

Fact Deserts:

How a lack of local fact-checking leaves states vulnerable to election lies

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A preliminary report from the Duke Reporters' Lab

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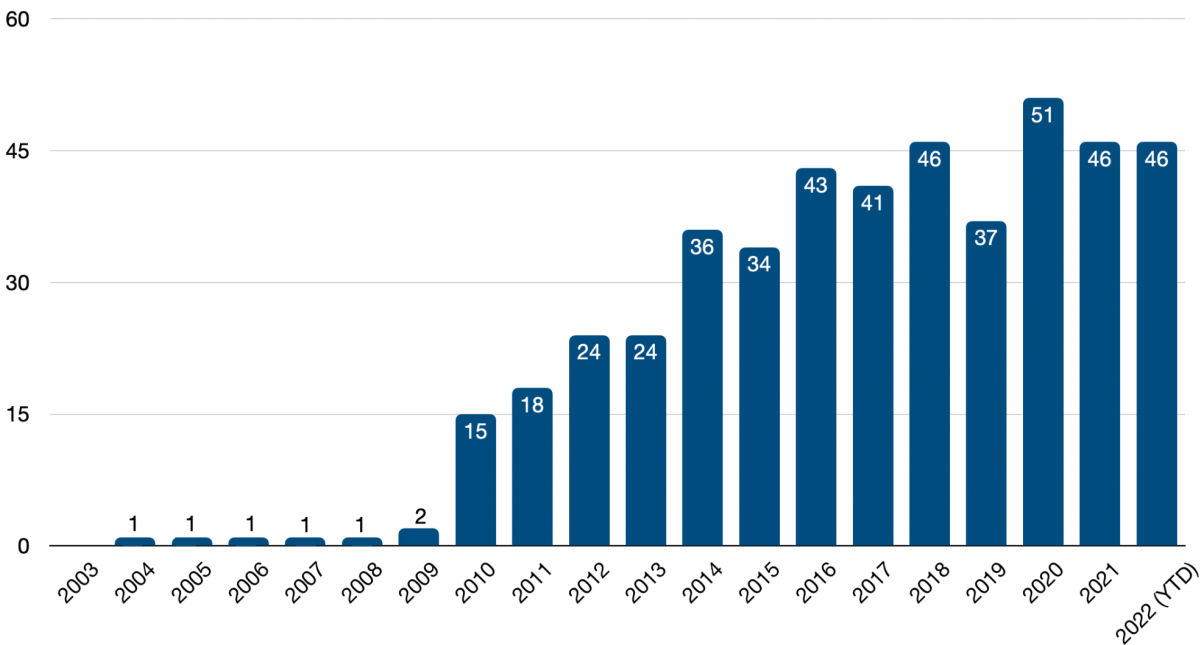
A Duke Reporters' Lab census finds politicians in 29 states get little scrutiny for what they say, while local fact-checkers in other places struggle to keep pace with campaign misinformation.

Amid the political lies and misinformation that spread across the country throughout the 2022 midterm elections, statements by candidates in 29 states rarely faced the scrutiny of independent fact-checkers.

Why? Because there weren't any local fact-checkers.

Even in the places where diligent local media outlets regularly made active efforts to verify the accuracy of political claims, the volume of questionable statements in debates, speeches, campaign ads and social posts far outpaced the fact-checkers' ability to set the record straight.

An initial survey by Reporters' Lab at Duke University identified 46 locally focused fact-checking projects during this year's campaign in 21 states and the District of Columbia. That count is little changed in the national election years since 2016, when an average of 47 fact-checking projects were active at the state and local level.



Active State/Local Fact-Checkers in the U.S., 2003-22

There's also been lots of turnover among local fact-checking projects over time. At least 40 projects have come and gone since 2010. And fact-checking is not always front and center, even among the news outlets that devote considerable effort and time to this reporting.

