

# Combating Repeated Lies: The Impact of Fact-Checking on Persistent Falsehoods by Politicians

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## Abstract

The rise of repeated false claims within political discourse is undermining fact-checking efforts. By reiterating similar statements that perpetuate previous falsehoods, political actors shift from misinformation to deliberate disinformation and even propagandistic tactics. Through an analysis of 1,204 political fact-checks conducted by the Spanish fact-checking organization Newtral, this study quantifies and characterizes the prevalence of repeated false claims in political discourse, revealing that a substantial 24.8% of false statements are repeated, with each being repeated an average of four times. By delving into the nature and types of claims most susceptible to recurrence, the study identifies five primary patterns employed by political actors: nuanced variations, data manipulation, multilateral attacks, discourse qualification, and cumulative repetition. These tactics blur the lines between deception and self-correction. The annotated database of these repeated false statements can serve as a valuable resource for exploratory qualitative analysis as well as claim-matching research in automated fact-checking.

## Keywords

disinformation; fact-checking; falsehoods; political discourse; propaganda

## 1. Introduction

The recurrence of false claims has become increasingly prevalent in political discourse. During the campaign for the Spanish regional elections of May 28, 2023, the fact-checking organization Newtral identified false claims repeated more than 30 times, even after having been debunked on multiple occasions (Real, 2023b). In 2021, *The Washington Post* tallied over 55 false claims made by former President Donald Trump that were repeated at least 20 times, with one instance reaching a staggering 493 repetitions (Kessler & Fox, 2021).

Numerous studies have focused on measuring how fact-checking can influence or correct the public perception of a given issue (Fridkin et al., 2015; Garrett & Weeks, 2013; Nyhan, 2020, 2021; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015; Porter & Wood, 2021). However, few have assessed the impact of fact-checking on actual political discourse, particularly in terms of compelling the author of a false claim to correct themselves or, at the very least, to cease its propagation (Lim, 2018). This is of particular significance, given that the repetition of a false assertion can have a higher detrimental effect on its recipients and may imply a greater level of intentionality on the part of the speaker (Garrett et al., 2013; Kessler, 2018).

Fact-checking organizations have devised various strategies to combat frequently repeated false claims, from increasing the visibility of such cases to pursuing greater impact through editorial strategies or even running campaigns publicly urging politicians to rectify their claims (Full Fact, n.d.-b). Another line of work revolves around artificial intelligence models based on claim matching to facilitate early detection of repeated claims and assist fact-checkers in responding more swiftly (Larraz et al., 2023).

Following these insights, the primary objective of this study is to quantify the prevalence of false claim repetition in political discourse through an analysis of the database of political fact-checks published by Newtral. In doing so, we seek to gain a deeper understanding of how these recurrent ideas are articulated through narratives and persuasive techniques. The second objective is to analyze what common elements these repeated phrases share to provide possible reasons why some political arguments persist over time despite evidence against them. Lastly, the article has an exploratory aim regarding the potential impact of fact-checking in making certain falsehoods disappear from political discourse or, conversely, endure despite being exposed numerous times. However, it is crucial to clarify that our exploration regarding fact-checking influences in the correction or modulation of political discourse aims to understand the potential implications and effects of this phenomenon, rather than seek definitive proof to either support or refute it.

To accomplish this analysis, we review the fact-checking database from Newtral up to September 15, 2023, including 1,204 fact-checks from the political discourse. We employ a quantitative approach to measure the repetition rate and ascertain how many of these repetitions can be attributed to the same individual or political party. In the revision of this exploratory dataset, two key limitations were identified. First, the Newtral policy regarding repetitions likely results in an undercount of the actual number of repeated claims. Second, the database depends on the political claims selectively chosen by Newtral, which may exhibit a heightened sensitivity to repetitions. Despite these limitations, almost one out of four of the political claims checked by the Spanish organization are repetitions. Furthermore, we utilize a qualitative approach to characterize the repeated falsehoods and classify them into different types. In this way, the research aims to shed light on the impact of fact-checking and propose effective approaches for countering the repetition of falsehoods in political rhetoric.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In a classic study on the transmission of rumors, Allport and Lepkin (1945) observed that the most significant factor in predicting belief in war-related rumors was simple repetition. The “illusory truth effect” or “repetition effect,” which posits that people are more likely to believe a message that has been repeated to them many times (McIntyre, 2018), has been supported by numerous studies (Begg et al., 1992; Corneille et al., 2020; Fazio, 2020; Hasher et al., 1977; Hawkins & Hoch, 1992; Unkelbach et al., 2019). Together, these findings

demonstrate that in the absence of additional information, people tend to base their beliefs on the apparent familiarity of a statement, under the assumption that if they've heard it before, it's probably true (Festinger, 1954; Horne & Adali, 2017; Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Reber & Schwarz, 1999).

