The Politics of Post-Truth

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The truth is rarely pure and never simple.

—Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

1 Introduction

We have reached a newly dysfunctional era of political discourse. The public sphere is awash with misinformation and propaganda; politicians are peddling lies as facts and dismissing facts as lies; social media are spreading fake news faster and farther than previously imaginable; journalists are falsely balancing opposing viewpoints even when the evidence is heavily stacked on one side; citizens are intellectually imprisoned in echo chambers; conspiracy theorists are undermining trust in vaccination efforts; and populist leaders are sowing doubt in key democratic institutions. Our information environment is more hostile than ever. We are living in a post-truth world.

We have all heard this story. The dominant narrative of our time is that democracy is facing an epistemological crisis. We find this claim repeated in the popular press. In Vox, David Roberts says, “America is facing an epistemic crisis.” In the Boston Review, Michael P. Lynch says, “We are living through an epistemological crisis.” In The New York Times, David Brooks says, “We live in a country in epistemological crisis.” In an interview for The Atlantic, Barack Obama says “We are entering into an epistemological crisis.” This is one part of a broader narrative. It is also said that we must resolve this epistemological crisis by *restoring truth to its rightful place at the heart of democracy.* To save democracy, these voices claim, we must “respect epistemic rules” (Lynch 2021), “live and act in a truthful manner” (Reeves 2021), and “distinguish what’s true from what’s false” (Obama, in Goldberg 2020).

This diagnosis frames contemporary democratic problems in a specific way. Those declaring that a crisis of truth is destroying democracy all seem to regard evidence, reasons, and facts as the solution to democracy’s ills. But this type of ‘truth-based solutionism’ (a term borrowed from Farkas and Schou 2020) relies on controversial epistemological, moral, and political assumptions. This essay will draw out some problematic assumptions beneath the post-truth narrative. Along the way, I will reflect on the fraught relationship between truth, democracy, public opinion, and power.
2 What Is ‘Post-Truth’ Politics?

Many commentators decry the advent of post-truth politics, but it is often unclear precisely what the phenomenon of the post-truth is. Consider the following statements. In The Guardian, Julian Baggini says we are living in “an era without truth.” In The Conversation, Vittorio Bufacchi says, “post-truth is the belief that truth is no longer essential, that truth has become obsolete.” In Post-Truth, Lee McIntyre proclaims that “truth has been eclipsed” (2018, 5). What exactly do these statements mean? In this section, I will examine several ways in which philosophers, social scientists, and journalists have attempted to understand the nature of post-truth. I will argue that these common understandings are inadequate.

2.1 The Death of Truth

In April 2017, Time Magazine had a striking cover that posed the question, “Is Truth Dead?” This suggests one interpretation of ‘post-truth’: a culture in which the very notion of truth is under attack. As Sergei Prozorov writes, “post-truth politics denies the existence of truth” (2019, 29). Sami Pihlström likewise says, “We seem to be living in a cultural situation that has endangered the concept of truth itself” (2021, 2). If this interpretation is correct, then many people have given up on the distinction between truth and falsity, or they despair at the very idea of truth, as if the concept were revealed to be nothing more than a relic of a bygone era (Haack 2019, 261).

But the wholesale abandonment of truth makes no sense. It is not as though people have really given up on the distinction between truth and falsity. Even flat earthers think it is true that the earth is flat. (They do not believe the truth, but they believe in truth.) Similarly, vaccine skeptics have false views about the efficacy of vaccinations, but they agree with orthodox scientists that there is a truth about their efficacy. Insofar as we grant that some people can sometimes be wrong about some things, or that things could be different from how we expect them to be, this is sufficient to ground a concept of truth (see Lynch 2005).

As Simon Blackburn says, “This… is not… a crisis about the very concept of truth. It couldn’t be… the concept of truth will never die… the concept of truth is a survivor” (2018, 911). As creatures who attempt to represent the world at all, we cannot get by without the notion of truth. To represent the world in a particular way (e.g., “There’s a bear over there!”) is to represent it as true. Truth is therefore among our most fundamental concepts and plays an ineliminable role in our lives and thoughts.¹

2.2 A Lack of Concern for Truth

We cannot kill the idea of truth, but our respect for truthfulness might be dying. In Truth and Truthfulness, Bernard Williams claims that truthfulness consists of two virtues: accuracy

