graves, 2016), being based on three conditions (Uscinski and Butler, 2013). First, the sentence must be empirically verifiable; this is a straightforward prerequisite to assess whether a statement is true or not. Second, the sentence must be relevant and newsworthy, so that it received non-negligible media attention (Woon, 2017) and it is likely to grab public interest; this excludes minor claims which are not going to be read or listened by voters and to carry any (electoral) effect. Third, prominence is given to questionable claims that make the audience wondering whether the claim is true or not. As such, we

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3 will investigate the probability of **telling falsehoods** when making disputable testable claims (that are
4 later checked). Fact-checkers data are unsuitable to evaluate which politician is lying most (Amazeen,
5 2015), but can help to investigate when the selected statements are more likely to be true or false.
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10 **Although such claims do not constitute a representative sample of all politicians' statements**, we must
11 consider that it would be hard to collect and check all the statements made every day by politicians.
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14 Fact-checker data retain some advantages: they are related to extensively researched
15 statements, evaluated by a third-party based on a publicly-stated rationale (Woon, 2017); therefore,
16 they represent a valuable source of naturally occurring deceptive or truthful statements (Braun et al.,
17 2015), factually categorized by experts, on a number of newsworthy high stakes matters. Such data
18 have been widely used to study lies and misrepresentation (Braun et al., 2015; Bucciol and Zarri,
19 2013; Nyhan and Reifler, 2015; Woon, 2017).
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28 To create the US dataset, we reverted to Wang (2017) to draft a list of 123 politicians
29 monitored by PolitiFact. Overall, from 21 march 2007 to 28 august 2018, we collected 6003 fact-
30 checks concerning 122 politicians: 51 Democrats and 71 Republicans. Barack Obama, with 586 fact-
31 checks, is the most monitored politician, while the minimum number of fact-checks is equal to 10,
32 with an average of 49 per politician.
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39 In the US, the PolitiFact Truth-o-Meter adopts a 6-degree scale to evaluate the accuracy of
40 politicians' statements. Following previous studies (Braun et al., 2015; Lim, 2018), we merged the
41 two categories used for patently false statements ("False" and "Pants on Fire!") into a single category.
42 Therefore, our dependent variable ranges from 0 (True) to 4 (False). PolitiFact's judgments are almost
43 evenly distributed among these five categories with only a slight prevalence of statements labelled as
44 "False". In detail, 42% are deemed as false or mostly false, while 36% are evaluated as true or almost
45 true.
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55 To create the Italian dataset, we web scraped data from the Italian fact-checker Pagella Politica.
56 We selected politicians with a non-trivial number of checked statements (more than 5); the maximum
57 number of fact-checks is equal to 374 for Matteo Renzi, with an overall average of 67. From 13
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3 November 2011 to 1 august 2018, 1668 fact-checks related to 25 politicians belonging to 8 parties
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5 have been collected.
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8 The dependent variable is based on Pagella Politica 5-degree scale. It ranges from 0 (True) to
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10 4 (False). Differently from the US, in the Italian case there is a prevalence of statements deemed as
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12 truthful (38%), while less than 20% are considered as false or mostly false.
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15 The main independent variables are related to attributes of the politicians' statements. To test
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17 H1, we counted the number of days from the date of the statement to the following election. In the
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19 US, both Presidential⁴ and mid-term elections⁵ have been considered (though considering
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21 Presidential elections alone does not alter the results), while for Italy we referred to national
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23 parliamentary elections.⁶ The variable "Days left to election" records how close the elections are,
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25 therefore lower negative values indicate that the elections are far away, while higher values (close to
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27 0) indicate that statements are released when elections are closer.
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31 To test H2, we measured to what extent politicians support their claims with data, checking
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33 how often exact numbers are displayed. The variable "Numbers" indicates the percentage of numbers
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35 **over the total number of words** reported in each statement. Higher values indicate that politicians
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37 mentioned more and more stringent data to support their claims.
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41 To test H3, we rely on Braun and colleagues (2015). They investigated the different linguistic
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43 patterns in truthful and deceptive political discourse, taking into consideration also the different
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45 production context of these messages (scripted versus interactive communication). To gather
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47 information about the origin of the message, we relied on information available online and in each
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49 fact-check (the link to the source or other details provided by the fact-checker). The variable "Scripted"
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51 is equal to 1 when the declaration arises from a situation in which the message is scripted, i.e. planned
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53 and prepared before its diffusion (for instance, advertisements, written statements such as press
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55 releases, tweets and party documents, or unsolicited not spontaneous and not interactive speeches,
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57 like those delivered from the podium at party conventions or political rallies): this allows the sender
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59 to go through a meticulous editing of the message. The variable is equal to 0 when the statement is
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3 produced in a synchronous interactive real-time context (such as a debate or an interview), where the
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5 live questions posed to the politician can generate solicited and more spontaneous answers; in such
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7 context, even if the politician has a general idea of the message that s/he wants to deliver and can
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9 rehearse, it becomes more difficult to completely plan the content of the statement in advance,
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11 carefully pondering each single word. Accordingly, we distinguished between the two contexts (for
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13 details: Braun et al., 2015).
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17 Finally, to test H4 we created the dummy variable “Issue Ownership”, which is equal to 1
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19 when the politician belongs to a party that owns that issue. We first detected the topic of each
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21 statement, then we matched it with the list of issues owned by each party, according to the existing
22
23 literature, as described below. In the US, using the keywords assigned by PolitiFact to classify topics,
24
25 we identified 10 main issues (e.g. immigration, welfare, civil rights). US voters usually perceive the
26
27 Democrats as more competent in dealing with welfare, civil rights and education (Petrocik et al.,
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29 2003). The Republicans, instead, are considered best suited to face internal and external security
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31 issues (Benoit, 2018), defence spending and policy, or concerns about taxes, spending and the size of
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33 government (Petrocik et al., 2003).⁷ For Donald Trump, beside the issues traditionally owned by the
34
35 Republican Party, we added immigration as an additional issue owned by him, to account for the
36
37 populist nature of this politician, given that the topic of immigration is usually owned by right-wing
38
39 populist parties nowadays (Béland, 2020; Hameleers and van der Meer, 2019).
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45 For Italy, we recoded Pagella Politica’s topics into the same 10-issues classification adopted
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47 in the US (plus one additional issue for European Union topics). We ascribed ownership following
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49 existing studies (Schwarzbözl et al., 2019) and focusing on party families as suggested in the literature
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51 (Budge and Farlie, 1983). We assigned welfare to social-democratic and left parties (Free and
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53 Equal/Left Ecology Freedom, LEU/SEL, and the Democratic Party, PD), which have traditionally
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55 owned this issue. We assigned the ownership of Europe and economy issues to centre-right parties
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57 affiliated to the European People’s Party (Forward Italy, FI, and New Centre-Right/Popular
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59 Alternative, NCD/AP). Analogously, we assigned ownership on economy and civil rights issues to
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3 members of the Radical Party (RAD) belonging to the liberal-democratic party family. We attributed
4 ownership on issues concerning Europe, law and order, and immigration to right-wing populist parties
5 (LN, and Brothers of Italy, FdI). Finally, given that M5S does not belong to any traditional party
6 family and it is classified as a special issue party by the experts, we assigned ownership based on its
7 traditional manifesto, which focuses on environmental issues, on justice and welfare (e.g. guaranteed
8 minimum income; Ceron et al., 2020).
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11 We control for a set of variables (see the Online Appendix for descriptive statistics) that reflect
12 individual politician's attributes: "Gender" (0 for male and 1 for female); "Age" of the politician at
13 the time of the declaration; level of "Education" (0 for Bachelor degree or lower, 1 for Master degree,
14 2 for PhD or academic positions), which also represents a proxy for the level of knowledge/ignorance
15 of the politician (Buccioli and Zarri, 2013); party affiliation (the reference category is the Democratic
16 Party in both countries).
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33 **Analysis and Results**