This is compounded by the “continued influence effect,” which refers to the tendency of misinformation to continue influencing people’s thinking and decision-making even after it has been corrected or discredited (Garrett et al., 2013). In more recent times, this effect has been exacerbated by the proliferation of bots and the widespread use of social media to disseminate messages, contributing to the broader phenomenon of misinformation (Pennycook et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018).

This study emerges from detecting the actions undertaken to address the repetition of false claims. Since the primary purpose of fact-checking is to promote truth in public discourse (Graves & Cherubini, 2016), it is essential to hold politicians accountable for correcting their statements or, at the very least, avoid the repetition of false information that has already been fact-checked. If this does not occur, fact-checks lose effectiveness (Amazeen, 2013; Schwarz et al., 2007), and misinformation transitions into a form of propaganda (Kessler, 2018; Rashkin et al., 2017).

Existing literature has placed greater emphasis on analyzing the effects on people, providing various evidence regarding its ability to correct ideas or positions (Fridkin et al., 2015; Garrett & Weeks, 2013; Nyhan, 2020, 2021; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015; Porter & Wood, 2021). The analysis could be divided between those who see limited effects on changing beliefs and correcting misinformation (Nyhan et al., 2020) and those who observe strong effects (Carnahan & Bergan, 2021). These discrepancies are likely due to the operational context of fact-checking organizations, as noted by Walter et al. (2020). Effects on both political discourses and fact-checking resonate with research on post-truth, which emphasizes that the popularity of an idea among supporters often outweighs its factual accuracy (McIntyre, 2018).

However, fewer studies have examined the impact on political discourse itself (Mattozzi et al., 2022; Nieminen & Rapeli, 2019), and even fewer have attempted to measure its effect in preventing the repetition of false claims (Lim, 2018). As Amazeen (2013) points out, it is impossible to document all the lies that have not been repeated thanks to fact-checking, so it cannot be compared to the prevalence of repeated falsehood as a measure of its effectiveness.

In this context, several authors have sought to measure both the political cost of lying (Banks, 1990; Callander & Wilkie, 2007) and the effects of fact-checking on politicians’ decision to resort to misinformation (Lim, 2018; Ma et al., 2022; Mattozzi et al., 2022; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). For example, Callander and Wilkie (2007) suggest that there is a different predisposition to lie and establish that candidates can be of two types: liars with a cost or free liars. This model contrasts with the arguments of Banks (1990), who assume that the cost of lying is the same for all candidates, and therefore, all are equally willing to lie about their intentions. Most of these studies focus on analyzing the impact on the politician and their followers (Prike et al., 2023; Swire-Thompson et al., 2020), rather than a content analysis of the lie itself (Tandoc, 2019; Wintersieck et al., 2021).

On the other hand, Gaber and Fisher (2021), in their analysis of messages during the 2019 UK general election campaign, identified that the Conservative Party deliberately employed falsehoods as a strategy to set the agenda. Therefore, in situations where it is crucial to assert a position, counter criticisms, or oppose other

narratives, politicians are more likely to be willing to bear the political cost of falsehoods to contribute to the mentioned repetition effect (Shenhav, 2015). A final branch of studies has examined the automation of detecting recurrent falsehoods through the use of artificial intelligence via models of claim matching or pairing similar claims (Corney, 2021; Larraz et al., 2023).

To the best of our knowledge, no study has assessed the prevalence of repeated false claims in political discourse or examined why some false claims are repeatedly made while others are not. Additionally, there is a lack of research on whether fact-checking has a differential effect on certain false messages in preventing politicians from repeating falsehoods. Academics have not pursued this research because of two main reasons. First, it is impossible to determine causality without experimental methods, and second, the dataset is based on fact-checkers' subjective news judgment.

Despite these limitations, this study opens up interesting avenues for research, such as comparing claim-repetition statistics in the databases of different organizations. This could shed light on differences among fact-checkers and/or variations in media-political systems. In a subsequent stage, we reviewed the actions undertaken by Newtral to deepen our understanding of its limitations and establish the methodology used to measure repetitions.