¹As Joshua Cohen observes, we cannot make sense of activities like thinking, asserting, believing, and judging without the concept of truth. He writes, “[T]he idea of locating a common ground of political reflection and argument that does without the concept of truth—like doing without the concept of an object, or cause, or thought, or reason, or inference, or evidence—is hard to grasp. Truth is so closely connected with intuitive notions of thinking, asserting, believing, judging, and reasoning that it is difficult to understand what leaving it behind amounts to” (2009, 226).
and sincerity. Accuracy requires that we aim to believe the truth; this obliges us to apply truth-acquiring methods and resist the temptation to let our desires distort our judgements. Sincerity is a matter of saying what one believes to be true, and in a helpful way. While the virtue of truthfulness requires both accuracy and sincerity, it is tempting to think that our political culture is increasingly characterized by one of two incompatible attitudes: a lack of sincerity or, alternatively, valuing sincerity at the expense of accuracy. According to the first interpretation, we do not value sincerity enough; according to the second, we value it too much. I’ll briefly consider each proposal.

In On Bullshit, Harry Frankfurt suggests our culture increasingly lacks the virtue of sincerity. “One of the most salient features of our culture”, he writes, “is that there is so much bullshit” (2005, 1). Although Frankfurt does not use the word ‘sincerity’, the bullshitter is someone who “does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly” (Frankfurt 2005, 56). As this makes clear, the bullshitter lacks the virtue of sincerity (saying what one believes to be true).² Interestingly, Frankfurt believes that our political culture encourages bullshit by expecting democratic citizens to be informed about political issues. It is widely assumed, he claims, that “it is the responsibility of a citizen in a democracy to have opinions about everything, or at least everything that pertains to the conduct of his country’s affairs” (Frankfurt 2005, 63-4). This gives rise to bullshit: “Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about” (Frankfurt 2005, 63). If this analysis is correct, then a way to decrease bullshit would be to eliminate the (allegedly) widespread belief that citizens must be informed about numerous political issues.³

Many journalists, academics, and political commentators have drawn on Frankfurt to analyze the nature and dangers of post-truth politics (e.g., Davies 2017; Ball 2018). However, I find the concept of ‘bullshit’ to be a largely unhelpful tool for understanding recent political developments.⁴ While it is plausible that some political actors are especially prone to bullshit (e.g., many of Trump’s unfounded claims likely qualify as bullshit in Frankfurt’s sense), the vast majority of voters seem to genuinely believe their political views. Indeed, they often take their opinions to be obviously true and are puzzled as to why others hold different political beliefs. As Diana Mutz observes, a key feature of public opinion is perplexity about the very existence of political disagreement. Each citizen says, “The answers are obvious and we all agree on them. So, what is wrong with all of those other people?” (Mutz 2006, 32). Appealing to bullshit fails to explain why many people earnestly believe their political views. Citizens are deeply polarized over what they sincerely regard as true, not indifferent to truth.

²The bullshitter also lacks the virtue of accuracy, for they are “indifferent to how things really are” (Frankfurt 2005, 34). The bullshitter may occasionally (i.e., accidentally) speak the truth, but to be accurate and to have the virtue of accuracy are not the same thing, for only the latter involves having the dispositions that reliably lead one toward truth.

³Alternatively, one might argue that we should find ways to make citizens more informed about the issues facing their society. I find this route less plausible because the challenges facing modern societies are too complex for ordinary citizens to have informed opinions about more than a few of them (see Lippmann 1922; Friedman 2019). I will discuss this at greater length below.

⁴Cassam (2021) also argues that ‘bullshit’ is not a useful tool of politico-epistemological analysis, but for different reasons.
2.3 Post-Shame and Post-Trust

Perhaps the problem is with our politicians, not citizens. John Corner (2017) warns of “a new casualness in the use of blatant falsehood as a tool of public address”. Although political lies, spin, and propaganda are nothing new, public figures now seem less ashamed of being proven bullshitters or liars. For this reason, Blackburn (2019) suggests that ‘post-shame’ and ‘post-trust’ are better adjectives than ‘post-truth’. The first is a moral problem and the second is epistemological, but the epistemological problem is tied up with the moral problem. If public figures are no longer ashamed of dishonesty, they will lie and bullshit more.

The public reaction to dishonesty may then undergo a profound shift in at least two ways. First, one who is continually surrounded by dishonesty is likely to become less sensitive to it. When everybody is lying or bullshitting, we no longer find dishonesty to be shocking or shameful. Second, we can no longer be sure whom to trust. When others are unashamed of dishonesty, it is rational to trust our sources less. These two factors may result in an increasing lack of concern for truth. If we don’t know who to trust and are desensitized to dishonesty, we may give up on seeking truth in favor of believing what is comfortable or convenient.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘post-truth’ along these lines, as an adjective “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” There are a few things to note about this definition. First, to say that objective facts are now less influential implies there are such facts. So, this definition does not call into doubt the very notion of truth; it rather suggests that truth has become of secondary importance. Second, there is something not quite right about this definition. As Blackburn (2018) notes, it makes little sense to contrast “personal belief” with “objective fact.” To move people to act, objective facts must become personal beliefs. Third, the Oxford Dictionary definition implies a nostalgia for an age of facts, a time when politics supposedly had little to do with emotions or personal beliefs and revolved around arguments and evidence. As I’ll explain below, we should question this assumption. Finally, this definition may reflect a political bias (see Fuller 2018), for it insinuates that the ‘winners’ in recent politics are less rational (more emotional) and care less about truth. I will return to this point later.