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35 We have multiple observations per politician, therefore we analyze our ordinal dependent variable
36 using a multilevel ordered logistic regression. Table 1 displays the results for the US (Model 1 and
37 2) and Italy (Model 3 and 4). In both countries, the results provide support for all our hypotheses.
38 Concerning H1, as the election day approaches, it is more likely that politicians' statements are
39 deemed less accurate by Politifact and Pagella Politica. Moving one day closer to the election, the
40 likelihood of a "False" rating increases while the likelihood of a "True" rating decreases (see Figure
41 1). Keeping all the variables fixed at their means, a statement released 365 days closer to the election
42 than another one, will be approximately 2.5 percentage points more likely to be rated as "False", that
43 means a 10% relative increase compared to the expected share of "False" ratings in the US (In Italy
44 the effect is equal to 0.8 percentage points and 18% in relative terms; notice that "True" ratings would
45 increase instead by 3 percentage points).
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15 In line with H2, we notice that the likelihood of **falsehoods** decreases when politicians report data and
16 detailed numbers (Figure 2). Keeping all the variables fixed at their means, a one-standard deviation
17 increase in “Numbers” (compared to its average) reduces by approximately 4.2 percentage points the
18 likelihood of a “False” rating in the US (0.5 percentage points in Italy; “True” ratings would increase
19 instead by 3 percentage points).
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29 [Figure 2 around here]
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34 As for H3, we observe that, as expected, the likelihood of **falsehoods** is lower when fact-checkers
35 examine scripted statements (Figure 3). Keeping all the variables fixed at their means, a prepared
36 unsolicited message is about 3.2 percentage points less likely to be rated as “False” in the US (1.8
37 percentage points in Italy; “True” ratings would increase instead by 10 percentage points).
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46 [Figure 3 around here]
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50 Finally, the results support H4 showing that politicians can take advantage of their reputation and **tell**
51 more **falsehoods** on issues they own, thus being more often debunked when fact-checkers examine
52 these statements. Indeed, “Issue Ownership” decreases the likelihood of a “True” rating and increases
53 that of a “False” one (Figure 4). Keeping all the variables fixed at their means, a statement on an issue
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3 owned is about 2.4 percentage points more likely to be rated as “False” in the US (1.1 percentage
4 points in Italy; “True” ratings would increase instead by 5.5 percentage points).
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14 Moving to the control variables, politicians with the highest level of education are less likely to tell
15 **falsehoods**, older politicians tell more **falsehoods**, while we found no effect of gender. **In line with**
16 **previous studies (Card et al., 2018; Farnsworth and Lichter, 2016), the Republicans in the US (along**
17 **with M5S and FI in Italy) seem more likely to get false ratings, though we cannot assess whether this**
18 **occurs due to the bias of fact-checkers or because they do lie more (see: Graves, 2016).**
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26 In the Online Appendix we provide several robustness checks to control for: media type
27 (social media or traditional media as primary source of the message); office position (being member
28 of the government); politician’s fame and level of surveillance (total and ongoing number of fact-
29 checks received by each politician)⁸; level of fact-checker’s activity (overall number of checks per
30 week). All our results remain the same.
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37 Arguably, despite fact-checkers tend to release evaluations based on objective data (Bucciol
38 and Zarri, 2013; Woon, 2017), it could be argued that their potential ideological bias interferes with
39 their ratings. Although we selected non-partisan fact-checkers for our analysis, as a robustness test,
40 we want to prove that our findings hold irrespective of any ideological bias of the fact-checker. In
41 particular, if the fact-checker organization has a clear preference (or aversion) for one or more parties
42 (for instance, a pro-liberal bias), we could expect that, as new election approaches (and the issue at
43 stake gets higher), the fact-checker will increase the share of negative ratings against its political
44 enemies and will decrease the share of negative ratings concerning its political friends. Then, going
45 back to H1, we test the interaction between the party and the time left before the election. The
46 interaction though is never statistically significant, suggesting that, as the election approaches, the
47 share of “False” ratings increases in a similar way for everyone, irrespective of the party affiliation
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3 of a politician (and the preference of the fact-checker for one or another party). This seems to indicate
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5 that our results are not affected by any potential ideological bias of the fact-checker.
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10 **Discussion**