### ***2.1. Strategies to Prevent the Repetition of Falsehoods***

As part of our preliminary analysis, we sought to determine whether the recurrence of falsehoods poses a challenge for fact-checking organizations as it demonstrates its significance to practitioners and their active efforts to address it. We examined Newtral's strategies to develop a robust methodology for our study, drawing insights from their publications and discussions with the organization's fact-checkers.

Newtral does not maintain a comprehensive record of every instance in which it identifies the repetition of false claims in political discourse. Typically, when detecting nearly identical repetitions by the same political actor, they publish a message on X (formerly Twitter), providing a link to the corresponding previous fact-check. This practice is not unique to Newtral; other organizations such as FactCheck.org, Full Fact, and Politifact also note in their messages when a false statement is reiterated.

If the assertion introduces a new nuance or is combined with other relevant data, the retrieval of the previous publication is discarded. Newtral's decision to conduct a new fact-check depends on factors such as the relevance of the claim's author, political context, and degree of falsehood. A new fact-check also occurs if values or data change due to new information or if the claim arises during crucial moments like electoral debates. In other cases, references to previous fact-checks are made in the text, citing instances of prior checks (Cadenas, 2022; Pascual, 2022; Real, 2022a, 2022b).

In some cases, a different journalistic approach has been taken, including special reports or other journalistic products to highlight the recurrence of false claims. For example, when a falsehood is repeated several times, Newtral produces a compilation article (Cadenas & Alonso, 2023; Newtral, 2021; Pascual & Real, 2022; Real, 2023a, 2023b; Real & Larraz, 2022). Additionally, since 2022, Newtral has been developing ClaimCheck, an internal automated solution designed to detect similar claims and assist journalists (Larraz et al., 2023). This helps streamline the process of identifying and addressing repeated false claims.

Special reports are also done by other organizations such as Aos Fatos in Brazil, which tracked the falsehoods made by former President Jair Bolsonaro, or by *The Washington Post* with former President Donald Trump. This last created the “Repetition Observatory” column to highlight statements repeated by politicians even after debunking, and a panel to monitor these falsehoods (Kessler, 2017; Kessler & Fox, 2021). Kessler emphasized that highlighting the repetition of falsehoods aligns with the idea that “we need to seek corrections and hold people accountable” (Cox, 2019).

These editorial strategies can escalate, such as increasing the rating of a claim or even introducing a new one. Michael Dobbs, who founded *The Washington Post*’s Fact Checker in 2007, noted that candidates rarely admit mistakes. At most, they may stop repeating falsehoods, “depending on the level of embarrassment” (Dobbs, 2012, p. 3). He also increased the rating assigned to a politician for repeated falsehoods “for recidivism.” In 2018, *The Washington Post* introduced the Bottomless Pinocchio category to measure the persistence of repeated falsehoods, “when a politician refuses to drop a claim that has been fact-checked,” explained Glenn Kessler (2018, director of *The Washington Post* Fact Checker).

Some civil society organizations may even intervene directly to seek correction from politicians. This occurs among the so-called “second fact-checking generation,” such as Full Fact in the UK and Chequeado in Argentina. These organizations track deceptive claims after each fact-check to identify repetitions (Corney, 2021) and maintain records of politicians contacted about misinformation who have not corrected their statements (Full Fact, 2022). The rationale is that fact-checks alone are insufficient to combat misinformation, and additional steps are needed (Africa Check et al., 2019; Full Fact, n.d.-a; Team Full Fact, 2022a). Occasionally, these organizations run campaigns urging lawmakers to improve the correction system in parliament, aiming to restore trust in the political sphere (Full Fact, n.d.-b; Team Full Fact, 2022b).

In any case, some fact-checkers from Newtral have noted an impact when underlining falsehoods that are repeated, as explained in Box 1.

#### **Box 1. Case analysis: Increased exposure and direct confrontation.**

The issue of pension revaluation played a crucial role in the context of the pre-election campaign leading up to the Spanish general elections on July 23, 2023. Alberto Núñez Feijóo, leader of the Popular Party (PP), emphasized multiple times that his party, in contrast to the Socialist Party (PSOE), had consistently revalued pensions in line with the Consumer Price Index. Newtral published a fact-check on June 23 (Mejía, 2023). On July 17, the PP leader repeated this assertion on national public television (RTVE, 2023). This time, the program host responded live that this claim was “incorrect.” Feijóo maintained his position, insisting it was “absolutely correct.” The confrontation between the two continued and the clip became viral on social media. The politician did not retract or acknowledge his error at that moment but later altered his stance and, through a social media message, expressed the following: “I reiterate that the PP never froze pensions, and the PSOE did, with Sánchez’s vote. The PP increased pensions every year, and the PSOE did not.” This statement significantly differed from his initial claim.