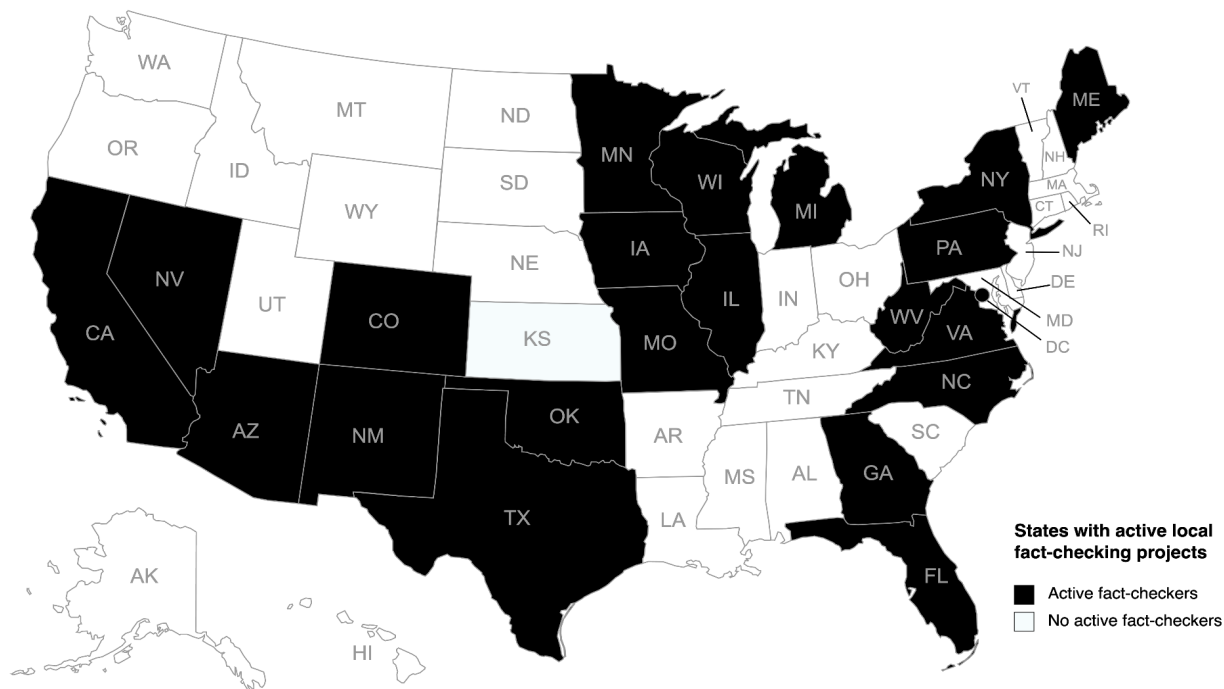
While some fact-checkers consistently produce reports from election to election, many others are campaign-season one-offs. And the overwhelming emphasis on campaign claims can produce a fact-vacuum after the votes are counted -- when elected officials, party operatives and others in the political process continue to make erroneous and misleading statements.

Fact-checks also can be hard for readers and viewers to find -- sometimes appearing only in a broader scroll of state political news, with little effort to make this vital reporting stand out or to showcase it on a separate page.

The Duke Reporters' Lab conducted this initial survey to assess the state of local fact-checking during the 2022 midterm elections. The Lab first began tracking fact-checking projects across the United States and around the world in 2014 and maintains a [global database and map of fact-checking projects](#).

While 29 states currently appear to have no fact-checking projects that regularly report on claims from politicians or social media at the local level, residents may encounter occasional one-off fact-checks from their state's media outlets.

Among the states lacking dedicated fact-checking projects are four that had hotly contested Senate or governor races this fall — New Hampshire, Kansas, Ohio and Oregon.



The states with the most robust fact-checking in terms of projects based there include Texas with five outlets; Iowa and North Carolina with four; and Florida, Michigan and Wisconsin with three each.

Competition seems to generate additional fact-checking. States with active fact-checking projects tend to have at least two (14 states of the 21), while seven states and D.C. have a single locally focused project.

