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## THE POLITICS OF POST-TRUTH

**ABSTRACT:** A prevalent political narrative is that we are facing an epistemological crisis, where many citizens no longer care about truth and facts. Yet the view that we are living in a post-truth era relies on some implicit questionable empirical and normative assumptions. The post-truth rhetoric converts epistemic issues into motivational issues, treating people with whom we disagree as if they no longer believe in or care about truth. This narrative is also dubious on epistemic, moral, and political grounds. It is epistemically dubious in being largely insensitive to the problem of complexity in politics; it is morally dubious because ‘post-truth’ is often a derogatory label for individuals or groups that are deemed stupid, irrational, or morally compromised; 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. While it may seem as if truth and democracy are on especially bad terms lately, 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.

**Keywords:** epistemological crisis; post-truth; political epistemology; bullshit

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## THE POLITICS OF POST-TRUTH

The truth is rarely pure, and never simple.  
—Oscar Wilde

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 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, quoted in Goldberg 2020).

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 percent 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” its own word of the year. This rapid rise in usage suggests that people find these terms helpful for making sense of their political situation. But beneath simple labels like “post-truth,” “alternative facts,” and “fake news” is a complex set of issues that call for interrogation.

The diagnosis that we are living in a post-truth era frames contemporary democratic problems in a specific way. Those declaring that a crisis of truth is destroying democracy tend 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. In drawing out some problematic assumptions that lie beneath the post-truth narrative, I will reflect on the fraught relationship between truth, democracy, public opinion, and power.

### *Truth and Truthfulness*

Many commentators decry the advent of post-truth politics, but what exactly is the phenomenon of post-truth?

Consider the following statements. In *The Guardian*, Julian Baggini (2017) says we are living in “an era without truth.” In *The Conversation*, Vittorio Bufacchi (2020) says, “post-truth is the belief that truth is no longer essential, that truth has become obsolete.” In *Post-Truth*, Lee

McIntyre (2018, 5) proclaims that “truth has been eclipsed.” What do these statements mean? As we will see, the way some philosophers, social scientists, and journalists have attempted to understand the nature of post-truth is inadequate.

In April 2017, *Time Magazine* had a striking cover that posed the question, “Is Truth Dead?” In this interpretation, “post-truth” signals a culture in which *the very notion of truth* is dead or dying. As Sergei Prozorov (2019, 29) writes, “post-truth politics denies the existence of truth.” Sami Pihlström (2021, 2) likewise says, “We seem to be living in a cultural situation that has endangered the concept of truth itself.” According to this interpretation, many people have either 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 view that there has been a wholesale abandonment of the very concept of truth is deeply implausible. 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 may have false views about the efficacy of vaccinations, but they nevertheless agree with orthodox scientists that there is *a truth* about their efficacy. The mere fact that people can (and do) err, or that there may be a misalignment between reality and our expectations about it, suggests that we have not given up on the concept of truth—indeed, the possibility of error presumes the actuality of the 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). Similarly, Joshua Cohen argues that we cannot make sense of activities like thinking, asserting, believing, and judging without the concept of truth:

The 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. (Cohen 2009, 226)

More strongly, 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 tiger 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.

Although we cannot kill the idea of truth, might our *respect for truthfulness* be dying? In *Truth and Truthfulness*, Bernard Williams claims that truthfulness consists of accuracy 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. Since 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*. Neither proposal, I will suggest, is plausible.

In *On Bullshit*, Harry Frankfurt argues that 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). In other words, the bullshitter is not disposed to *say what he believes to be true*. The truth or falsity of his statements are of no central interest to him. Instead of aiming to express his inner informational states, he aims to present himself in a particular light.<sup>1</sup>

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). This suggests that the bullshitter has both an accuracy problem and a sincerity problem. With regard to accuracy, the scope of issues on which we expect people to opine is larger than the scope of issues on which they can accurately opine. With regard to sincerity, the bullshitter does not try to sincerely report their inner states—e.g., by admitting their ignorance—but rather tries to represent themselves as knowing more than they do. If Frankfurt’s analysis is correct, we could decrease the amount of bullshit by jettisoning the (allegedly) widespread belief that citizens must be informed about numerous political issues.<sup>2</sup>

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, the concept of “bullshit” is largely unhelpful for understanding recent political developments.<sup>3</sup> While some political actors may be 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 as well as *assert what they believe*. Indeed, they often take their opinions to be *obviously true* and are puzzled as to why others disagree with them. 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 *sincerely believe* their political views and *express* those views in an open and honest way. When citizens are deeply polarized about an issue, they disagree over what they honestly regard as true—they are not indifferent to truth or misrepresenting their beliefs.