2.4 Sincerity over Accuracy

Let’s consider a different hypothesis. Instead of arguing that our culture lacks the virtue of sincerity (see §2.2), perhaps we value sincerity too highly—that is, at the expense of accuracy. Consider the following example. During the 2016 US presidential transition, George Stephanopoulos questioned Mike Pence about a tweet in which Donald Trump claimed that he won the popular vote (not just the electoral college) if “you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally.” As there was no evidence of illegal voting on this scale, Stephanopoulos asked whether it was Trump’s right to make false statements. In response, Pence said:

Well, it’s his right to express his opinion as president-elect of the United States.
I think one of the things that’s refreshing about our president-elect and one of the reasons why I think he made such an incredible connection with people all across this country is because he tells you what’s on his mind. (qtd. in Forstenzer 2018, 7, emphasis mine)

Trump may not have believed his own claim—it may have been bullshit. What’s interesting about this example, however, is the way Pence defends Trump: he appeals to the value of sincerity over accuracy. What voters want, according to Pence, is a political leader who says what he believes to be true, even when his belief is unpopular, inconvenient, or false. Trump may be a bullshit artist, but bullshit artists are often appealing because they seem to earn the perception of sincerity, at least among their supporters. As Hamid Foroughi and his colleagues write, "Rather than being known as leaders whose credibility rests on telling the truth and providing accurate representations of the world, they convince their followers that they are responding to their lived experiences and are offering honest solutions to their problems" (2019, 138).

If this explanation is correct, then we should ask: Why is the public so blasé about truth-telling politicians? Why do people care more about sincerity than accuracy? I’ll mention two hypotheses. First, some people may think that political statements rarely, if ever, have objective truth values. These people will say, “There are no objective truths about political issues”. Second, some people may think there are politically relevant truths, but they also feel there is no reliable way to determine what they are. These people will think, “There are political truths, but I have no way of knowing them”. The first is a metaphysical thesis about political truth; the second is an epistemological thesis about our ability to know the truth.

I do not have space to examine these hypotheses in any detail. For an excellent discussion of these views, see Ian MacMullen’s survey article, ‘What Is "Post-factual" Politics?’ (2020). According to MacMullen, each of these (conflicting) attitudes partly comprise the post-truth condition. He labels these views ‘metaphysical post-factualism’ and ‘epistemic post-factualism’. In addition to these attitudes, MacMullen considers ‘unconscious post-factualism’ (the view that we selectively interpret information to fit our values and personal experience) and ‘motivational post-factualism’ (the view that we don’t care about the facts; we only care about what makes us feel good).³ The essence of post-truth politics, he claims, is a culture in which these attitudes are widespread.

MacMullen’s analysis is illuminating, but he makes no empirical claims about the prevalence of these attitudes. His goal is conceptual, that is, “to characterize and draw clear distinctions between the different attitudes that—when widespread, presumably in some combination—would constitute a post-factual political culture” (MacMullen 2020, 99). This

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³I find these two additional hypotheses somewhat implausible. In the case of unconscious post-factualism, it is unclear why familiar psychological biases (e.g., confirmation bias) would explain the recent emergence of post-truth politics. We have always been susceptible to these biases and have known about them for at least several decades, arguably much longer. In the case of motivational post-factualism, it is unlikely that people would care enough about politics to participate without caring about the truth of political issues, especially when they believe there are such truths. If people did not care about the empirical dimensions of political questions, they would not oppose politicians whose empirical claims they regard as untrustworthy. Yet voters do judge political leaders for their lack of trustworthiness on such issues.
conceptual work is extremely valuable, but it does not clarify whether we have entered a new era of post-truth politics. Are these political attitudes prevalent in any particular democratic society? If so, is the prevalence of these attitudes a new phenomenon? I am doubtful on both counts, as I’ll explain below.