This case raises questions about whether real-time correction would have been possible without a prior fact-check and whether it indeed had the desired impact as it might have changed people’s opinion, but it didn’t make the politician correct himself. However, it highlights that media exposure and direct confrontation can exert considerable influence, enhancing the effectiveness of the fact-checking process.

## 2.2. Research Questions

Fact-checkers' actions highlight the importance of addressing the repetition of falsehoods, a topic not fully explored in academic literature. While they combat this issue, more information is needed about the magnitude and characteristics of repeated false claims in political discourse after being debunked. Previous research emphasizes fact-checking's role in reducing false information spread, but it is unclear if some false claims resist correction more than others. This foundation allows us to extend the understanding of misinformation dynamics in the political discourse, providing a nuanced perspective on fact-checking effectiveness, leading to the formulation of the following research questions:

RQ1: How many of the fact-checks address repeated falsehoods, and what is the repetition rate of these claims?

RQ2: How are these repetitions characterized, considering the presence of nuances, involvement of different political actors, and the timeframes within which these repetitions occur?

It is essential to note that the questions proposed in this study are exploratory in nature, designed to uncover potential relationships and patterns within the data rather than validate predetermined theories or make definitive predictions. Ultimately, the study seeks to gauge the prevalence of false claim repetition in discourse as a means to evaluate the efficacy of fact-checking.

## 3. Methodology

To conduct this study, we employed quantitative content analysis, evaluating all fact-checks published by the Spanish fact-checking organization Newtral since its inception. Our primary goal was to identify and quantify instances of repeated false claims. This analysis allowed us to collect data on the number of times fact-checked claims were repeated, the intervals between repetitions, the frequency of repetition, and whether they were made by the same political actor or party. This comprehensive dataset provides invaluable insights into the patterns of misinformation dissemination and repetition.

The choice of Newtral as the data source was based on several important criteria. Firstly, Newtral offers an extensive and well-organized database of fact-checks on political discourse, enabling in-depth analysis. Additionally, as a member of the International Fact-Checking Network, Newtral ensures the quality and reliability of its data. This selection also allows us to observe temporal diversity, providing a comprehensive perspective on the repetition of false claims across different times and political contexts.

### 3.1. Data Collection

The fact-checks published by the organization Newtral were obtained through Google's Fact Check Explorer, which aggregates verifications from media outlets using the structured data system of ClaimReview (Google, n.d.).

To narrow our selection to fact-checks related to political discourse, we conducted a data-cleansing process. This involved excluding publications focused on misinformation from non-political actors, and those falsely

attributing phrases to political actors. Additionally, repeated fact-checks in both individual publications and compilation articles were removed. After this process, we obtained a total of 1,204 results spanning almost five years, from October 3, 2018, to September 15, 2023 (refer to the annotated database in Supplementary File 1).

### **3.2. Procedure**

To tally repetitions, a record was implemented that identifies how many times a specific claim appears in other fact-checks published, both in previous and subsequent fact-checks. For instance, if a false claim is verified in three different fact-checks, it is counted as three repetitions. For each assertion, the following classifications were carried out: (a) similar fact-checks considered repeated claims; and (b) analysis of repeated statements.

In regards to similar fact-checks considered repeated claims (a), we identified whether statements had been previously fact-checked within the same organization by conducting keyword searches across the entire database. For an assertion to be considered a repetition, it had to address the same topic or data concerning a claim with the same sense, regardless of numerical variations. For example, claims about the number of companies needed to pertain to the *loss* of companies to qualify as repetitions. When a match was found, we recorded the identification number of the repeated phrase in a new column, indicating how frequently it had been reiterated, whether by the same or different authors.

As for the analysis of repeated statements (b), to better understand the patterns and context of these repetitions, we analyzed the time interval between them, and whether they came from the same author. For repetitions by different authors, we noted how often they were from the same political party. The analysis also examined whether new repetitions introduced any nuance or modulation into the original discourse by examining their ratings of veracity.

