Elections and fact-checking in Portugal: the case of the 2019 and 2022 legislative elections

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Abstract

Fact-checking is a relatively recent journalistic genre in Portugal that has been growing in recent years, alternately viewed as a journalism reform movement or criticized as inefficient and idealistic. Our study is a comparative analysis of the output of the Portuguese fact-checkers *Observador* and *Polígrafo* in the 2019–2022 elections to determine whether their coverage is politically biased. Performing a quantitative content analysis of all fact-checking articles on national politics (*n* = 265) published during the campaign for the parliamentary elections, our results show that fact-checking activity has increased in the last elections. These data may indicate that fact-checking agencies have increased their capacity and resources, but may also suggest a greater presence of subjectivity and deception in Portuguese political discourse. The focus of Portuguese fact-checkers is statements produced during political debates (70%), while social media verification is disregarded. Our most significant finding is the lack of evidence of partisan or political bias in the selection of the assessed statements. Both fact-checkers do not show a tendency to check statements that are more or less anti- or pro-government and/or statements that are ideologically favorable to the left wing or the right wing. Therefore, our findings confirm the high level of professionalism and impartiality of Portuguese fact-checkers evidenced in other studies, and demonstrate that the Portuguese citizen's skepticism toward the practice has no foundation.

Keywords

Fact-checking; Disinformation; Political bias; Partisanship; Left-wing; Right-wing; Digital media; *Observador*; *Polígrafo*; Elections; Portugal.

1. Introduction

The spread of disinformation continues to be a problem with serious consequences for societies. Journalists and academics have expressed their concerns about the threat that disinformation poses to democracy (**McKay**; **Tenove**, 2020; **Tenove**, 2020), contributing to distrust in the media and public institutions (**Bennett**; **Livingston**, 2018) and increased political polarization (**Spohr**, 2017).

The scale of the problem has led several governments to take action. In 2018, the *European Commission* created a group of experts on fake news and disinformation and, in 2020, the *European Digital Media Observatory* (*EDMO*) was created, bringing together academics and media professionals to understand and analyze disinformation. In Portugal, the *Government* also announced a *National Plan* to combat fake news and cyberattacks (*DN/Lusa*, 2019) and the adoption of measures of the *European Action Plan* against disinformation was approved by the *Portuguese Parliament*. In fact, political disinformation is a reality in Portugal, with a special focus on *Facebook* (**Baptista**; **Gradim**, 2022; **Cardoso** *et al.*, 2019a; 2019b; **Pena**, 2019; *ERC*, 2019). **Cardoso** *et al.*, (2019b) monitored, during the 2019 legislative elections, the activity of 47 political disinformation pages on *Facebook*, which use around 39 political groups or closed communities to share false and manipulative messages. These disinformation pages are followed by thousands of users. **Baptista** and **Gradim** (2020) compared the activity of some of these pages with the pages of national newspapers on *Facebook* during the electoral campaign and found that fake news tends to be shared more than real news. However, fake news, from these disinformation pages, did not obtain greater engagement than real news. Unlike other countries (see **Humprecht**, 2020), such as Germany or the United Kingdom, the disinformation narrative in Portugal does not seek to reduce Islamic culture to stereotyped fundamentalisms. On the other hand, in Portugal, the discourse of political disinformation is essentially against the political class and corruption, assuming a populist and anti-system rhetoric (**Cardoso** *et al.*, 2019b; **Baptista**; **Gradim**, 2022). Fake news also assumes an informal and offensive language (**Pena**, 2019). With the COVID-19 pandemic, several groups dedicated to covering the topic appeared on *Facebook*, which ended up promoting the dissemination of false and misleading content about the disease (**Cardoso** *et al.*, 2020). In addition to *Facebook*, the same Obercom report notes that Whatsapp has become a social network used to disseminate false content about the disease, especially in audio format (**Cardoso** *et al.*, 2020).

Despite everything, journalists – "the guardians of the truth for the last 50 years" (**Ladd**, 2012) – have been heavily affected by disinformation, not only because of the way it threatens their digital business model (**Baptista**; **Gradim**, 2021), but also how it denigrates the reputation of their profession. This has led to low trust in the media in most Western countries (**Newman** *et al.*, 2021) and to great skepticism regarding the rigor of journalism, namely in relation to fact-checking (**Baptista** *et al.*, 2022, in press). Therefore, it is not surprising that, in recent years, the number of fact-checking organizations has increased exponentially, especially in Europe (**Brandtzaeg**; Følstad, 2017; **Graves**; **Cherubini**, 2016; **Stencel**, 2019).