3 Are We Post-Truth?

Is it widely believed that we cannot achieve truth? I have my doubts. It is likely, rather, that most citizens believe that they could—at least in principle—hold accurate factual beliefs about politics. As mentioned earlier, many voters take their political views to be obviously true and are puzzled as to why others disagree with them. They are naïve realists about politics (see Friedman 2019 for a discussion). A naïve realist believes they see the world objectively, without bias, and that people who disagree must therefore be uninformed, irrational, biased, or immoral. The naïve realist commonly assumes that other fair-minded people will share their views, as long as they have the same evidence.

Moreover, I doubt we have now reached some kind of uniquely dysfunctional era in public and private communication. The idea of ‘post-truth’ implies a nostalgia for an age of facts, a time when politics supposedly had little to do with emotions or personal opinions and instead revolved around evidence, objectivity, and rationality. This narrative suggests that public discourse was previously governed by good epistemic norms until the villains of post-truth entered the scene. Like many others, I am skeptical that the epistemic problems facing modern democracies are radically unlike those of the past. There have never been clear and authoritative standards of truth in politics (I’ll return to this in §5). Lies, bullshit, spin, propaganda, prejudice, uncertainty, bias, emotions, complexity, disagreement, division, and contestations over truth are not aberrations in politics; they are the norm.

That said, I will largely set aside whether such lamentations about post-truth are accurate. My primary aim is not to evaluate whether democracies really are facing a deep-seated “crisis of facts” (Davies, 2016). Instead, I want to focus on a related issue: What social effects might such written or oral descriptive statements about post-truth have on an audience? It is undeniable that contemporary public discourse is saturated with talk of post-truth. What should we make of the fact that people are speaking this way? In what

Some people may think that political judgments are evaluative claims and that evaluative judgments lack truth values. But truth is still important even for evaluative judgments because whether we endorse these judgments will still depend on statements that have truth values. For example, we may endorse an evaluative judgment such as “Hillary Clinton is a crooked politician” on the basis of statements describing her behavior. As Erik Olsson remarks, “Generally, we take things to be good or bad because of certain beliefs we have about those things. Thus, we may hold one thing to be good because we believe it will increase our wealth or make us happier. If, upon closer examination, those beliefs turn out to be false, we tend to withdraw our initial positive sentiment toward the thing in question” (2008, 95).

In 21 Lessons for the 21st Century, Yuval Noah Harari says, “humans have always lived in the age of post-truth”. Likewise, Simon Blackburn says, “There’s nothing new about post-truth politics” (2018). I am largely sympathetic with the view that there has been no profound epistemological shift in our collective relationship to the value of truthfulness in politics. However, those who claim this still have an explanatory burden: they must explain why people are speaking this way. To proclaim there is “nothing new” about post-truth is deeply unsatisfying even if true, for it leaves mysterious why so many people think we’ve entered into a new era of politics.
follows, I will argue that the rhetoric of post-truth is epistemically, morally, and politically problematic.

4 Problems with Post-Truth Rhetoric

It will help to distinguish between post-truth discourse and post-truth rhetoric. ‘Post-truth discourse’, as I’ll use the term, refers to the epistemically dysfunctional aspects of contemporary political discourse. When people say that we live in an era of post-truth politics, they are alleging that we have reached a newly dysfunctional era of political discourse. For example, Michiko Kakutani says public discourse is now saturated by “lies”, “propaganda”, “bullshit”, “fake news”, “political manipulation”, “echo chambers”, “indifference to truth”, “the displacement of reason by emotion”, and “a disregard for facts” (2017, 1-3). Lee McIntyre refers to “the obfuscation of facts, abandonment of evidential standards in reasoning, and outright lying” (2018, 1). Evan Davis adds “conspiracy theories” and “skepticism about expert opinion” (2017) to the list of problems with contemporary public discourse. As these quotes illustrate, those who lament the arrival of post-truth politics are concerned with changes in the epistemic quality of public discourse. The term ‘post-truth discourse’, as I use it, refers to first-order epistemic problems with contemporary political discourse.

‘Post-truth rhetoric’, on the other hand, is second-order discourse about political discourse. To say, “We have now reached a uniquely dysfunctional era of political discourse” is a piece of post-truth rhetoric. Those who speak this way assume that political discourse is epistemically defective or even toxic. They say things like, “People no longer care about the facts!” and “Nobody respects the truth anymore”. These are claims about the epistemic state of first-order political discourse. As mentioned above, I will set aside the question of whether first-order political discourse is dysfunctional in these ways. I want to focus on a different question, namely: Is post-truth rhetoric—rather than post-truth discourse—itself dysfunctional? In other words, are those who accuse others of post-truth politics themselves participating in a form of toxic political discourse? I will suggest they are.