### **3.3. Validation and Reliability**

To ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, an external reviewer conducted a review process. A random sample of 10% of the instances from the database was selected, and the process of identifying and tallying repetitions was repeated. The agreement between the original results and the review results was calculated using Cohen's Kappa coefficient, used for assessing inter-rater agreement. A Weighted Quadratic Cohen's Kappa value of 0.902 was found, indicating almost perfect agreement between the two sets of data (see Supplementary File 2).

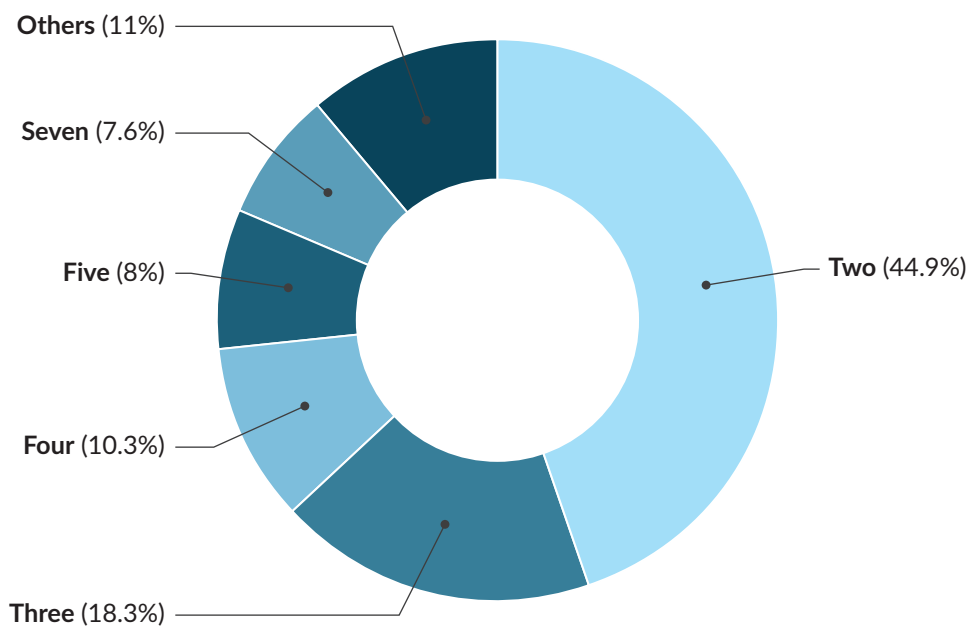
## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Quantitative Analysis**

Out of the 1,204 verifications subjected to analysis, 24.8% of them, equivalent to 299 verifications, were related to similar claims. In 13.6% of cases, which amounts to 164 verifications, false claims had been repeated at least three times. Additionally, in 9.1% of cases, equivalent to 109 verifications, assertions had been repeated four times or more (Figures 1 and 2). In those claims that are repeated, the average repetition rate of each assertion is close to four (3.7 times).

Repetitions	Number	Percentage
Total number of fact-checks analyzed	1,204	100%
Two or more	299	24.8%
Three or more	164	13.6%
Four or more	109	9.1%
Five or more	78	6.5%
Six or more	54	4.5%
Seven or more	45	3.7%
Eight or more	22	1.8%
Nine or more	13	1.1%
Ten or more	17	1.4%

**Figure 1.** Number and percentage of repeated phrases by repetition rate.



**Figure 2.** Repetition rate among repeated claims.

#### 4.2. Qualitative Analysis

Regarding the results related to RQ2, when categorizing and characterizing repeated false claims, a mix of occurrences is evident. Political actors often employ alternative strategies, blurring the line between deception and self-correction. These strategies include introducing nuances in their claims or involving other party members in spreading the same assertion, among others. Five main patterns have been identified where, despite minor changes, the underlying argument remains constant. The numbers that appear in the following paragraphs are references to fact-checks in the database (see Supplementary File 1).



In regards to variation in numbers or locations and their adaptation to the context (see also Table 1), for example, for months, members of the PP repeated figures such as “seven million Spaniards who want to work and cannot” (434), “we have five million unemployed” and “six million unemployed” (both in 564), or “four million people unemployed” (686).

As for the manipulation of data to present them in different modalities, the same figure is repeated through different calculations. For example, the data on the increase in public debt has been presented using various units of time, such as hours (“nine million euros every passing hour” [779]), days (“200 million euros in new debt every day” [1190]), or months (“6,000 million euros every month” [1018]). The same occurs when different time periods or reference dates are taken into account.