With the emergence of fact-checking agencies around the world – due to the need to restore confidence in the truth, correct misperceptions and promote a healthy democracy – the fact-checking of statements made by political candidates during elections has also increased. **Wintersieck** and **Fridkin** (2016) surveyed all fact-checking between 2003 and 2012, during elections (USA), and found that about 20% of the total focused on statements that politicians had made in electoral debates. Fact-checking has played an increasingly important role during elections, as it can contribute to voters' greater knowledge and perception of political affairs (**Gottfried** *et al.*, 2013; **Nyhan**; **Reifler**, 2015a). Several studies have also shown that fact-checking can influence voters' trust in political candidates, which can affect their electoral decisions (**Barker**; **Joesten-Martin**; **Nalder**, 2022; **Cobb**; **Nyhan**; **Reifler**, 2013; **Nyhan**; **Reifler**, 2015b; **Wintersieck**, 2017). Therefore, if fact-checkers are politically biased in their checks, they may not be fulfilling one of their core missions, since impartial coverage of election campaigns is fundamental to democracy.

Until now, few studies have focused on analyzing the political bias in the coverage of fact-checking agencies, although it is a topic explored in relation to traditional media (**Hassell**; **Holbein**; **Miles**, 2020; **Jost**; **Koehler**, 2021). However, researchers are increasingly interested in checking their own fact-checkers (**Amazeen**, 2016; **Lim**, 2018; **Louis-Sidois**, 2022).

The main objective of this study is to understand if Portuguese fact-checking agencies reveal is any kind of political bias during the coverage of national elections. In view of the increase in skepticism and distrust of the media in recent years, particularly in the face of fact-checkers' practices, it is vital to analyze the possible existence of political and ideological biases in fact-checking agencies. A recent study by **Baptista** *et al.* (2022) warned that 50% of the Portuguese citizens surveyed were skeptical about the impartiality and political rigor of fact-checkers.

In short, our study analyzes the coverage of the two Portuguese fact-checking agencies, *Polígrafo* and *Observador*, in two government elections: Legislative in 2019 and 2022. We focus the analysis on articles published during this period, realizing how fact-checkers vary in relation to the selection and evaluation of verified political contents. More specifically, we consider the political-party and ideological orientation of each publication and intend to identify the most verified topics, parties, and political candidates and possible correlations between the two fact-checkers.

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2. Fact-checking: a recent practice in Portugal

Fact-checking, as a journalistic practice, has always existed, although it was a purely internal process and prior to publication. Indeed, seeking the truth through rigor and impartiality are practices inherent in journalism (**Schudson**, 2001; **Tuchman**, 1972). **Canavilhas** and **Ferrari** (2018) label the success of fact-checking as the "return of journalism to its origins". However, we can consider the precursors of fact-checking to be the surveillance of political advertisements (ad watch) that were in vogue during the 1990s in the United States (**Frantzich**, 2002; **Glowaki**; **Jonhson**; **Kranenburg**, 2004). In the same country, fact-checking has become a recurrent practice since the 2000s, with the emergence of the first organizations (**Graves**; **Nyhan**; **Reifler**, 2016). Thus, the journalistic movement that was assumed to be crucial for the reform of journalism and being itself a "democratic institution" (**Graves**; **Cherubini**, 2016) has grown, in the last two decades, to an unprecedented level. With the growing threat of disinformation, this journalistic movement acquired more relevance and began to integrate the practices of established news organizations and to operate, in other cases, independently and exclusively (**Humprecht**, 2020). In 2021, Duke Reporter's Lab identified 341 active fact-checking projects, which represent 51 more than the previous year and is an activity that has spread to 102 countries worldwide.

This new style of reporting uses basic professional principles of journalism, namely the impartial and non-partisan treatment of information (**Graves**, 2013). For these reasons, **Singer** (2018) considers fact-checking simply as "good journalism". However, fact-checking is more associated with the scientific method, seeking to expose the truth based on factual evidence and not through seeking consensus or exposing different points of view (**Coddington**; **Molyneux**; **Lawrence**, 2014). In fact, the scientific treatment of the content of fact-checkers, through the analysis of evidence, the use of methods and the selection of various sources, is what makes this journalistic genre viable and reliable (**Amazeen**, 2015; 2016). Alongside conventional journalism, fact-checking appears to reinforce the watchdog role of matters of public and political interest. In 2015, the *American Press Association* considered that

> "fact checkers and fact-checking organizations aim to increase knowledge by re-reporting and researching the purported facts in published/recorded statements made by politicians and anyone whose words impact others' lives and livelihoods" (**Elizabeth**, 2014).