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13 The paper developed and tested a reputational theory of **political falsehoods**. The findings support
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15 our argument and are strengthened by the fact that we found similar results in two countries, Italy and
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17 the US, which have very different political-institutional settings and media systems.
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20 Although our theoretical framework points to the costs and benefits of **falsehoods**, the recent
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22 debate on the spread of fake news and the role of misinformation, especially in the US (Bastos and
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24 Farkas, 2019; Till, 2020; Nelson and Taneja, 2018), could suggest that nowadays politicians do not
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26 consider the consequences of being caught lying and do not feel that citizens will condemn such
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28 behavior.
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32 Nonetheless, this argument is perfectly congruent with our findings about the effect of issue
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34 ownership. Precisely because politicians know that they are perceived by voters as more competent
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36 in dealing with certain issues, they can take advantage of their reputation to spread incorrect
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38 information on those issues, as voters will believe such information (coming from a trusted source).
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41 This can also be linked with the influence of confirmation bias on voters (Lerman and Acland,
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43 2018), which can be exploited by politicians to tell false statements that are deemed truthful by their
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45 partisan voters. Notice, however, that some studies suggest that voters are able to update their beliefs
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47 according to new information even when this is in contrast with their prior beliefs (Druckman, 2012).
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50 Furthermore, recent studies indicate that voters do punish politicians caught lying, though the
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52 severity of the punishment will depend on some factors, such as being well-known among voters (this
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54 can be linked with issue ownership too) or the saliency of the norm of honesty in the public debate
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56 (Crocco et al., 2021). Summing up, despite the role of confirmation bias, politicians can be made
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58 accountable for the veracity of their statements.
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3 Our results imply that agencies willing to prevent the spread of misinformation should pay
4 higher attention to election campaign periods, and to vague messages (those more difficult to test)
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6 and solicited declarations. Furthermore, huge attention should be devoted to issues in which one
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8 politician is perceived to be competent on, and retains a greater reputation in the eyes of voters; this,
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10 in turn, will require a much stronger effort to convince the audience of the possible existence of
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12 falsehood (for a meta-analysis of fact-checking effects: Walter et al., 2019).
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17 In this regard, professional journalists can still play an essential role precisely when this is
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19 more important, i.e. when elections approach. Despite politicians' use of (unmediated) digital
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21 campaigning, how elections are reported still matters (for a review: Cushion and Jackson, 2019).
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25 Scholars argued that journalistic preferences for newsworthy stories (scandals and the horse
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27 race) might have affected the coverage and the outcome of the US 2016 presidential election (Searles
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29 and Banda, 2019), therefore stronger attention should be put when reporting on potentially fake
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31 scandals (Gratton et al., 2018) or on questionable politicians' statements that can turn out to be lies,
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33 as our analysis suggests.
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36 Due to the rise of actors willing to disseminate misinformation, challenging the media
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38 narrative with "alternative facts" (Ekström et al., 2020), journalists have to reshape and adapt their
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40 role to this new environment. Beside this, misinformation can be contrasted also by reconsidering
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42 how news contents are ranked and monetized online (Gray et al., 2020).
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46 The present paper has some limitations though. First, we cannot assess whether politicians tell
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48 **falsehoods** with the intention of deceiving the audience or truly believe in the **falsehoods** they tell.
49
50 On the one hand, politicians can make genuine mistakes; the control variable Education, which is a
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52 proxy for the relative level of knowledge/ignorance of the politician, allows us to test our hypotheses
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54 while holding constant the risk that politicians are debunked not because they are intentionally willing
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56 to deceive the audience but just because they made a mistake (Buccioli and Zarri, 2013). On the other
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58 hand, self-deception can occur when an actor believes a particular fact because of his/her cognitive
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60 desire of the fact being true, even if the available evidence suggests this is not the case (Galeotti,