A multilateral attack from different angles occurs when different aspects related to the same topic are criticized to reinforce a central idea. For example, representatives of the Vox party stated that “false accusations (of gender violence) affect millions of Spaniards” (55), “the EU gives more money to those regions that have registered a higher number of (gender violence) complaints” (335), or that “out of all the complaints of gender violence, 80% are dismissed because there is no evidence or clues” (539). These cases have not been counted as similar in the database, but it is important to highlight them as a strategy.

**Table 1.** Examples of repeated assertions regarding the loss of companies.

Claim	Claimant	Date
100,000 companies have closed in this country	Cuca Gamarra	2020-12-16
We have lost 207,000 companies in the last six months	Inés Arrimadas	2021-02-24
You have been the minister of economy for more than three and a half years, and during this period almost 104,000 companies have been forced to close	Cuca Gamarra	2022-02-23
[There are] 30,000 companies that disappeared in Spain from January to March 2022	Jorge Buxadé	2022-05-09
If we talk about companies, it turns out that since the pandemic we have lost 53,000 companies, and since Mr. Sánchez has been in office, 79,000 companies	Juan Bravo	2023-01-03
In terms of productive fabric, Spain is doing poorly, because 70,000 companies have disappeared since the pandemic and have not recovered	Iván Espinosa de los Monteros	2023-03-08
If things are going so well for them, why did company closures in Spain set records in 2022 with more than 26,200 companies dissolved?	Iván Espinosa de los Monteros	2023-04-19
Today we have, sir, 68,000 fewer companies than before the pandemic	Iván Espinosa de los Monteros	2023-04-19
We are in a phase of deterioration of the business fabric: We have lost 100,000 self-employed workers in the last year and 87,000 companies since Mr. Sánchez became president of the government	Alberto Núñez Feijóo	2023-05-03
55,000 fewer companies during Sánchez's government	Isabel Díaz Ayuso	2023-09-18

Concerning the qualification of the discourse, over time, some repeated statements become more specific, focusing only on specific aspects or points of the initial statement (Table 2). For example, criticisms of inflation have diversified to include core inflation, a specific type of price increase (972, 1021).

As for repetition through accumulation, some statements contain multiple verifiable claims that accumulate over time. For example, it has been repeated that the right wing has voted “against everything,” with various claims ranging from “the revaluation of pensions or voting against the minimum income guarantee or voting against scholarships” (721) to “against aid for the self-employed, mortgage moratoriums, rent suspensions, utilities (electricity, water, and gas), against ERTEs (Temporary Employment Regulation Files), and against the minimum income guarantee” (395). The ultimate concept aligns with the same perspective: The conservative faction opposes any societal enhancements. Many of these claims have already been subject to individual fact-checks.

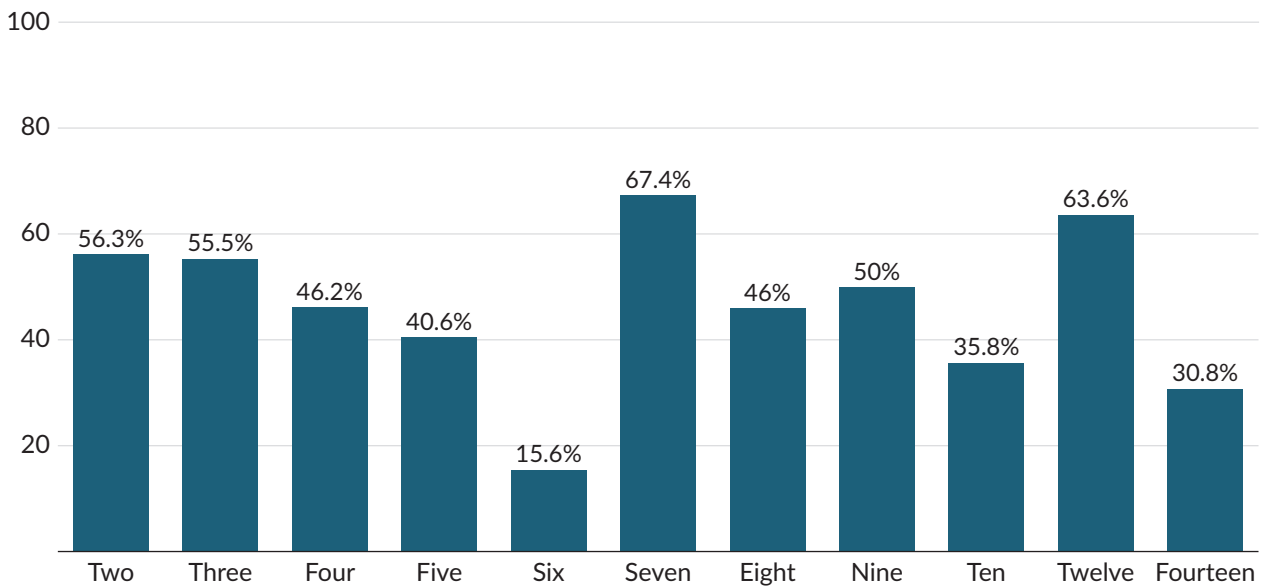
The database reveals another strategy, which consists of certain ideas that have a national scope being replicated at the regional level (698, 883, and 1108). Furthermore, for certain content, there are repetitions of assertions in both directions. For instance, regarding the increase or reduction of youth unemployment (692, 1,215 vs. 728, 955) or fiscal pressure (1,076 vs. 1,097). The repetitions occur both in defense of one’s own actions and to construct an orchestrated argument of attack.