Local television stations are the most active fact-check producers. Of the outlets that generated fact-checks at the state and local level this year, more than half are local television stations. That's a change over the past two decades, when newspapers and their websites were the primary outlets for local fact-checks.

Who Produces Local Fact-Checks?

Local TV stations	24
Newspaper-affiliated	11
Digital-only	9
Radio-affiliated	2

Almost all local fact-checking projects are run by media outlets, while several are based at universities or nonprofit organizations. The university-related fact-checkers are Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication; The Daily Iowan, the University of Iowa's independent student newspaper; and West Virginia University's Reed

College of Media. All three are state affiliates of PolitiFact, the prolific national fact-checking organization based at the nonprofit Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida.

National news partnerships and media owners drive a significant amount of local fact-checking. Of the 46 projects, almost a quarter are affiliated with PolitiFact, while another half-dozen are among the most active local stations participating in the Verify fact-checking project by TV company Tegna. In addition, five Graham Media Group television stations use a unified Trust Index brand at the local level.

One of the newest efforts to encourage local fact-checking is Repustar's Gigafact, a non-profit project that partnered with three newsrooms to counter misinformation during the midterms. The Arizona Center for Investigative Reporting, The Nevada Independent and Wisconsin Watch produced "fact briefs," which are short, timely reports that answer yes or no questions, such as ["Is Nevada's violent crime rate higher than the national average?"](#)

Nearly 40 percent of the fact-checkers in the Lab's count got their start since 2020, including 11 projects in that year alone. In contrast, the oldest fact-checker, WISC-TV in Madison, Wisconsin, began producing its Reality Check segments almost two decades ago, in 2004. It's among 12 fact-checkers that have been active for 10 years or more.

Another new initiative launched in April to increase Spanish language fact-checking at the local level in the U.S. -- but with the help of two prominent international fact-checking organizations.

Factchequeado, a partnership between Maldita.es of Spain and Chequeado in Argentina, has built a network of 27 allies, including 19 local news outlets in the U.S. through which they share fact-checks and media literacy content. Currently, the majority of Factchequeado fact-checks

are produced at the national level by its own staff. Through its U.S. partnerships, Factchequeado aims to train Hispanic journalists to produce original fact-checks in Spanish at the local level.

The Reporters' Lab conducted this survey with support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which also has helped fund the Lab's work on automated fact-checking. The Lab intends to follow up its initial assessment of the local fact-checking landscape with a post-election report that will dive into some of the challenges facing journalists trying to do this vital work. Our follow-up report will explore the content of local fact-checkers' work in 2022, including data on whom they fact-checked and their approaches to rating claims. We will interview local reporters, producers and editors about public and political feedback and their editorial processes and methodologies. We also intend to examine why some local fact-checking initiatives are short-lived election-year efforts while others have carried on consistently for many years.

Here's [how we decide](#) which fact-checkers to include in the Reporters' Lab database. The Lab continually collects new information about the fact-checkers it identifies, such as when they launched and how long they last. If you know of a fact-checking project that has been missed, please contact [Mark Stencel](#) and [Erica Ryan](#) at the Reporters' Lab.

Joel Luther of the Reporters' Lab contributed to this report.

Appendix

Local Fact-Checking Projects

Arizona

[Arizona Center for Investigative Reporting \(Gigafact\)](#) | Phoenix

Fact-checking for Repustar's Gigafact Project by an independent, nonprofit newsroom in Phoenix funded by individual donors, foundations, fee-for-service revenue and other sources. Repustar is a privately-funded benefit corporation based in the San Francisco Bay Area.

[PolitiFact Arizona](#) | Phoenix

The Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University is PolitiFact's local affiliate in Arizona. PolitiFact previously worked in Arizona with KNXV-TV (ABC15), ABC's local affiliate in Phoenix, as part of partnership with the station's owner, Scripps TV Station Group. (KNXV-TV had previously produced its own "Truth Test" segments.) PolitiFact's national staff maintained the site starting with the 2018 midterm election cycle until the fact-checking organization partnered with ASU in 2022.