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3 2015). However, even when self-deception occurs, the outcome remains the same (misleading the
4 audience) and the politician will risk to pay a reputational cost for having failed to check the veracity
5 of the statement (if the truth emerges).
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10 Second, fact-checkers judgments might not be unbiased. Uscinky and Bulter (2013) criticised
11 the method adopted by fact-checkers in order to select the claims they check. Fact-checkers cannot
12 examine every statement made by political actors and have to choose a smaller number of claims. A
13 candidate can appear as a liar just because his/her claims were checked more frequently compared to
14 other candidates, or because, during the selection process, they might prefer to choose claims that
15 appears ex-ante misleading while discarding statements that are not suspicious (Uscinky and Bulter,
16 2013). However, our aim is not to rank politicians to see who lies most (Amazeen, 2015). Still, fact-
17 checking represents a valuable source of naturally occurring deceptive and truthful statements (Braun
18 et al., 2015) that allows to investigate when the selected statements (disputable testable claims that
19 attracted public and media attention) are more likely to be true or false.
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33 Finally, although some concerns can arise about the ability of different fact-checkers to
34 provide consistent ratings, Lim (2018) compared the performances of two different agencies and
35 found that fact-checkers do not judge in a different way when examining obviously truth or patently
36 false claims, while ratings can diverge only when more ambiguous and uncertain claims are evaluated
37 (Lim, 2018). Consequently, and given the wide differences between the results concerning the most
38 extreme categories of our dependent variable, we can be more confident about the reliability of fact-
39 checking data used in this study and about the robustness of our findings.
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49 Future research can shed light on politicians' likelihood to deliver equivocal claims that are
50 evaluated as ambiguous by fact-checkers. Additionally, starting from the theoretical framework
51 outlined above, future studies can adopt an experimental design to investigate other determinants of
52 political falsehoods.
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Notes

¹ <http://theconversation.com/in-italy-fake-news-helps-populists-and-far-right-triumph-92271>

² For simplicity, throughout the paper we use the term lie/lying to refer to falsehood/telling a falsehood and as synonyms for false statements. We cannot assess whether a politician is intentionally lying or not.

³ This limitation will be discussed below.

⁴ 4 November 2008; 6 November 2012; 8 November 2016.

⁵ 2 November 2010; 4 November 2014; 6 November 2018.

⁶ 24 February 2013 and 4 March 2018. For the very few claims (22) made after the 2018 election, we set the 4 March 2023 as the reference date for the following elections. Excluding these observations does not alter our findings.

⁷ Democrats' statements concerning Obamacare focused on welfare provision (providing an accessible health care system); conversely, Republicans framed Obamacare as a spending and taxation matter.

⁸ Some scholars point to the role of few prolific liars (Levine, 2020). Given that some politicians (Obama, Renzi, Trump) are fact-checked more often than others, these two variables also allow us to make sure that our findings are not driven by the different weight of politicians within the dataset.

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Table 1. Multilevel Ordered Logistic Regression.

Parameters	US		Italy	
	(1) Baseline	(2) Controls	(3) Baseline	(4) Controls
Days left to election	0.0004** (0.0001)	0.0004** (0.0001)	0.0004*** (0.00008)	0.0003*** (0.00008)
Numbers	-0.034*** (0.003)	-0.035*** (0.003)	-0.016** (0.005)	-0.015** (0.005)
Scripted	-0.168*** (0.047)	-0.150** (0.048)	-0.391*** (0.098)	-0.442*** (0.097)
Issue Ownership	0.264*** (0.048)	0.139** (0.049)	0.255* (0.118)	0.244* (0.118)
Female		0.110 (0.160)		-0.124 (0.326)
Age		0.012* (0.004)		0.008 (0.005)
Education (ref. category: no Master degree)				
Master degree		-0.355 (0.187)		-0.312 (0.185)
PhD		-0.437*** (0.113)		-0.590* (0.268)
Party (US, ref. category: Democrat)				
Republican		0.767*** (0.103)		
Party (Italy, ref. category: PD)				
M5S				0.546* (0.214)
FI				0.787*** (0.225)
LN				0.411 (0.226)
LEU/SEL				-0.763 (0.408)
FdI				0.761 (0.425)
NCD/AP				-0.072 (0.395)
RAD				-0.743 (0.560)
Observations	5,951	5,951	1,630	1,630
Log Likelihood	-9371.481	-9221.374	-2283.716	-2268.289

Note: Values are unstandardized coefficients.