Regarding the topic, the content analysis also reveals that statements with higher repetition rates are associated with current affairs and occur in a shorter period of time, whereas those with lower recurrence are typically aimed at establishing a party’s identity or position.

Another approach to ascertain whether statements are moderated or attenuated in their falsehood through new nuances was to check if the truth rating or classification of similar statements varied. On average, 52.4% of the fact-checks maintained the same rating, while changes occurred in the rest (Figure 3). However, this could be attributed to other factors, such as phrases encompassing additional assertions besides the one that is repeated.

**Table 2.** Examples of repeated assertions regarding Inflation.

Claim	Claimant	Date
We are the country with the highest inflation in the European Union, now at 5.5%	Pablo Casado	2021-12-07
We are the country with the highest inflation in the European Union	Alberto Núñez Feijóo	2022-03-27
Spain is the country with the highest inflation in the European Union	Alberto Núñez Feijóo	2022-04-20
Spain is once again, in July, the country in the EU where prices are rising the most	Sergio Sayas	2022-08-18
[Mr. Sánchez] has boasted of containing inflation, after leading it for months and having two points more core inflation than the EU average	Alberto Núñez Feijóo	2022-10-18
And the real inflation, the one felt in mortgages, housing, electricity bills, groceries...that is at 7.5%, which is two points higher than the European average	Alberto Núñez Feijóo	2023-02-03
Inflation affects all countries in the European Union, but the one suffering 16% inflation month after month in food is Spain	Cuca Gamarra	2023-04-19



**Figure 3.** Rating consistency per number of repetitions.

There are notable instances where political actors adopt a hoax and widely disseminate it. For example, various Vox leaders claimed that unaccompanied foreign minors receive a “monthly allowance” (507) provided “until the age of 25” (660) by regional governments such as Catalonia and Andalusia. Another example is the alleged destruction of dams (1110, 1148, 1191).

Regarding the number of political actors involved in the repetitions, our observations indicate that in 80.9% of cases, a different person repeats the false claim compared to the original author. The original author reiterates their false claim in only 19.1% of cases, while repetitions within the same party rise to 57.6%. Although these results pertain to the average of the analyzed cases, there are instances where the same claim is repeated by a single person or a limited number of political actors over an extended period, sometimes spanning years.

These assertions persistently recur over time. On average, these statements tend to reoccur approximately every 193 days. However, this frequency decreases in cases with a higher number of repetitions. For instance, the claim that Spain has the “highest inflation in the European Union” (810) recurs every 70 days, and data related to the increase in self-employed individuals in Andalusia (684) is recorded every 64 days.

When comparing repeated and non-repeated phrases, no definitive conclusion differentiates them. Repeated issues often refer to controversial aspects such as economic recovery, post-pandemic, or identity issues. However, a firm criterion to separate them beyond pointing to the potential self-interest of each party or political actor depending on the topic has not been established.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Research on fact-checking has traditionally focused on its role in shaping public perceptions, yet it often overlooks its significant impact on politicians themselves. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the prevalence of repeated false claims in political discourse and investigating the strategies used by political actors to manage the recurrence of debunked disinformation. Examining 1,204 fact-checks from Newtral,

the study provides insights into how fact-checking initiatives detect and highlight persistent falsehoods in politics. It reveals that nearly one out of four fact-checks address repeated false claims, with each assertion being repeated approximately four times on average, underscoring the widespread nature of the problem.