The same report points out that

> "fact checkers investigate verifiable facts, and their work is free of partisanship, advocacy and rhetoric" (**Elizabeth**, 2014).

Like a scientific protocol, fact-checking agencies have formalized and institutionalized their methods through a code of principles proposed by the International Fact-Checking Network. By following the code, fact-checkers undertake to assess the veracity of declarations of public and political interest in a non-partisan, fair, transparent manner, with open and honest corrections.

In Portugal, the practice of fact-checking is relatively recent. The first Portuguese fact-checker appeared only in 2015 at the initiative of the digital newspaper *Observador*, which dedicated an exclusive section to fact-checking. The newspaper was created in 2014, has a transversal and impartial editorial line. In a text published in 2017, the executive director, Mário Pinheiro, said that the objective of the "fact-check" section is to "increase scrutiny of the various powers" (**Pinheiro**, 2017). In the same article, it can be read that the

> "*Observador* decides to do a fact-check whenever someone makes a statement that raises doubts in the public space",

stressing that the fact-checker

> "does not go into journalistic investigation with any closed idea about what the conclusions will be" (**Pinheiro**, 2017).

In 2018, the first fact-checker operating independently with exclusive dedication appears. *Polígrafo* reinforces the new journalistic movement on the rise in Portugal. Presented during the *Web Submit*, *Polígrafo* assumes itself as "an online journalistic project whose main objective is to find out the truth –and not the lie– in the public space"[1]. The *Poynter Institute* considers *Polígrafo* a success case for the way it became popular in Portuguese society and also for the influence it managed to achieve with Portuguese politicians, who even contact the newsroom to acknowledge their mistakes (**Tardáguila**, 2019). In addition, this fact-checker was distinguished with 11 awards in two years[2].

The activity of *Polígrafo* and *Observador* became more familiar due to the partnerships that both created with the main Portuguese television channels. In partnership with the *SIC* channel, *Polígrafo* created *Polígrafo SIC*, a TV show that increases the number of broadcasts during election periods. *Observador*, together with the *TVI* channel, created the TV show (which has already ended) "A hora da verdade" (The hour of truth).

In addition to these two fact-checkers, *Público* daily newspaper also dedicates a section to fact-checking entitled "Prova dos factos" (Evidence of facts).
https://www.publico.pt/prova-dos-factos

Other Portuguese media have joined forces to fight disinformation. The *Lusa* news agency recently created a platform (*Fighting fake news. A democratic issue*) that aims to group information and develop computing resources and technological tools to support professionals and citizens in combating disinformation. Finally, also in 2019, *Diário de Notícias* joined forces with the *MediaLab* of the *Instituto Universitário de Lisboa* to "monitor propaganda and disinformation on social media".

3. Perceived political media bias

Like the conventional media, fact-checking has been the target of various criticisms and accusations. This emerging genre has been accused of being partisan in the selection process and during the verification of politicians' statements (**Krugman**, 2011; **Stencel**, 2015). Other criticisms are related to the mission –for some "Utopian"– of fact-checkers in verifying the "political facts". **Uscinski** and **Butler** (2013) criticized the practice of fact-checking in relation to political discourse, due to its controversy, subjectivity and complexity. For these authors, facts in politics can always be contested and subject to different interpretations.

The doubts generated by political facts are legitimate. For these reasons, several authors recognize that verifying debates or political statements is a very difficult task. Opinion, motivated reasoning, and partisanship influence the interpretation of information. In fact, these have been the main problems associated with belief and the spread of disinformation (**Baptista** *et al.*, 2021a; 2021b). Although the audience accepts and recognizes fact-checking as a positive and important practice (**Nyhan**; **Reifler**, 2015a), part of the audience continues to select and share fact-checking articles that benefit their candidate or political party (**Shin**; **Thorson**, 2017). It has long been known that journalists can be affected by political bias during their professional routines and in their interpretation strategies (**Tuchman**, 1978). **Uscinski** and **Butler** (2013) criticize the method of selecting fact-checkers for these reasons, even considering that political bias may be unconscious, bias can cause sampling problems. However, **Amazeen** (2015) does not agree with the position of **Uscinski** and **Butler** (2013) and states that

> "it is precisely because facts are complex and often not self-evident that more fact-checking, rather than less, is necessary" (**Amazeen**, 2015, p. 3).

The author reinforces the crucial role that fact-checkers have in correcting mistakes, stressing that it is important to distinguish between facts and opinions. Fact-checkers should focus on verifiable facts.
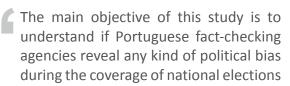
In another study, **Amazeen** (2016) showed that there is a high level of agreement in the assessments of policy statements made by fact-checkers. However, it is the more aggressive political ads that attract the most attention from fact-checking agencies (**Amazeen**, 2016). This problem is not unique to fact-checking, but to all media because it pays too much attention to negativity.