Admittedly, people do sometimes make insincere political assertions. I have elsewhere argued that some political claims are merely “expressive” whereby people deliberately

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<sup>1</sup> The 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.

<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, 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.

<sup>3</sup> Cassam (2021) also argues, albeit for different reasons, that “bullshit” is not a useful tool of politico-epistemological analysis.

misreport their belief in order to *express their attitude* (see Hannon 2021). For example, one in seven Americans say that Barack Obama is “the antichrist” (Harris 2013). It is likely that such claims often reflect identity-expressive discourse, not genuine belief. (It is a way of saying “Boo, Democrats!” and “Go, Republicans!”) The extent to which voters engage in such identity-expressive behavior is an unresolved empirical issue (Berinsky 2018; Bullock and Lenz 2019). While these instances of partisan cheerleading may qualify as bullshit, they are also symptomatic of deeply held political opinions. Partisans use identity-expressive discourse to signal their allegiance to political communities that share deeply held convictions. It is not bullshit all the way down.

### *Post-Shame and Post-Trust*

Perhaps the post-truth problem is due to 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.” Post-shame is a moral problem and post-trust is an epistemological problem, 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 shocking or shameful. Second, we can no longer be sure whom to trust. When we think others are unashamed of dishonesty, it is rational to trust our sources less. These two factors may result in an increasing lack of concern to find out truths in the relevant domain. If we don’t know whom 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, this definition pits objective facts against personal beliefs, but, as Blackburn (2018) notes, this contrast makes little sense for 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, this assumption is questionable. Fourth, this definition may reflect a *political bias* (see Fuller 2018) in insinuating that the “winners” in recent politics are less rational (more emotional) and care less about truth. I will return to this point shortly.

### *Valuing Sincerity over Accuracy*

Another interpretation for what is meant by “post-truth” is not that we lack sincerity but rather we value it *too highly*—at the expense of accuracy. Consider the following example. During the 2016 U.S. presidential transition, George Stephanopoulos questioned Mike Pence about a tweet in which Donald Trump claimed that he won the popular vote “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*. (Quoted in Forstenzer 2018, 7, emph. added)

Trump may not have believed his own claim—it may have been bullshit. But Pence appears to defend Trump by appealing 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 even inaccurate. Trump may be a bullshit artist, but bullshit artists are often appealing because they earn the perception of sincerity 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” (Foroughi et al. 2019, 138).

This explanation, though, assumes that Trump’s followers believe there is a gap between what they *think* is true (subjective truth) and the truth (objective truth). Foroughi et al. are effectively treating the objective truth as if it were self-evident so that Trump’s supporters know this truth but value something *above* it. In this view, when Trump’s supporters disagree with this (putative) objective truth, it must be because they value a competing subjective truth (sincerity) *over* the objective truth (accuracy). This, however, renders the beliefs of Trump’s supporters incoherent. To take Pence’s 2016 interview with Stephanopoulos, Pence defended the plausibility of Trump’s claim about voter fraud by saying that Trump had been trying to indicate that “there has been evidence over, over many years of voter fraud and, and expressing that reality, Pew Research Center found evidence of that four years ago.”<sup>4</sup> Pence, then, does not appear to have been valuing sincerity *over* accuracy, but suggesting, rather, that they coincided (at least in that case). It is plausible that Trump’s followers may have likewise perceived there to be a convergence between the Trump’s sincerity in claiming that “millions of illegal votes were cast in 2016” and the possible objective truth of that claim (on the grounds that it does *not* contradict their evidence). They may have been wrong about the accuracy of this claim, but this does not mean that they *knew* they were wrong—as Foroughi et al. appear to think.

Let us suppose for the sake of argument that voters do care more about sincerity than accuracy. Why would this be? Why would the public be so blasé about truth-telling politicians? One possible explanation is that 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.” Alternatively, some people may think there *are* politically relevant truths, but that 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 statement is a *metaphysical thesis* about political truth; the second is an *epistemological thesis* about our ability to know the truth.