California

[PolitiFact California](#) | Sacramento

Affiliate of PolitiFact, staffed by reporters at Capital Public Radio.

[Sacramento Bee Fact Check](#) | Sacramento

Fact-checks by Sacramento Bee reporters appear in its Capitol Alert section, especially in election years. Began as an "Ad Watch" feature focused on political advertising.

Colorado

[9News Truth Test](#) | Denver

NBC's local TV affiliate in Denver has long done political fact-checking, particularly during elections. In addition, the Tegna-owned station also actively contributes to the Verify initiative — a companywide fact-checking and explanatory journalism project that involves a mix of local stories and national reporting shared across more than 60 stations (<https://www.9news.com/verify>). 9News relies on funding from advertising and local carriage fees from cable, satellite and digital TV service providers.

[CBS4 Reality Check](#) | Denver

Election-year fact-checks from Denver's local, CBS-owned commercial TV affiliate.

District of Columbia

[WUSA9 Verify](#) | Washington

WUSA9 is among the most active contributors in Tegna's Verify initiative — a companywide fact-checking and explanatory journalism project that involves a mix of local stories and national reporting shared across more than 60 stations. The Washington-area's CBS affiliate relies on funding from advertising and local carriage fees from cable, satellite and digital TV service providers.

Florida

[News4Jax Trust Index](#) | Jacksonville

Fact-checking by the news team at WJXT-TV (News4Jax), an independent commercial TV station in Jacksonville, Florida. News4Jax is owned by the Graham Media Group, a commercial media company whose stations launched their "Trust Index" reporting during the 2020 U.S. elections with help and training from Fathm, a media lab and international consulting group.

[News 6 Trust Index](#) | Orlando

Fact-checking by the news team at WKMG-TV (News 6), the CBS affiliate in Orlando, Florida. News 6 is owned by the Graham Media Group, a commercial media company whose regional TV stations launched their "Trust Index" reporting during the 2020 U.S. elections with help and training from Fathm, a media lab and international consulting group.

[PolitiFact Florida](#) | St. Petersburg

PolitiFact's reporting on the state is produced in affiliation with the Tampa Bay Times. The newspaper's bureau in Washington, D.C., was the fact-checking service's original home before it was folded into the Poynter Institute — a non-profit media training center in St. Petersburg, Florida, that also owns the Times and its commercial publishing company. From 2010 to 2017, the Miami Herald was also a PolitiFact Florida reporting and distribution partner.

Georgia

[11 Alive Verify](#) | Atlanta

WXIA is among the most active contributors in Tegna's Verify initiative — a companywide fact-checking and explanatory journalism project that involves a mix of local stories and national reporting shared across more than 60 stations. The Atlanta-area's NBC affiliate relies on funding from advertising and local carriage fees from cable, satellite and digital TV service providers.

Illinois

[PolitiFact Illinois](#) | Chicago

Affiliate of PolitiFact, staffed by reporters and researchers from the Better Government Association, a nonprofit watchdog organization founded in 1923 that focuses on investigative journalism. PolitiFact's previous news partner in the state was Reboot Illinois, a for-profit digital news service.

Iowa

[Gazette Fact Checker](#) | Cedar Rapids

Fact-checks by reporters at The Cedar Rapids Gazette. The newspaper previously worked on its fact-checks in collaboration with KCRG-TV, a local TV station the Gazette owned until 2015.

[KCCI's Get the Facts](#) | Des Moines

Fact-checks of campaign ads during election cycles by reporters at the Des Moines, Iowa, CBS affiliate, a commercial station owned by Hearst Television.

[KCRG-TV's "I9 Fact Checker"](#) | Cedar Rapids

Occasional fact-checks presented by commercial station KCRG-TV's "I9 Investigation" team. The local ABC affiliate in Cedar Rapids was previously owned by the area's local newspaper, The Cedar Rapids Gazette. The two news organizations worked together on fact-checks from 2014 to 2018.