Focusing on Portugal, the Portuguese media system has evolved a lot in recent years, which motivated **Hallin** and **Mancini** (2017) to rectify, after a decade, their position in relation to the Portuguese case. In 2004, the authors integrated the Portuguese media system into the Polarized Pluralist model, which corresponds to a weak journalistic culture, with high political parallelism and a great dependence on the State (**Hallin**; **Mancini**, 2004). This label has been contested over the years by several academics who believed that these characteristics did not define the Portuguese system (**Álvares**; **Damásio**, 2013; **Brüggemann** *et al.*, 2014; **Fishman**, 2011; **Santana-Pereira**, 2016).

The Portuguese media stands out for its ideological, partisan, and professional impartiality (**Álvares**; **Damásio**, 2013; **Fishman**, 2011; **Santana-Pereira**, 2016). Furthermore, the party identities of Portuguese journalists are among the least perceived by the audience (**Popescu** *et al.*, 2011). Recently, **Hallin** and **Mancini** (2017) reviewed their position and considered the Portuguese media system to be more liberal, confirming that the level of political parallelism had significantly decreased. The level of professionalism of journalists and reduced political dependence is what distinguishes the Portuguese media from other countries in southern Europe (**Santana-Pereira**, 2016).

Over the years, the Portuguese media has also been an exception due to the little attention it has devoted to political populism (**Caeiro**, 2019; **Salgado**, 2019; **Salgado**; **Zúquete**, 2016). The populist discourse and attitudes appeared in the media in a derogatory and pejorative way (**Salgado**; **Zúquete**, 2016).

In the 2019 national elections, a deputy from the populist radical right was elected to *Parliament* for the first time and the media began to devote ample attention to a single deputy (**Caeiro**, 2020; **Palma** *et al.*, 2021). The leader of *Chega!*, a party of the populist radical right (**Marchi**, 2019; 2020; **Mendes**; **Dennison**, 2020), André

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Ventura managed to gain strong media attention and became a regular presence in the columns and covers of newspapers (**Palma** *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, **Graça** (2017) found that it is the mainstream parties that deserve more media attention, even if the news tone does not favor them. The author also observed an increase in the politicization of the media in general. **Popescu** *et al.* (2011) had noticed that partisan bias seems more noticeable on television than in the press. In fact, in terms of television, over the years, there has been a strong influence of parliamentary representation in the distribution of political commentators on Portuguese television, with a majority of members of the *Social Democratic Party* (*PSD*) and *Socialist Party* (*PS*) being present (**Figueiras**, 2018).

Finally, the Portuguese political system is multi-party, in which voters have political representation from various ideological families: left-wing with the *Socialist Party* (*PS*), the *Portuguese Communist Party* (*PCP*), *Bloco de Esquerda* (*BE*), *People- Animals-Nature* (*PAN*), *Free* (*L*) and right-wing with *Social Democratic Party* (*PSD*), *Liberal Initiative* (*IL*), *Social Democratic Center* (*CDS*) and *Chega!* (*CH*).

4. Methods

Our study aimed to carry out a comparative analysis of the coverage, of two Portuguese fact-checkers, of the national election campaigns of 2019 and 2022. Our analysis focused on the articles published by *Observador* and *Polígrafo*. Both are part of the list of 101 fact-checkers of the *International Fact-Checking Network* (*IFCN*).
https://en.unesco.org/node/296054
https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/signatories

In addition, *Observador* and *Polígrafo* undertake to evaluate the statements of public and political figures in general, which justifies our choice. On the *Polígrafo* website, it is read that the fact-checker coverage falls on "a wide range of personalities whose interventions have public relevance", namely politicians, commentators and influencers.
https://poligrafo.sapo.pt/institucional/artigos/o-nosso-metodo

Observador published an article, in 2015, on the eve of the national elections, stating that the fact-check section "will serve to analyze the controversies of the electoral campaign", stressing that "whenever parties conflict on an important issue, we will look to the topic and tell who is more right" (*Observador*, 2015).