I lack the space to examine these hypotheses in detail, but Ian MacMullen’s survey article, “What Is ‘Post-factual’ Politics?” (2020), suggests that the post-truth condition is partly

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FOYLSE83utw>

characterized by these (conflicting) attitudes, which he labels “metaphysical post-factualism” and “epistemic post-factualism.” He also 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.<sup>5</sup> The essence of post-truth politics, he claims, is a culture in which these attitudes are widespread. While MacMullen’s analysis is conceptually illuminating, he makes no empirical claims about the *prevalence* of these attitudes. His work attempts “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), 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. Further, regardless of their prevalence, some of the post-truth attitudes that MacMullen describes are theoretically questionable. For example, how could someone who thinks there are no objective truths in politics have political opinions (understood as a cognitive attitude) about these issues? Further, motivational post-factualism is questionable because it is impossible—or at least extremely unlikely—to hold opinions that one thinks are merely motivated by the desire to feel good rather than to get at the truth.<sup>6</sup>

### *Are We Post-Truth?*

Is it widely believed that we cannot know the 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. Indeed, many voters take their political views to be *obviously true* and are puzzled when others disagree with them. They are *naïve realists* about politics (see Friedman 2019), believing that they see the world objectively, without bias, and that people who disagree must therefore be uninformed, irrational, biased, or immoral. Naïve realists commonly assume that other fair-minded people will share their views, as long as they have the same evidence.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> These two additional hypotheses seem implausible. In the case of unconscious post-factualism, it is unclear why longstanding psychological biases (e.g., confirmation bias) would explain the *recent* emergence of post-truth politics. In the case of motivational post-factualism, people are unlikely to care enough about politics to participate if they did not care about the truth of political issues, especially when they believe there *are* such truths. If voters did not care about the empirical dimensions of political questions, they would not oppose—as they do—politicians whose empirical claims they regard as untrustworthy.

<sup>6</sup> Psychologists of motivated reasoning get around this by positing an unconscious level where a sort of homunculus “knows” that the opinion is untrue but spares the conscious self this knowledge—because if one knew an opinion were untrue, one could not hold it. For doubts about the plausibility of this common idea, see Friedman (2019, 243-6).

<sup>7</sup> 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 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 (2008, 95) 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

Moreover, I doubt that 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.<sup>8</sup> There have never been clear and authoritative standards of truth in politics (I'll return to this later on). Lies, bullshit, spin, propaganda, prejudice, uncertainty, bias, emotions, complexity, disagreement, division, and contestation 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), but to examine the possible social effects of the discourse of, and rhetoric about, post-truth. I will argue that this rhetoric is epistemically, morally, and politically problematic.

It will help to distinguish between post-truth *discourse* and post-truth *rhetoric*. “Post-truth discourse” refers to first-order epistemic problems with 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 (2017, 3) 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.” Lee McIntyre (2018, 1) refers to “the obfuscation of facts, abandonment of evidential standards in reasoning, and outright lying.” Evan Davis (2017) adds “conspiracy theories” and “skepticism about expert opinion” to the list of problems plaguing 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. “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 itself 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.

Setting aside the question of whether first-order political discourse is dysfunctional in these ways, let us ask whether post-truth rhetoric is itself dysfunctional. I shall suggest that those who accuse others of post-truth politics are themselves participating in a form of toxic political discourse.

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examination, those beliefs turn out to be false, we tend to withdraw our initial positive sentiment toward the thing in question.”

<sup>8</sup> In *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Yuval Noah Harari says, “humans have always lived in the age of post-truth”. Likewise, Simon Blackburn (2018) says, “There’s nothing new about post-truth politics.” 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, to proclaim there is “nothing new” about post-truth is deeply unsatisfying *even if true*, for it leaves unexplained why so many people *think* we’ve entered into a new era of politics.



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 recent 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, for assertions of post-truth are often expressions of frustration from members of 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 kind of accusation typically comes from those on the political left, who view their political adversaries as a group that is constantly misled by disinformation, irrationality, or immorality.

As we saw earlier, this partisan bias has been enshrined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The concept of post-truth is thus deeply *normative*.<sup>9</sup> 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 dismiss the legitimacy of their perspectives. This has the effect of preempting others’ contribution to public discourse by denigrating their capacity for (or interest in) truth. Those who speak this way effectively demote the political judgments of others to the realm of mere opinion, bias, self-interest, or an expression of false consciousness. This is not to imply that the rhetoricians of post truth are *aiming* to bring about these effects. I am primarily interested in the *effect* of their rhetoric rather than their aims or psychological motives. From the speaker’s perspective, the aim may simply be to speak the truth about the other side as they see it.