Standard errors in parentheses. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

Figures

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Figure 1

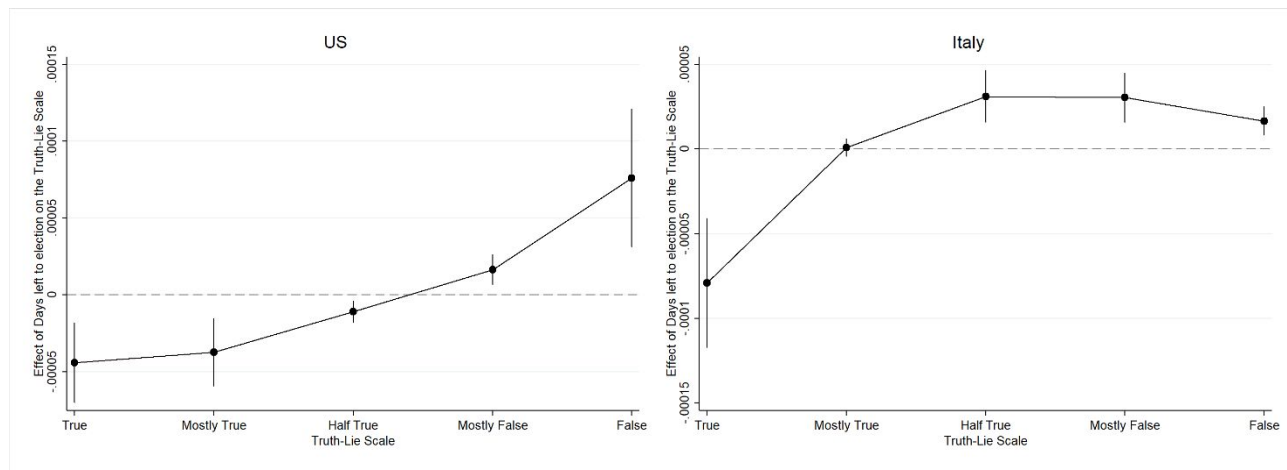


Figure 2

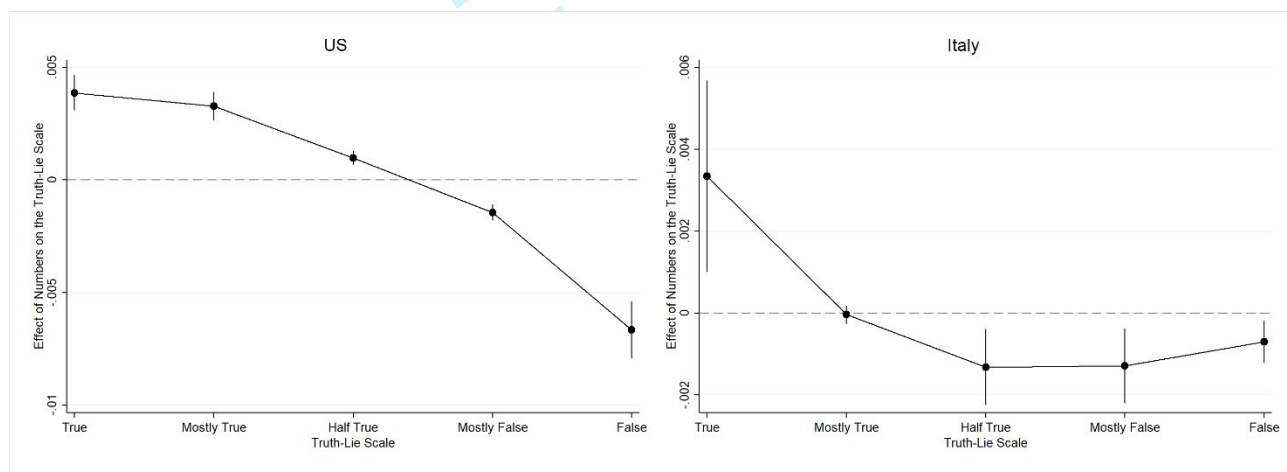


Figure 3

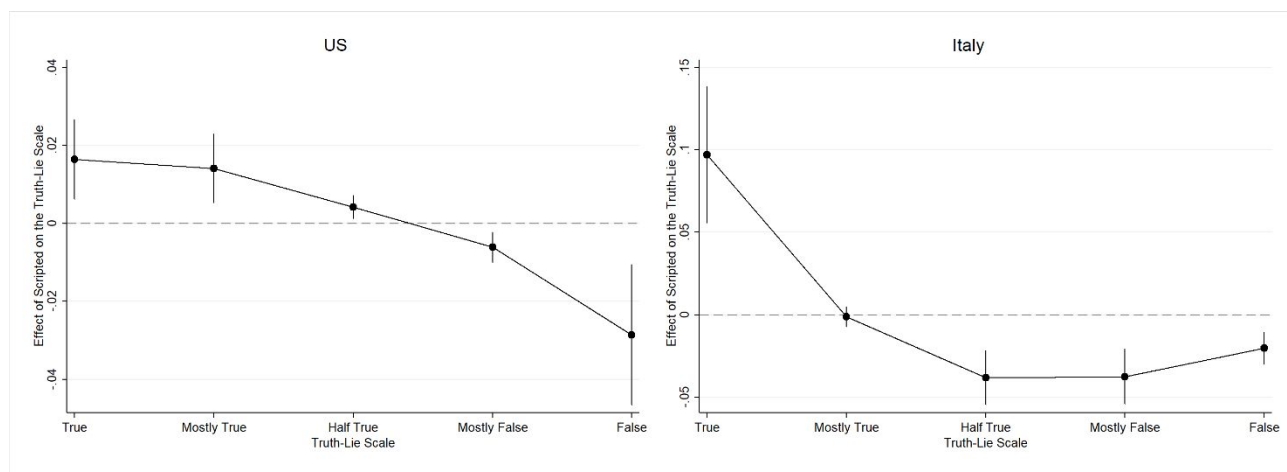


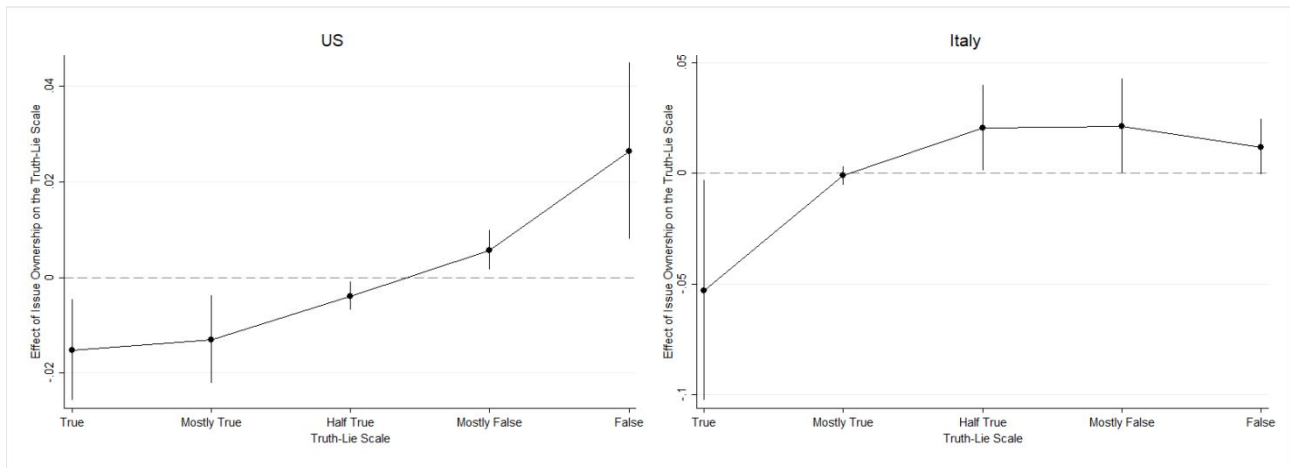
Figure 4**Figures captions**

Figure 1. Average Marginal Effects of “Days left to election” on the Truth-Lie Scale in the US and Italy, with 95% confidence interval (source Table 1, Model 2 and 4).

Figure 2. Average Marginal Effects of “Numbers” on the Truth-Lie Scale in the US and Italy, with 95% confidence interval (source Table 1, Model 2 and 4).

Figure 3. Average Marginal Effects of “Scripted” on the Truth-Lie Scale in the US and Italy, with 95% confidence interval (source Table 1, Model 2 and 4).

Figure 4. Average Marginal Effects of “Issue Ownership” on the Truth-Lie Scale in the US and Italy, with 95% confidence interval (source Table 1, Model 2 and 4).

Politicians caught lying: Fact-checking, reputation and political lies in Italy and the US

Online Appendix

Annex 1

Table A1.1 Descriptive statistics of the variables used in the analysis (US)

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Truth-Lie Scale	2.16	1.41	0	4
Days left to election	-312.50	204.49	-1062	0
Numbers	5.82	6.95	0	40
Scripted	0.55	0.50	0	1
Issue Ownership	0.45	0.50	0	1
Female	0.13	0.34	0	1
Age	58.26	10.10	28	80
Education	1.22	0.94	0	2
Government member	0.12	0.33	0	1
Politician fame (total checks)	192.80	213.32	10	598
Politician surveillance (ongoing checks)	95.93	135.11	0	597
Fact-checker (FC) activity (weekly checks)	14.84	7.90	1	41
Social Media	0.11	0.31	0	1

Table A1.2 Descriptive statistics of the variables used in the analysis (Italy)