4.1 Post-Truth is Partisan

To say that we live in a post-truth world is rarely politically neutral. For many, the evidence of post-truth politics is found in two events: the Leave campaign’s victory in the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump’s election to the US presidency (see Ball 2017; Davies 2017; d’Ancona 2017; McIntyre 2018). The rhetoric of post-truth politics is thus highly partisan. Assertions of ’post-truth’ are expressions of frustration from a liberal class bewildered by recent political upheavals that confound their most basic beliefs. It is not our capacity for truthfulness or respect for facts that has deteriorated, but theirs. This is ironic. The so-called perpetrators of post-truth (those who “don’t care about the facts”) are often accused of having a specific ideological aim, when it is those who accuse others of post-truth who clearly have their own ideological aims. These accusations typically come from the political left, who view their political adversaries as a group that is constantly misled by disinformation, irrationality, or immorality.
As mentioned in §2.3, this partisan bias has been enshrined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The concept of post-truth is thus deeply *normative.* It is a way of claiming *epistemic authority* over others. To portray one’s political adversaries as ignoring the facts, appealing to emotion, and having “lost their minds” (as Kurt Andersen says in *The Atlantic*) is to implicitly dismiss the legitimacy of their perspectives. The aim, presumably, is to preempt their rational contribution to public discourse by denigrating one’s adversaries’ capacity for (or interest in) truth. This is a delegitimization tactic, that is, an attempt to demote the political judgments of others to the realm of mere opinion, bias, self-interest, or an expression of false consciousness. As I’ll explain below, this relies on a bad political epistemology and bad morality.

### 4.2 ‘Post-Truth’ is Bad Political Epistemology

Proponents of the post-truth thesis typically do not include themselves in the group of those said to be more-than-normally-wrong about politics. They assume that *others* are led into error because of ignorance, bias, gullibility, or immorality, whereas proponents of the post-truth thesis take themselves to grasp truths that are within reach and recognizable by anyone smart enough and motivated enough to find them. This presupposes that the problem of post-truth politics is one of *epistemology*, not *ideology.* I find this assumption troubling, as it rests on naive epistemological assumptions.

First, it is unclear whether those with ‘bad beliefs’ (i.e., beliefs that are odds with the great preponderance of evidence) are irrational or intentionally ignoring the facts. As Neil Levy (2022) argues, those with bad beliefs—e.g., those denying anthropogenic climate change, the safety and efficacy of vaccines, and evolution—are often rational agents who are responding appropriately to evidence. Levy writes,

> those who come to hold bad beliefs do so for roughly the same sorts of reasons as those who come to hold good beliefs. It isn’t because they’re irrational and we’re not. It is largely because we defer to reliable sources of evidence and they defer to unreliable ones. This deference, which may be explicit or implicit, is rational on both sides. (Levy 2022, xiii)

In other words, those with bad beliefs are not choosing to privilege ignorance or irrationality over knowledge and reason; they simply have bad evidence. The problem is one of *inputs* into reasoning, not reasoning itself. People often end up with beliefs that conflict with abundant evidence because their epistemic environment is distorted or has been manipulated (Levy 2022, xii).

Second, the issues confronting modern societies are immensely epistemically complicated (see Lippmann 1922; Friedman 2019). Consider examples such as global warming, drug

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8 It is what Alex Worsnip calls a ‘cryptonormative judgment’, viz., “a judgment that is presented by the agent who makes it as non-normative, but that is in fact normative” (2017, 4). These judgments can be non-transparent to its bearer. So, those who use post-truth rhetoric need not take themselves to make making normative judgments.

9 Along similar lines, Joshua Habgood-Coote (2019) argues there are political problems with the term ‘post-truth’. He suggests we stop using the term ‘post-truth’ because it has propagandistic uses and risks smuggling bad ideology into conversations.
control, poverty and inequality, racism, and how best to manage a global pandemic. All sorts of complex social, scientific, moral, and political factors influence each of these issues, making it rational to think there will be reasonable disagreement about the best way to ameliorate these problems.¹⁰ To explain this disagreement by appealing to indifference to truth, prejudice, or a lack of reasoned debate is to ignore the fact that policymaking is not straightforward, there are always reasonable tradeoffs, and the truth is rarely self-evident.

Advocates of the post-truth thesis seem to forget that truth has a controversial history. Even self-evident political truths can be proven false, otherwise slaves would still be slaves and women would not have the vote. Yet proponents of the post-truth thesis have a habit of supposing that reality is all around them, within arm’s reach and graspable through data, facts, and appropriate deference to authority. They assume that open-minded people will come to share their views, as long as they are exposed to the same evidence. Why, then, do people disagree? Those who think differently must be stupid, lazy, biased, or morally compromised.