A content analysis, systematic, objective and quantitative was performed (**Igartua**, 2006; **Neuendorf**, 2017; **Piñeiro-Naval**, 2020; **Piñeiro-Naval**; **Morais**; **Baptista**, 2021), and was also applied to analyze the media coverage of fact-checkers (**Dimitrova**; **Nelson**, 2018; **Farnsworth**; **Lichter**, 2019; **Kim** *et al.*, 2022; **Marietta**; **Barker**; **Bowser**, 2016). Our analysis focuses on the publications of *Polígrafo* and *Observador* articles during two national election campaign periods. The sample selection comprises all fact-checking articles on national politics (*n* = 265) published in 2019 (between September 1 and October 4) and in 2022 (between January 1 and January 28). During the two collection periods, we selected a total of 182 articles from the *Polígrafo* and 83 from the *Observador*.

4.1. Coding

To answer the research questions, a code book was created to be applied to each unit of analysis. The coders analyzed each fact-checking article, taking into account the statement being verified through

1) the figure who made or shared the statement (α_k = .75);
2) party affiliation (α_k = .79);
3) topic or issue under discussion (α_k = .66);
4) context/format in which the statement was made (α_k = .75);
5) political orientation of the statement (pro-*vs.* anti-government) (α_k = .76);
6) the ideological position (left *vs.* right) that favors (α_k = .58); and
7) the classification attributed by fact-checkers (α_k = .99).

As fact-checkers use different veracity scales in their ratings, the scales were standardized from 1 to 6[3].

The coding of the sample was carried out between February 10 and March 10, 2022 by two coders who coded the same 265 fact-checking articles. In order to calculate the reliability of the coding process, a sub-sample of *n* = 50 cases (~19% of the total) analyzed by the two study coders simultaneously was randomly selected. From there, it was possible to calculate the alpha of Krippendorff parameter (**Hayes**; **Krippendorff**, 2007; **Krippendorff**, 2011) for each of the 7 variables, reaching a satisfactory average: α_k = .75.

5. Results

In descriptive terms, it was found that more fact-checking articles were published during the 2022 elections (*n* = 179) than in 2019 (*n* = 86). Both fact-checkers increased the number of publications in 2022. In both years, the *Polígrafo* published more articles than the *Observador* (Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency and percentage of publications by each fact-checker in each election year

	Polígrafo		*Observador*		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
2019	50	58.1	36	41.9	86	100
2022	132	73.8	47	26.2	179	100
Total	182	68.7	83	32.5	265	100

Analyzing Table 2, we observe that both fact-checkers devote practically the same attention to statements made by the same politicians and users of different social networks. Overall, there is no significant trend [χ^2 (11, *n* = 214) = 12.799, *p* = 0.30; *v* = 0.245].

We found that António Costa, the current prime minister, was the personality most scrutinized by fact-checkers in both electoral campaigns. Rui Rio, leader of the opposition, was the second most verified (19.2%). It is important to highlight that António Costa's statements deserved, significantly, more attention from the *Observador* (36%) than the *Polígrafo* (23%). Also noteworthy is the percentage of verifications of André Ventura's statements by the *Polígrafo* (14.4%), which is significantly higher than the amount of verifications made by the *Observador* (5.3%).

Regarding the elections (see Table 2), the differences are clearly evident [χ^2 (11, *n* = 214) = 46.195, *p* < 0.001; *v* = 0.465]. It is notorious that statements/posts or publications from *Facebook* users during the 2019 elections (21.5%) were more

verified by fact-checkers than during the 2022 elections (2%). The leaders of the new parties with parliamentary seats since 2019, were most checked in the 2022 elections, such as André Ventura (14.8%), Cotrim Figueiredo (7.4%) or Rui Tavares (6.0%).

In a later analysis, we only considered the verifications of political figures, which we grouped into "left-wing leaders" and "right-wing leaders". We analyzed the percentage of checks considering the election year and each fact-checker. However, our results did not show significant differences between groups or in relation to election years [χ^2(1, n = 188) = 3.360, p = 0.67; v = 0.134], nor in relation to fact-checkers [χ^2(1, n = 188) = 2.780, p = 0.95; v = 0.122].

Table 2. Statements and/or publications by politicians and social media users (% per column)

Author	Total %	Fact-checkers		Elections	
		Polígrafo %	Observador %	2019 %	2022 %
Facebook user	7.9	7.2	9.3	21.5 +	2.0 –
Twitter user	3.7	3.6	4.0	4.6	3.4
Twitter/Facebook page	0.5	0.7	0	0	0.7
António Costa (*PS*)	27.6	23.0 –	36.0 +	33.8	24.8
Rui Rio (*PSD*)	19.2	18.0	21.3	23.1	17.4
André Ventura (*CH*)	11.2	14.4 +	5.3 –	3.1 –	14.8 +
Jerónimo Sousa (*PCP*)	1.4	1.4	1.3	1.5	1.3
Inês Real (*PAN*)	2.3	2.9	1.3	0	3.4
Cotrim Figueiredo (*IL*)	5.1	6.5	2.7	0 –	7.4 +
Catarina Martins (*BE*)	11.2	10.1	13.3	12.3	10.7
Rui Tavares (*L*)	4.2	5.8	1.3	0 –	6.0 +
Francisco Santos (*CDS*)	5.6	6.5	4.0	0 –	8.1 +
n	214	139	75	65	149

Note: + statistically higher value (analysis of corrected typified residuals); - statistically lower value (analysis of corrected typified residuals).

