

Ten tips for fact-checking political claims

Greg Borowski, assistant managing editor/projects and investigations,
Editor, PolitiFact Wisconsin
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
greg.borowski@jrn.com (414) 224-2252
@GregJBorowski; @PolitiFactWisc

Truth is the first casualty of political campaigns. Amid the rush of ads, robocalls and debates, political and government reporters are key to helping voters sort out competing claims. But how do you do it in practice? This tip sheet is aimed at reporters who are covering politicians and campaigns, from the state house to the White House.

- 1. Pick sharp, strong statements:** Does the statement provoke this reaction: *Hmm, I wonder if that's true*. Look for ones that have weight (central to the debate), currency (were just made) and prominence (in TV ads, stump speeches, etc.)
- 2. Always be on the lookout:** There's the campaign everyone sees (the TV ads, the debates), the personalized campaign (the robocalls, the mailings, the fund-raising emails) and the social campaign (Twitter, Facebook, chain emails). Mine them all for what is being said.
- 3. Avoid opinion statements and predictions:** You can't fact-check an opinion (*Taxes are too high*), you can't factcheck the future (*I will never raise taxes*). You can fact-check this: *When I was in the Legislature I sponsored 10 tax cuts that saved more than \$500 million*.
- 4. Understand the context:** Something comes before a statement, something comes after it. To understand the full context of what was said, get transcripts of speeches (as delivered); get the text of ads – and don't forget the words on the screen.
- 5. Seek outside, independent sources:** Find credible people and entities that don't have a dog in the fight. Identify some gold-standard sources. For instance, Congressional Budget Office, fiscal bureau for your Legislature.
- 6. Be transparent:** Provide links to source documents. Readers will want to see for themselves ... and may end up fact-checking you. If a think tank has a partisan bent, describe it. If an expert has given to political campaigns, list it.
- 7. Beware checking votes:** These seem like the easiest to check – a candidate did or didn't vote for something. But there may be multiple votes on multiple versions of a bill. In Congress, measures often are lumped together, obscuring where a person really stands.
- 8. Call balls and strikes:** In the end, you need a conclusion. Is the statement true or false (Or in the world of PolitiFact: True, Mostly True, Half True, Mostly False, False or Pants on Fire)? Solid research will lead to strong, confident conclusions.
- 9. Have a consistent strike zone:** Players don't love the umpires. Never will. You don't want them to. But they'll respect you – and fans (there are some among your readers) will appreciate you even more – if you are consistent and fair.
- 10. Do factchecking in daily stories, too:** Incorporate this mindset into daily coverage. Be skeptical. When something doesn't ring true, it usually doesn't. Avoid *on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand* presentations. Aim for *candidate-says, facts-show* stories.