This reveals another irony of the post-truth narrative: its staunchest proponents decry the spread of fake news, conspiracy theories, bullshit, and the like, yet they nevertheless assume that political knowledge is easier to come by (at least for them) than is reasonable to expect. In Post-Truth, for example, Lee McIntyre opens his chapter on ‘Fighting Post-truth’ with the following quote from Orwell: “We have now sunk to a depth which restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men.” These assertions of a self-evident reality miss the deeper truth that politics is realm of competing views amongst citizens about what is true and good. To be clear, I am not suggesting that we should be anti-science or anti-truth. It is uncontroversial, for instance, that ingesting household cleaners will not prevent Covid-19.¹¹ I am simply reminding us that knowing the truth is often difficult, as it “doesn’t lie there on the street in the sun waiting to be observed by anyone who glances in its general direction” (Geuss 2014, 140). The rhetoric of ‘post-truth’ implies that political truths are self-evident, incontrovertible, and closed to reasonable disagreement. It assumes that policymaking is relatively easy and that the problem is citizens who willfully choose bad policies or are hapless dupes.

Third, proponents of the post-truth thesis ignore the fact that peoples’ values and normative concerns (e.g., ‘joblessness is a pressing problem that needs addressing’) can be relevant to assessing the truth of technical, scientific claims (e.g., ‘anthropogenic climate change is real’). Imagine a scientist who is more concerned about the potential environmental damage of climate change than the harms of joblessness. They will be more willing to publicly assert that climate change is occurring because their epistemic standard for warranted assertion is lower than someone with the opposite value priorities. Now, suppose that some listener disagrees with this scientist’s normative judgments. Maxime Lepoutre provides the following illustration:

¹⁰According to Jeffrey Friedman, genuine disagreement about technocratic policy effects is always reasonable (2019, 38).

¹¹What is controversial is whether many people actually drank bleach to avoid coronavirus (see Litman et al. 2020). It is also unclear what the connection between drinking bleach and post-truth politics is supposed to be.
Suppose, for example, that Briana comes from a rural community where jobs are scarce and, consequently, believes that one of the state’s normative priorities should be creating jobs in economically deprived areas. Suppose, moreover, that environmental regulation would threaten key job-providing industries in rural areas. Since the stakes of environmental regulation are very high for Briana (given her normative concerns) it makes sense for her to adopt a relatively high epistemic standard for accepting claims asserting the reality of climate change. Suppose, finally, that scientist Amy is insensitive to the economic threat rural areas face—perhaps because this threat is less visible to Amy’s social group than to Briana’s. If so, then Briana has a reason to believe that, because of this normative blindspot, Amy may have an insufficiently high epistemic standard for asserting ‘anthropogenic climate change is real’. (Lepoutre 2021: 175)

In other words, normative considerations—including those grounded in group-based identities—are in principle relevant to whether, epistemically speaking, one should accept scientific claims about technical descriptive matters.

This is just one example, but it illustrates a general point: our political moment requires more than simplistic calls for trusting ‘the science’. It requires engagement with competing political visions. Those who disagree often respect evidence that matters to their condition, have different experiences, and prioritize different values. We can’t simply explain away their opinion as ignorance or prejudice, nor should we think the best corrective is to get more science and facts into the public’s ignorant, biased minds. To think this way is to overlook the fact that democracy’s ills are ideological, not epistemic. As Jasanoff and Simmett write, “To say that facts speak for themselves is to live in a ‘post-value’ world that ignores contention and questioning as the very stuff of a democracy that has always connected public facts with public values” (2017, 763).

4.3 ‘Post-Truth’ is Bad Morality

The rhetoric of post-truth is not only epistemically dubious but also morally and politically questionable. One danger of post-truth rhetoric is the discrediting of fellow citizens. To say others are ‘post-truth’ is to delegitimize their perspectives and fail to respect fellow citizens on equal terms. This way of talking implies that others are merely confident idiots whereas we know better. It is them who custom-make reality, who take preposterous ideas seriously, and who live in fantasyland; it is we who are in touch with reality and know what’s best (both for us and them). This style of discourse reflects what Emmett Rensin calls “the smug style of American liberalism”. It is “a condescending, defensive sneer toward any person or movement outside its own consensus, dressed up as a monopoly on reason” (Rensin 2016). This has morally dubious implications, as I’ll describe below.