Regarding the main political topics addressed by *Polígrafo* and *Observador*, in 2019 and 2022 (Table 3), we found that some topics resulted in more verifications than others, showing significant differences between electoral acts [χ^2(15, n = 265) = 31.857, p = 0.007; v = 0.347] and between the two fact-checkers [χ^2(15, n = 265) = 25.060, p = 0.002; v = 0.364].

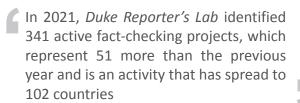Table 3. Topics covered by fact-checkers in the 2019 and 2022 national elections (% per column)

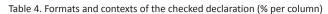| Topics	Fact-checker			Elections		
	Total %	Observador %	Polígrafo %	Total %	2019 %	2022 %
Income	12.5	8.4	14.3	12.5	9.3	14.0
Health	10.9	15.7	8.8	10.9	2.3 –	15.1 +
Energy	1.1	3.6 +	0 –	1.1	1.2	1.1
Nationalizations	4.5	8.4 +	2.7 –	4.5	4.7	4.5
Economy	18.5	22.9	16.5	18.5	22.1	16.8
Employment	2.6	2.4	2.7	2.6	2.3	2.8
Labor conditions	0	0	0	0	0	0
Immigration	2.3	2.4	2.2	2.3	3.5	1.7
Education	3.4	3.6	3.3	3.4	4.7	2.8
Racism	2.3	2.4	2.2	2.3	3.5	1.7
Administration	2.6	4.8	1.6	2.6	4.7	1.7
Environment	1.1	0	1.6	1.1	3.5 +	0 –
Social security	2.6	3.6	2.2	2.6	3.5	2.2
Internal security	1.5	2.4	1.1	1.5	4.7 +	0 –
Elections	26.4	10.8 –	33.5 +	26.4	20.9	29.1
Justice	3.4	6.0	2.2	3.4	4.7	2.8
Other	4.2	2.4	4.9	4.2	4.7	3.9
n	265	83	182	265	86	179

Note: + statistically higher value (analysis of corrected typified residuals); - statistically lower value (analysis of corrected typified residuals).

Considering Table 3, we notice that it was the theme "Elections" that resulted in more checks in the analysis set (26.4%). In other words, matters related to accusations, false polls or electoral controversies were the most verified, especially in a clearly more evident way by the *Polígrafo*. Comparing the verifications carried out by both fact-checkers, the *Observador* significantly focused more attention on subjects such as "Energy" and "Nationalizations". For most topics, we did not find a clear trend.

If we analyze the coverage of topics by election year, we observe a noticeably higher percentage of checks on "Health" during the 2022 elections. It is important to note that, unlike 2019, in 2022 the world was in a COVID-19 pandemic period. It is also noted that, during the 2022 election campaign, the "Environment" and "Internal Security" were not subject to any checks, contrary to what happened in 2019.

In Table 4, we analyze the context/format in which the statement verified by the fact-checkers was made. Most of the checks carried out (69.8%) resulted in the analysis of statements made by politicians in televised political debates. There is a significant increase in political debate checks, from 59.3% (in 2019) to 74.9% (in 2022).

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Table 4. Formats and contexts of the checked declaration (% per column)

Format	Fact-checker			Elections		
	Total %	*Observador* %	*Polígrafo* %	Total %	2019 %	2022 %
Under debate	69.8	86.7 +	62.1 –	69.8	59.3 –	74.9 +
In interview	1.9	0	2.7	1.9	2.3	1.7
Statement	6.0	1.2 –	8.2 +	6.0	12.8 +	2.8 –
Facebook post	2.3	2.4	2.2	2.3	3.5	1.7
Tweet	3.0	1.2	3.8	3.0	2.3	3.4
Post with photo	5.7	2.4	7.1	5.7	4.7	6.1
Tweet with photo	2.3	1.2	2.7	2.3	2.3	2.2
Meme post	2.6	0	3.8	2.6	4.7	1.7
Meme tweet	0	0	0	0	0	0
Post with graphic	1.5	1.2	1.6	1.5	1.2	1.7
Tweet with graphic	0.8	0	1.1	0.8	0	1.1
Video post	0.8	1.2	0.5	0.8	0	1.1
Video tweet	0.4	1.2	0	0.4	0	0.6
Meme with video	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fake news	1.5	1.2	1.6	1.5	3.5	0.6
Other	1.5	0	2.2	1.5	3.5	0.6
n	265	83	182	265	83	182
Context	Total %	*Observador* %	*Polígrafo* %	Total %	2019 %	2022 %
Social media content	21.1	12.0 –	25.3 +	21.1	22.9	20.2
Media context	78.9	88.0 +	74.7 –	78.9	77.1	79.8
n	261	83	178	261	83	178