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Truth-Lie Scale	1.22	1.21	0	4
Days left to election	-1048.12	551.36	-1880	0
Numbers	9.62	8.59	0	66.67
Scripted	0.48	0.50	0	1
Issue Ownership	0.19	0.39	0	1
Female	0.12	0.33	0	1
Age	50.83	13.98	28	82
Education	0.75	0.66	0	2
Government member	0.23	0.42	0	1
Politician fame (total checks)	172.28	126.67	6	374
Politician surveillance (ongoing checks)	85.99	88.55	0	373
Fact-checker (FC) activity (weekly checks)	10.04	7.23	1	37
Social Media	0.27	0.44	0	1

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3 Notice that the variable Numbers (related to H2) has been automatically measured through the
4 Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count dictionary (LIWC: Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010), first, and then
5 it has been manually checked for consistency (and to make sure that the automated method did not
6 made any mistake). Manually checking, after the LIWC measurement, whether and to what extent a
7 sentence contained a number was a straightforward and trivial task, therefore we did not evaluate the
8 reliability of the coding. Conversely, for the variables related to H3 (Scripted) and H4 (namely, the
9 topic of each statement) we performed manual coding with two independent coders. Here we report
10 the inter-coder reliability, separately for the US and Italy, based on 100 statements in each country.
11 For the variables related to Italy, Krippendorff's Alpha is the following one: Scripted 0.96; Topics:
12 0.93. For the variables related to the US, Krippendorff's Alpha is the following one: Scripted 0.84;
13 Topics: 0.92.

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33 Additional Reference:

34 Tausczik YR and Pennebaker YW (2010) The Psychological Meaning of Words: LIWC and
35 Computerized Text Analysis Methods. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 29(1): 24-54.
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Annex 2

Table A2.1 Robustness checks for the US (part one)

Parameters	(1) Baseline	(2) Controls	(A2.1) Office	(A2.2) Fame	(A2.3) Surveillance
Days left to election	0.000** (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)
Numbers	-0.034*** (0.003)	-0.035*** (0.003)	-0.035*** (0.003)	-0.035*** (0.003)	-0.035*** (0.003)
Scripted	-0.168*** (0.048)	-0.151** (0.048)	-0.156** (0.048)	-0.162** (0.048)	-0.153** (0.048)
Issue Ownership	0.264*** (0.049)	0.139** (0.049)	0.138** (0.049)	0.137** (0.049)	0.138** (0.049)
Female		0.111 (0.161)	0.164 (0.162)	0.294 (0.162)	0.133 (0.164)
Age		0.012* (0.005)	0.011* (0.005)	0.011* (0.004)	0.011* (0.004)
Education (ref. category: no Master)					
Master Degree		-0.356 (0.187)	-0.304 (0.188)	-0.109 (0.192)	-0.328 (0.192)
PhD		-0.438*** (0.114)	-0.426*** (0.113)	-0.320** (0.114)	-0.428*** (0.114)
Party (ref. category: Democrat)					
Republican		0.767*** (0.104)	0.815*** (0.108)	0.887*** (0.106)	0.783*** (0.107)
Government member			0.125 (0.088)		
Politician fame (total checks)				0.001** (0.000)	
Politician surveillance (ongoing checks)					0.000 (0.000)
Log likelihood	-9344.41	-9221.37	-9220.38	-9215.88	-9221.22
Observations	5,951	5,951	5,951	5,951	5,951
Number of politicians	122	122	122	122	122

Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table A2.2 Robustness checks for the US (part two)

Parameters	(1) Baseline	(2) Controls	(A2.4) FC Activity	(A2.5) Social	(A2.6) FC Bias Test
Days left to election	0.000** (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)
Numbers	-0.034*** (0.003)	-0.035*** (0.003)	-0.035*** (0.003)	-0.035*** (0.003)	-0.035*** (0.003)
Scripted	-0.168*** (0.048)	-0.151** (0.048)	-0.157** (0.048)	-0.172** (0.051)	-0.151** (0.048)
Issue Ownership	0.264*** (0.049)	0.139** (0.049)	0.139** (0.049)	0.138** (0.049)	0.139** (0.049)
Female		0.111 (0.161)	0.106 (0.161)	0.111 (0.160)	0.111 (0.161)
Age		0.012* (0.005)	0.012** (0.005)	0.012* (0.005)	0.012* (0.005)
Education (ref. category: no Master)					
Master Degree		-0.356 (0.187)	-0.351 (0.188)	-0.348 (0.186)	-0.356 (0.187)
PhD		-0.438*** (0.114)	-0.431*** (0.114)	-0.428*** (0.114)	-0.436*** (0.114)
Party (ref. category: Democrat)					
Republican		0.767*** (0.104)	0.771*** (0.104)	0.761*** (0.103)	0.785*** (0.131)
Fact-checker (FC) activity (weekly checks)			-0.006 (0.003)		
Social Media				0.113 (0.081)	
Republican X days left to election					0.000 (0.000)
Log likelihood	-9344.41	-9221.37	-9219.97	-9220.42	-9221.35
Observations	5,951	5,951	5,951	5,951	5,951
Number of politicians	122	122	122	122	122

Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Annex 3

Table A3.1 Robustness checks for Italy (part one)