[PolitiFact Iowa](#) | Iowa City

Affiliate of PolitiFact, staffed by reporters at The Daily Iowan, the independent student newspaper at the University of Iowa. PolitiFact's previous state partner in Iowa was the Des Moines Register.

Maine

[Bangor Daily News Ad Watch](#) | Bangor

Fact-checks of campaign ads during election season by staffers at the Bangor daily newspaper.

[Portland Press Herald](#) | Portland

Fact-checks of campaign ads during election cycles by staffers at the daily newspaper in Portland, Maine.

Michigan

[Bridge Michigan](#) | Detroit

An ongoing reporting project published mainly in election years by Bridge Magazine, an online journal published by the non-profit Center for Michigan. Originally called The Truth Squad, the project began as a standalone site before it merged with the center and its magazine in 2012. The Bridge's fact-checkers also have collaborated with public media's [Michigan Radio](#).

[Local 4 Trust Index](#) | Detroit

Fact-checking by the news team at WDIV-TV (Local 4), the NBC affiliate for Detroit, Michigan. Local 4 is owned by the Graham Media Group, a commercial media company whose regional TV stations launched

their "Trust Index" reporting during the 2020 U.S. elections with help and training from Fathm, a media lab and international consulting group.

[PolitiFact Michigan](#) | **Detroit**

Affiliate of PolitiFact, staffed by reporters from the Detroit Free Press. The newspaper previously did fact-checking on its own during the 2014 midterm elections.

Minnesota

[5 Eyewitness News Truth Test](#) | **St. Paul**

Election season fact-checking by the local ABC affiliate's political reporter.

[CBS Minnesota Reality Check](#) | **Minneapolis**

Fact-checking by the news staff at the local CBS affiliate in Minneapolis.

Missouri

[KY3 Fact Finders](#) | **Springfield**

Fact-checks by an anchor/reporter for the NBC affiliate in Springfield, Missouri. Focuses on rumors and questions from viewers.

[News 4 Fact Check](#) | **St. Louis**

Election season fact-checks by reporters at CBS's local affiliate in St. Louis.

Nevada

[Reno Gazette-Journal Fact Checker](#) | **Reno**

Fact-checks by RGJ's local government reporter and engagement director. The position is supported by donations and grants.

[The Nevada Independent \(Gigafact\)](#) | **Las Vegas**

Fact-checking for Repustar's Gigafact Project by a nonprofit news website in Las Vegas funded by corporate donations, memberships, foundation grants and other sources. Repustar is a privately-funded benefit corporation based in the San Francisco Bay Area.

New Mexico

[4 Investigates Fact Check](#) | **Albuquerque**

Occasional fact-checks by the investigative news team at KOB-TV (KOB4), a commercial TV station owned by Hubbard Broadcasting Company that is NBC's local affiliate in Albuquerque, New Mexico. A reporter conducts the fact-checks with the help of a political scientist from the University of New Mexico.

New York

[News10NBC Fact Check](#) | Rochester

Fact-checks by an anchor/reporter at the Rochester, New York, NBC affiliate, that focus on rumors and questions from viewers.

[PolitiFact New York](#) | Buffalo

Affiliate of PolitiFact, staffed by reporters from the Buffalo News.

North Carolina

[CBS 17 Truth Tracker and Digging Deeper](#) | Raleigh-Goldsboro

Fact-checks by a data reporter from the Raleigh-area's local CBS affiliate — a commercial TV station owned by Nexstar Media Group. Televised versions of the "Digging Deeper" segments are supplemented with source material on the station's website, with political "Truth Tracker" reports appearing on its election news page.

[PolitiFact North Carolina](#) | Raleigh

Affiliate of PolitiFact, staffed by reporters at WRAL-TV, a privately owned commercial station that is NBC's local affiliate in the Raleigh-Durham area. The News & Observer, a McClatchy-owned newspaper in Raleigh, was PolitiFact's original local news partner in the state from 2016 to 2019.