Note: + statistically higher value (analysis of corrected typified residuals); - statistically lower value (analysis of corrected typified residuals).

On the other hand, it is noted that fact-checkers, during the two elections, paid little attention to publications from social media. If we group the different formats into two sets "Social media content" and "Traditional media context", we observe that checks from social media only correspond to 21% of the analysis corpus. Even so, considering these two categories, we found significant evidence between *Polígrafo* and *Observador* [χ^2 (1, *n* = 261) = 5.965, *p* = 0.015; *v* = 0.151], with *Polígrafo* devoting more attention to social media content than *Observador*.

Table 5. Classifications attributed by the fact-checkers (frequencies and percentages of each point of the range)

	Polígrafo		*Observador*	
	n	%	*n*	%
True / Right	82	45.1	20	24.1
True but.../ Mostly true	19	10.4	6	7.2
Imprecise	12	6.6	9	10.8
Decontextualized/Inconclusive	3	1.6	5	6.1
Manipulated / Deceived	0	0	16	19.3
Pepper on tongue / False	66	36.3	27	32.5
Total	182	100	83	100

Considering the positioning of the political content of the checked statement (1 = Pro-government, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Anti-government), we did not find any significant trend between *Polígrafo* and *Observador* [χ^2 (2, *n* = 265) = 3.719, *p* = 0.15; *v* = 0.118] and between the two legislative elections [χ^2 (2, *n* = 265) = 0.292, *p* = 0.86; *v* = 0.33]. Our results also reject the idea of political bias in relation to the political dimension of content (1 – Pro-left, 2 – Neutral, 3 – Pro-right), either between the two fact-checkers [χ^2 (2, *n* = 265) = 4.278, *p* = 0.118; *v* = 0.127], or between 2019 and 2022 [χ^2 (2, *n* = 265) = 0.292, *p* = 0.86; *v* = 0.033]. In other words, there is no significant evidence that any of the fact-checkers have carried out biased checks that favor a particular political field. In this way, the evident impartiality on both sides stands out.

Regarding the classifications attributed by the fact-checkers (Table 5), through Student's t test analysis we noticed that the *Observador* significantly classified the checks, on average, as being more false (M_{checks} = 3.87, SD = 2.02) compared to *Polígrafo* (M_{checks} = 3.10, SD = 2.28) [t (263) = 2.63, p = 0.009, d = 0.357].

Our results also show that the political orientation of statements does not influence the ratings given by fact-checkers, either in relation to the pro-government and anti-government dichotomy [$F_{(2, 262)}$ = 0.635, p = 0.53], or with regard to the pro-left and pro-right dyad [$F_{(2, 262)}$ = 0.91, p = 0.40] (Table 6).

Table 6. Relationship between the classification of fact-checkers and the political orientation of the statements

| | | Fact-checker classification | | F | p |
		M	SD		
Political orientation	Pro-government	3.61	2.23	0.635	0.53
	Neutral	3.23	2.21		
	Anti-government	3.27	2.23		
Ideological orientation	Pro-left	3.09	2.16	0.910	0.40
	Neutral	3.39	2.23		
	Pro-right	3.53	2.28		

6. Discussion and conclusions

Our results confirmed that Portuguese fact-checkers performed more checks of political statements during the 2022 elections compared to the 2019 elections. These data may indicate that fact-checking has become a more common journalistic activity in Portugal, but may also suggest that fact-checking agencies have increased their capacity and resources. Furthermore, its role as a political affairs whatchdog was reinforced in 2022. On the other hand, these findings may also indicate a greater presence of subjectivity and deception in Portuguese political discourse, which agrees with several studies that highlighted an increase in the political instrumentalization of disinformation, especially through *Facebook*, during the 2019 elections (**Baptista**; **Gradim**, 2022; **Cardoso** *et al.*, 2019b).