As indicated in the literature review, documenting all unspoken falsehoods prevented by fact-checking is impractical (Amazeen, 2013), making it challenging to measure its effectiveness solely by comparing prevalence with repeated falsehoods. However, this research sheds light on their correlation and underscores the importance of addressing repeated falsehoods due to their prevalence and detrimental impact.

Political actors employ various strategies that blur the line between deception and self-correction. These include tweaking claims with nuances and engaging other party members to propagate the same assertions to mitigate the political costs of repetition. While original claimants rarely repeat their false claims directly (about 20% of the time), repetitions within the same party occur at a much higher rate. Moreover, false claims are often echoed by different individuals within political parties, highlighting their broad dissemination.

This repetition pattern supports the notion that it serves as a deliberate strategy within political parties, aligning with existing literature that suggests politicians may prioritize maintaining a false narrative even at the cost of being signaled for it (Gaber & Fisher, 2021; Shenhav, 2015). Unlike occasional errors or deceptions, repeatedly asserted false claims contribute to a coordinated narrative strategy aimed at solidifying a stance. This aligns with findings from post-truth research (McIntyre, 2018), and the acceptance of an idea among its adherents surpassing its factual veracity. Consequently, these repetitions persist over extended periods. When false claims persist despite fact-checking efforts, it may indicate an intent to deceive or manipulate, transforming misinformation into a propagandistic tool.

The results also reveal that the strategies deployed by fact-checkers yield a positive effect in terms of unveiling propagandistic rhetoric. While this study's primary objective does not directly address political motivations to disinform, its findings could contribute to a better understanding of how false claims are disseminated. This could be achieved by evaluating the political cost associated with exposing falsehoods in contrast to the consolidation of positions and ideologies. This analysis also helps delineate the boundaries between rhetoric and propaganda. Furthermore, the data obtained largely elucidate how disinformation strategies are orchestrated within political parties and their potential role in fostering political polarization.

The study identifies five primary patterns of repeated falsehoods, showing how these claims adapt over time while maintaining their core arguments. Strategies include adjusting numerical figures or geographic locations to fit different contexts, presenting data in various formats, launching multi-faceted attacks on topics, refining discourse to focus on specific aspects, and accumulating multiple verifiable claims to reinforce narratives. Finally, the dataset can serve as a base for the development of claim-matching training in the field of automated fact-checking with artificial intelligence.

## 6. Limitations and Future Research

The analysis of repeated false claims has certain limitations. Firstly, the variability in methods used by the organization under study to expose repeated claims may affect the database and influence the results. For instance, claims about budget approvals "in a timely manner" were found only twice in the database,

while one of them accounts for 22 repetitions mentioned in the article. Efforts were made to understand the organization's policies on repetitions to mitigate this effect.

Secondly, the classification of similar claims is not limited to cases where the claims are formulated in the same way, adding complexity to identifying related phrases (see section 3.2). Despite measures to address this in the methodology, the results should be interpreted with caution.

Another limitation is resource constraints within the fact-checking organization. Statements from less-represented political groups may have lower repetition rates in the database but still significantly impact their followers. For example, Bildu's leaders' statements about the Basque Country rejecting the Constitution and various statements on the Catalan referendum reflect ideological positions rather than current events. These repetitions are tied to the party's identity, unlike more frequent claims related to current events. Additionally, the results are derived solely from fact-checks, assuming fact-checkers monitor other platforms like social media for repeated false claims. Finally, there is a limitation in comparing repeated false claims with non-repeated ones due to the lack of a clear differentiation. An alternative methodological approach could be considered for this purpose.

Future research should explore why fact-checking sometimes fails to prevent falsehoods from being repeated and assess its overall impact on political discourse. A subsequent inquiry would focus on identifying effective strategies for fact-checkers to increase their impact and deter the propagation of false claims effectively. Further exploration could extend into other domains, investigating whether the frequency of false claim repetition intensifies during electoral campaigns, and exploring thematic patterns across different political parties would provide valuable insights for future studies on combating misinformation effectively in public discourse.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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