[The News & Observer's Fact-Checking Project](#) | Raleigh

Fact-checks by the reporting staff of The News & Observer, the McClatchy owned newspaper in Raleigh, North Carolina. It freely distributes its fact-checking to other media in the state. The N&O previously did fact-checking as PolitiFact's state partner from 2016 to 2019.

[WCNC Verify](#) | Charlotte

WCNC is among the most active contributors in Tegna's Verify initiative — a companywide fact-checking and explanatory journalism project that involves a mix of local stories and national reporting shared across more than 60 stations. The Charlotte-area's NBC affiliate relies on funding from advertising and local carriage fees from cable, satellite and digital TV service providers.

Oklahoma

[The Frontier fact checks](#) | Tulsa

Fact-checking by reporters from this non-profit news site based in Tulsa. The fact-checks appear in the form of thematic roundups posted with the site's other news stories. The Frontiers' work is also used by other Oklahoma media. The Frontier Media Group Inc. operates the site with support from foundations, corporate supporters and individual donors.

Pennsylvania

[News 8 "Ad Watch" | Lancaster](#)

Ad Watch segments appear during election campaigns in televised newscasts and on the politics page of this local, commercially supported TV station. Based in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, WGAL-TV is owned by Hearst Television and is the local NBC affiliate for the Susquehanna Valley region, including the state capital in Harrisburg.

Texas

[KHOU11 Verify | Houston](#)

KHOU is among the most active contributors in Tegna's Verify initiative — a companywide fact-checking and explanatory journalism project that involves a mix of local stories and national reporting shared across more than 60 stations. The Houston-area's CBS affiliate relies on funding from advertising and local carriage fees from cable, satellite and digital TV service providers.

[KPRC Trust Index | Houston](#)

Fact-checking by the news team at KPRC-TV, the NBC affiliate for Houston, Texas. KPRC is owned by the Graham Media Group, a commercial media company whose local TV stations launched their "Trust Index" reporting during the 2020 U.S. elections with help and training from Fathom, a media lab and international consulting group.

[KSAT Trust Index | San Antonio](#)

Fact-checking by the news team at KSAT-TV, the ABC affiliate in San Antonio, Texas. KSAT is owned by the Graham Media Group, a commercial media company whose regional TV stations launched their "Trust Index" reporting during the 2020 U.S. elections with help and training from Fathom, a media lab and international consulting group.

[PolitiFact Texas | Austin, Houston, San Antonio](#)

Affiliate of PolitiFact, with contributions from its three newspaper partners in the state, Austin American Statesman, Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News.

[WFAA's Verify Road Trip | Dallas](#)

WFAA-TV's contribution to Tegna's companywide fact-checking and explanatory journalism project is its "Verify Road Trip" segments. For these stories, the Dallas-area ABC affiliate enlists viewers to be "guest reporters" who join the news team to find answers to their questions. The station relies on funding from advertising and local carriage fees from cable, satellite and digital TV service providers. Verify Road Trip also has a [YouTube page](#).

Virginia

[PolitiFact Virginia | Richmond](#)

Staffed by reporters from the news team at WCVE-FM in the Richmond/Petersburg area, where the station is part of a cluster of regional public broadcasters. WCVE revived PolitiFact's presence in the

commonwealth after a nearly two-year hiatus. (PolitiFact's original local news partner, the Richmond Times Dispatch, operated the Virginia site from 2010 to 2016.)

West Virginia

[PolitiFact West Virginia](#) | Morgantown

Affiliate of PolitiFact, staffed by student reporters at West Virginia University's Reed College of Media.

Wisconsin

[News 3 Reality Check](#) | Madison

Video fact-checking segments by News 3 team on Wisconsin politics and TV ads, especially during election season.

[PolitiFact Wisconsin](#) | Milwaukee

Affiliate of PolitiFact, staffed by reporters from the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

[Wisconsin Watch \(Gigafact\)](#) | Madison

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