On the other hand, the increase in the number of fact-checking articles, from 2019 to 2022, may be directly related to the transmission of televised debates. While 13 televised debates were held in 2019 (**Borges**, 2019), during the 2022 electoral campaign, 30 face-to-face electoral debates were broadcast on television (**Monteiro**, 2022). Our study showed that about 70% of the total of fact-checking articles are verifications of statements made by politicians in electoral debates. Our results reinforce the idea that fact-checkers focus their attention essentially on political debates (**Amazeen**, 2016; **Wintersieck**; **Fridkin**, 2016).

Similar to what **Amazeen** (2016) found analyzing the US presidential race in 2008, our study also seems to support the idea that fact-checkers pay more attention to the negativity in political advertising. This finding is evident when we observe that the topic "elections" (which highlights controversial statements and accusations between candidates) was the most prominent topic in general. Other studies have also found this trend (**Lim**, 2018). However, it was found that *Polígrafo* devoted significantly more attention to this type of subject. In the case of *Observador*, topics such as "Health" and "Economy" were the subject of greater scrutiny. Therefore, our findings raise some important questions to add to the contemporary debate about the business model and the practice of fact-checking. Are independent fact-checkers (like *Polígrafo*) more dependent on controversial statements and accusations among politicians than fact-checkers that are integrated into a news organization? We believe that our investigation can be a starting point for this discussion.

Our findings also confirmed that both fact-checkers paid very little attention to social media in both election periods. Portuguese fact-checkers seem to be almost exclusively focused on political discourse and debate, although some studies in Portugal have warned of the increased dissemination of disinformation in social media (**Baptista**; **Gradim**, 2022; **Cardoso** *et al.*, 2020; 2019b), including that disinformation in Portugal

> "is large enough to bias public opinion's perception of the veracity of the information and thus diminish the quality of our democracy" (**Cardoso** *et al.*, 2019a, p. 4).

As in our study, **Ribeiro** *et al.* (2021) found that fact-checkers have difficulties in keeping up with the digital universe, highlighting that many fake publications that went viral were not verified in several countries.

More importantly, our findings did not identify evidence of partisan and political bias in the selection of statements for assessment by fact-checkers. We did not find, on the part of *Observador* and *Polígrafo*, any tendency to verify more or less anti- or pro-government statements and/or ideologically favorable statements on the left or the right. In addition, we also found that the political orientation of the statements had no influence on the ratings given by fact-checkers. Our findings are not in agreement with some literature that has identified political bias in checking fact-checkers. For example, **Louis-Sidois** (2022) analyzed the partisan bias of French and American fact-checkers and found that fact-checkers tend to check ideologically close politicians less often and agree with them. In addition, polarization increases during electoral periods. In the Portuguese case, on the other hand, our results confirm the high

> In Portugal, the practice of fact-checking is relatively recent. The first Portuguese fact-checker appeared only in 2015 at the initiative of the digital newspaper *Observador*, which dedicated an exclusive section to fact-checking

level of professionalism and impartiality of Portuguese fact-checkers (**Álvares**; **Damásio**, 2013; **Da-Silva** *et al.*, 2017; **Fishman**, 2011). Furthermore, our study also demonstrates that the skepticism with which the Portuguese view the practice of fact-checking is exaggerated (**Baptista** *et al.* 2022, in press).

> In the 2019 national elections, a deputy from the populist radical right *Chega* was elected to *Parliament* for the first time and the media began to devote ample attention to a single deputy

In short, our study allowed us to perceive that fact-checkers' attention fell mainly on the statements of political candidates during electoral debates. We believe fact-checkers should focus more attention on the digital universe, tracking viral posts and politically segregated groups. In future work, it is important to try to evaluate the efforts of fact-checkers to follow up on disinformation online. On the other hand, our work highlights the professionalism of journalists dedicated to fact-checking in Portugal and can serve as a vote of confidence in the practice of fact-checking, which has proven to be non-partisan and impartial.

7. Notes

1. The *Polígrafo*'s editorial statute is available at:
https://poligrafo.sapo.pt/institucional/artigos/estatuto-editorial

2. More information at:
https://poligrafo.sapo.pt/institucional/artigos/poligrafo-vence-mais-dois-premios-e-ja-sao-onze-em-dois-anos

3. The veracity scale of *Polígrafo* has 7 points, while the *Observador* has only 6. Therefore, as for *Polígrafo*, two values of the initial scale were combined in the "6" category: 6 = False and 7 = Pepper in tongue (the value "7 = pepper in tongue" only initially appeared in 5 cases in 2022). This decision was taken to standardize the scales of the two fact-checkers: from 1 to 6 values.

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