Parameters	(3) Baseline	(4) Controls	(A3.1) Office	(A3.2) Fame	(A3.3) Surveillance
Days left to election	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
Numbers	-0.017** (0.005)	-0.015** (0.005)	-0.015* (0.005)	-0.016** (0.005)	-0.016** (0.005)
Scripted	-0.391*** (0.098)	-0.442*** (0.098)	-0.431*** (0.097)	-0.438*** (0.097)	-0.459*** (0.097)
Issue Ownership	0.255* (0.119)	0.244* (0.119)	0.241* (0.119)	0.253* (0.119)	0.251* (0.119)
Female		-0.134 (0.327)	-0.316 (0.311)	0.199 (0.331)	0.110 (0.319)
Age		0.009 (0.005)	0.008* (0.004)	0.011* (0.004)	0.008* (0.004)
Education (ref. category: no Master)					
Master Degree		-0.313 (0.186)	-0.400* (0.162)	-0.281 (0.163)	-0.307 (0.162)
PhD		-0.591* (0.268)	-0.715** (0.238)	-0.331 (0.252)	-0.425 (0.241)
Party (ref. category: PD)					
M5S		0.546* (0.214)	0.647*** (0.183)	0.666*** (0.180)	0.630*** (0.174)
FI		0.788*** (0.225)	0.961*** (0.214)	0.841*** (0.202)	0.880*** (0.202)
LN		0.411 (0.227)	0.542** (0.202)	0.634** (0.205)	0.576** (0.196)
LEU/SEL		-0.764 (0.408)	-0.455 (0.406)	-0.830* (0.390)	-0.818* (0.390)
FdI		0.761 (0.426)	0.994* (0.405)	0.740 (0.393)	0.720 (0.393)
NCD/AP		-0.072 (0.395)	-0.296 (0.375)	-0.016 (0.374)	-0.070 (0.373)
RAD		-0.744 (0.560)	-0.709 (0.538)	-0.751 (0.540)	-0.725 (0.540)
Government member			0.410** (0.156)		
Politician fame (total checks)				0.002*** (0.000)	
Politician surveillance (ongoing checks)					0.003*** (0.001)
Log likelihood	-2283.72	-2268.29	-2265.17	-2261.85	-2256.38
Observations	1,630	1,630	1,630	1,630	1,630
Number of politicians	25	25	25	25	25

Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table A3.2 Robustness checks for Italy (part two)

Parameters	(3) Baseline	(4) Controls	(A3.4) FC Activity	(A3.5) Social	(A3.6) FC Bias Test
Days left to election	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)
Numbers	-0.017** (0.005)	-0.015** (0.005)	-0.015** (0.005)	-0.015** (0.005)	-0.015** (0.005)
Scripted	-0.391*** (0.098)	-0.442*** (0.098)	-0.452*** (0.098)	-0.339** (0.121)	-0.463*** (0.099)
Issue Ownership	0.255* (0.119)	0.244* (0.119)	0.242* (0.119)	0.240* (0.119)	0.257* (0.120)
Female		-0.134 (0.327)	-0.168 (0.326)	-0.127 (0.329)	-0.194 (0.333)
Age		0.009 (0.005)	0.009 (0.005)	0.009 (0.006)	0.009 (0.005)
Education (ref. category: no Master)					
Master Degree		-0.313 (0.186)	-0.325 (0.184)	-0.317 (0.191)	-0.323 (0.186)
PhD		-0.591* (0.268)	-0.625* (0.266)	-0.563* (0.275)	-0.619* (0.272)
Party (ref. category: PD)					
M5S		0.546* (0.214)	0.520* (0.211)	0.608** (0.225)	0.491 (0.319)
FI		0.788*** (0.225)	0.812*** (0.225)	0.830*** (0.232)	0.521 (0.313)
LN		0.411 (0.227)	0.390 (0.225)	0.438 (0.235)	0.436 (0.357)
LEU/SEL		-0.764 (0.408)	-0.762 (0.406)	-0.741 (0.414)	-1.267 (0.759)
FdI		0.761 (0.426)	0.755 (0.422)	0.824 (0.436)	0.255 (0.745)
NCD/AP		-0.072 (0.395)	-0.090 (0.394)	-0.065 (0.399)	-0.564 (0.990)
RAD		-0.744 (0.560)	-0.766 (0.558)	-0.721 (0.566)	-0.285 (0.907)
Fact-checker (FC) activity (weekly checks)			-0.015* (0.007)		
Social Media				-0.206 (0.144)	
M5S X days left to election					-0.000 (0.000)
FI X days left to election					-0.000 (0.000)
LN X days left to election					0.000 (0.000)
LEU/SEL X days left to election					-0.000 (0.001)
FdI X days left to election					-0.001

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3						(0.001)
4	NCD/AP X days left to election					-0.000
5						(0.001)
6	RAD X days left to election					0.000
7						(0.001)
8						(0.001)
9	Log likelihood	-2283.72	-2268.29	-2265.69	-2267.26	-2266.50
10	Observations	1,630	1,630	1,630	1,630	1,630
11	Number of politicians	25	25	25	25	25
12	Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05					
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For Peer Review