First, it easily tempts us to mandate for others a particular way of life. To denounce others as the misinformed masses establishes a worrying dichotomy between those who are worthy of political influence (the informed elite) and those who are unworthy (the misguided masses). I often hear people say things like, “They [half the country] just don’t know what’s good for them”, “They’re getting conned by right-wing propagandists to vote
against their own interests", and “They don’t care about the facts”. Those who talk this way risk driving us to a two-tier society (Brown 2016). In one camp are those who care about facts, evidence, reason, and democracy; in the other camp are those who cannot be reasoned with, are incapable of objective inquiry, and are threats to democracy.¹²

This rhetoric reveals another irony of the post-truth narrative: those who lament post-truth society often say it threatens democracy (e.g., more than a few critics warn that post-truth is a precursor to totalitarianism¹³) but embedded within the post-truth narrative is elitist and anti-democratic assumptions. By distinguishing those who know the truth from those living in alternative realities, this narrative legitimizes the view that many citizens could be removed from political influence.¹⁴ If citizens are so deeply misguided, why should we listen to them? The viewpoints of those deemed ‘post-truth’ are presumably written off as noise rather than genuine calls for political change. There is little reflection on how this could lead to authoritarian consequences. If calls for political change are framed as misinformed noise, it licenses the neglect of popular demands and a refusal to take them seriously. As Jeremy Elkins writes,

[We] will too often end up restraining political dialogue by privileging those who are thought to have special access to truth while circumscribing the kinds of voices that are recognized as legitimate... More generally, the fear is that an emphasis on truth will too often promote insularity in our thought and an unwillingness to take seriously the perspective of others, for if we believe that we know the truth or what reason demands, the point of our speech will be to bring others over or to coerce them into compliance.” (Elkins 2012: 25)

This is not idle speculation. Neil deGrasse Tyson has called for a governmental “Truth Force” to police public speech. This type of rhetoric functions to give discursive advantage to some over others, by labelling one’s own views as ‘sensible’, ‘realistic’, and ‘legitimate’. Accusations of post-truth are often moves in a discursive ‘truth game’ in which agents vie for political power by rooting it in their alleged epistemic authority.¹⁵

Second, this attitude may fuel one of the most urgent problems facing America today: affective polarization. Affective polarization is the tendency of political adversaries to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively (Iyengar et al. 2012, 406). It is measured by asking respondents to rate how well various positive traits—such as generosity, honesty, open-mindedness, and intelligence—and negative traits—such as meanness, selfishness, and hypocrisy—describe their political opponents (Iyengar et al. 2012; Garrett

¹²As I’ve argued elsewhere (Hannon 2021), those who are better educated, more reflective, and more politically knowledgeable are at least as susceptible to bias, dogmatism, and groupthink as those with less education, less knowledge, and who display less cognitive reflection.

¹³Timothy Snyder says, “post-truth is pre-fascism” (Illing 2017).

¹⁴Defenders of epistocracy are willing to accept this conclusion. I find the objections to epistocracy sufficiently compelling, so I will set this view aside. In any case, the proponents of the post-truth thesis pay lip service to the value of democracy (they want to defend democracy against post-truth), so they are unable to accept these anti-democratic consequences.

¹⁵Those who think this way commit what Estlund (2007) calls the ‘expert/boss fallacy’. As Estlund argues, it is fallacious to conclude that one’s political opponents ought to be under one’s political authority just because their views are false.
et al. 2014), as well as to rate the extent to which one trusts others do what is right (Levendusky 2013). Overall, affectively polarized citizens tend to dislike, distrust, and avoid each other.

Affective polarization is bad for a number of reasons; for example, it impairs political trust (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015), hampers interpersonal relations (Huber and Malhotra 2017), and hinders economic exchanges (McConnell et al. 2018). Scholars resoundingly agree that affective polarization is epistemically, morally, and politically problematic (see Iyengar et al. 2019; Talisse 2019; Lelkes 2021). Yet, the rhetoric of post-truth stokes partisan flames by encouraging us to view our political adversaries as ignorant, irrational, gullible, or morally contemptuous (it also encourages those accused of ‘post-truth’ to view the accusers as smug, biased, liberal elites). This way of thinking causes disagreement to devolve into demonization. It reinforces an us/them mentality that promotes social divisions. It encourages us to view those with different views as obstacles to achieving our policy goals, rather than members of a political community bound together by a common fate.

In a recent paper, Elizabeth Edenberg (2021) makes a similar point. Her focus is specifically on social media discourse, but her argument extends to rhetoric about post-truth. Edenberg argues that many scholars (e.g., Rini 2017; Lynch 2019; Cassam 2019) wrongly view polarized public discourse as an epistemic problem that calls for an epistemic solution. To bridge political divides, it is commonly said that we must improve the epistemic capacities of citizens and our collective epistemic resources. According to Edenberg, these approaches misdiagnose the problem, which she takes to be moral, not epistemic. To mend out divides, we must “cultivate mutual respect for one another as moral agents” (Edenberg 2021, 273). The post-truth narrative frustrates this goal because it discourages us from establishing mutual moral respect. This is not to suggest there are no epistemic problems within contemporary democracies or that ameliorating ignorance, bias, and misinformation will do nothing to improve the quality of public discourse. But these epistemic concerns are not very new, and political division is not necessarily an epistemic problem that requires an epistemic solution. In fact, epistemic solutions may exacerbate the very problems they attempt to solve (Edenberg 2021).

5 Truth and Democracy

The post-truth presumes a particular understanding of the relationship between truth and democracy. While it often remains an implicit premise, the post-truth diagnosis tends to equate democracy with truth-seeking and rationality (Farkas and Schou 2020). This assumption is ubiquitous, but it is quickly challenged by the complex history of democratic thought. Political philosophers have spent centuries analyzing the relationship between politics and truth, and this inquiry has led to at least two fundamental insights. First, the

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truth rarely helps us settle our most important disagreements. As Rawls (1993) reminds us, appeals to truth are often too divisive and too deeply contestable for political purposes. Second, truth is not above some otherwise fundamental elements of democracy. What remains vital to a well-functioning democracy is its ability to give voice to different political groups and projects, not so much its ability to arrive at truth. It is for this reason that democracy does not discriminate on the grounds of lack of knowledge. As Michelle Obama said during a Get-out-the-vote event in Las Vegas:

Voting does not require any kind of special expertise. You know you don’t need to have some fancy degree to be qualified to vote. You don’t have to read every news article to be qualified to vote. You know what you need to be qualified to vote? You need to be a citizen . . . You need to have opinions about the issues in your community. That’s what qualifies you to vote . . . I’ve been voting since I was 18 years old. And trust me, I didn’t know nothing about nothing.

Democracy is about different visions of a well-ordered society. These visions may, of course, involve emotive language and disputable arguments, but the primary conflict is between alternative imaginations of democracy. Democracy is not just a tool to ‘get things right’ but rather a contest over what it means to get things right (see Muirhead 2014).

The post-truth diagnosis portrays this conflict in a different way: as a clash between truth and the forces of darkness. This relies on particular normative ideas about the nature and function of democracy. In particular, it presupposes that politics is a tool to get things right, and that we must respect the authority of truth. In this way, the narrative of post-truth tends to obscure “the creative, open-ended, uncertain, and ultimately contestatory nature of democratic politics” (Muirhead 2014, 5). What makes democracy valuable, in part, is that it guards against illusions of certainty. It is for this reason that democracy is rule by the people, not rule by the truth. This is not to say there is no better or worse in politics, no right or wrong. It is simply to say that democracy is valuable primarily because it reflects the equality of citizens (Christiano 2008).

6 Conclusion

Are Western democracies undergoing a profound epistemological shift? Are we facing a deep-seated crisis of truth? People are certainly speaking this way. In 2016, the term ‘post-truth’ experienced a 2,000% increase in usage compared to the previous year, which coincided with Oxford Dictionary declaring it international word of the year. In 2017, the Collins Dictionary named ‘fake news’ as their own word of the year. This rapid rise in usage suggests that people find these terms helpful for making sense their political situation. But beneath simple labels like post-truth, alternative facts, and fake news there is a complex set of issues that call for interrogation.

I have critically evaluated the post-truth narrative and its implicit normative ideas. First, I examined several interpretations of ‘post-truth’ and explained why each of them faces certain challenges. For example, it makes little sense to proclaim that truth is “dead” or that people no longer care about truth (see §2), and it is misleading to imply that there was
a ‘truth’ era insulated from the epistemic problems we face today (see §3). Second, I argued that post-truth rhetoric is deeply normative, partisan, and questionable on epistemic, moral, and political grounds (see §4). It is epistemically dubious because it is largely insensitive to the problem of complexity in politics; it is morally dubious because it is often a derogatory label for individuals or groups that are—implicitly or explicitly—deemed to be stupider, less rational, or morally compromised (which reinforces an us/them mentality that entrenches social divisions.); and it is a politically toxic neologism because it purports to use the language of ‘truth’ as a weapon against power, yet these truth-claims are often themselves attempts to exert power over others by delegitimizing their perspectives. (It was exactly this worry that animated writers like Nietzsche, Foucault, and Arendt.) Finally, I attempted to situate the contemporary post-truth narrative within a wider framework (§5). While it might seem like truth and democracy are on especially bad terms lately, it is important to remember two things: politics and truth have long had a vexed relationship, and moral panics about the value of truthfulness in politics are as old as politics itself. For these reasons, I conclude that post-truth rhetoric is itself highly problematic and something we are better off without.
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