It goes without saying that proponents of the post-truth thesis do not take themselves to be ignorant, irrational, or gullible. They see themselves as grasping truths that are recognizable by anyone smart enough and motivated enough to find them. Meanwhile, they assume that *others* are led into error because of ignorance, gullibility, or irrationality; and those others, at the same time, assume that they themselves are smart enough and motivated enough to recognize the truth. This conundrum suggests that one problem of post-truth politics is *epistemological*: both the rhetoricians of post-truth and the targets of their rhetoric appear to be naïve realists.<sup>10</sup>

While it is common to treat those with “bad beliefs”—i.e., beliefs that are odds with the great preponderance of evidence, such as denials of anthropogenic climate change, the safety and efficacy of vaccines, and evolution—as irrational or intentionally ignoring the facts, Neil Levy (2022) argues that they should rather be seen as rational agents who are responding appropriately to their evidence. As he puts it,

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

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<sup>9</sup> It is what Alex Worsnip (2017, 4) 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.” These judgments can be non-transparent to its bearer. So those who use post-truth rhetoric need not take themselves to be making normative judgments.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

ones. This deference, which may be explicit or implicit, is rational on both sides. (Levy 2022, xiii)

On this view, 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).

Even setting aside the possibility that one's epistemic inputs may have been manipulated, a more innocent source of error arises from the fact that modern societies are immensely epistemically complicated (see Lippmann 1922; Friedman 2019). Consider issues such as global warming, drug control, poverty, inequality, and how best to manage a global pandemic. Complex social, scientific, moral, and political factors affect each of these issues, making it likely that there will be reasonable disagreement about how to both diagnose the causes of social problems and to predict the best way to ameliorate them. For Jeffrey Friedman (2019, 38), modern society is so complex that genuine disagreement about technocratic policy effects is *always* reasonable. Explaining disagreement by appealing to indifference to truth, prejudice, or a lack of reasoned debate does not recognize that social reality is hard to understand, that policymaking is not straightforward, that there are often reasonable tradeoffs, and that the truth is rarely self-evident. The idea of post-truth presumes that social reality is transparent enough that disagreement is a product of motivational rather than epistemic factors. The rhetoric of post-truth thus waves away social complexities.

At this point, readers may worry that arguments about the complexity of social reality and the possible counterintuitive effects of public policy serve as an *excuse* for ignoring the fact that many voters are denying science, denying elections, and believing whatever they want to believe with no basis in reality. In fact (the objector might continue), appeals to complexity or uncertainty—to epistemological issues more generally—come from the Republican denialist playbook, where, following the lead of tobacco and oil companies in the twentieth century, emphasizing “uncertainty” leads to skepticism about science and even truth. From this perspective, my epistemological argument would appear to be part and parcel of the post-truth strategy of denying truth.

While all philosophical arguments can be appropriated for a number of ends, it is important to distinguish between first-order arguments that foster doubt where confidence appears justified and second-order arguments that examine the implicit assumptions undergirding any type of rhetoric, including that of post-truth. My focus, on this latter analysis, requires us to notice that an important assumption in post-truth rhetoric is that both the causes of and solutions to complex matters of public policy are often treated as relatively self-evident.

Consider the debate over the efficacy of lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many on the political left tended to favor lockdowns and criticized those opposing them, who pointed to the enormous and wide-ranging collateral damage caused by extreme social restrictions. Even if lockdowns *were* the best solution, it was by no means self-evident *that* they were, especially when their costs were taken into account. Advocates of the post-truth thesis seem to forget that various truths have controversial histories. Even seemingly self-evident political truths can be and have been proven false—otherwise slaves would still be slaves and women would be unable to vote. Yet proponents of the post-truth thesis frequently assume 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 therefore 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, misinformation, and bullshit, but they also assume that political knowledge is *easy enough to come by* (at least for them). 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 at which *restatement of the obvious* is the first duty of intelligent men." This Orwellian view is, paradoxically, not what we usually think of as Orwellian in that it overlooks the possibility that politics is realm of competing views amongst citizens about what is true and good. To acknowledge this is neither to reject science nor truth. It is to recognize that obtaining 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 often 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.

Another concern with post-truth rhetoric is that it ignores the way in which peoples' values and normative concerns (e.g., "joblessness is a pressing problem that needs addressing") may be relevant to assessing the truth of technical, scientific testimony (e.g., "anthropogenic climate change is real"). Scientists who are more concerned about the potential environmental damage of climate change than the harms of joblessness 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:

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 are in principle relevant to whether, epistemically speaking, one should accept scientific claims about technical descriptive matters. This will, in turn, influence what one believes on the basis of scientific testimony.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> To be clear, this argument does not show that Amy's normative concerns are relevant to her own assessment of the truth (or likelihood) of technical descriptive claims. This view is more radical, less plausible, and invites the charge of epistemological relativism. That one cares more about joblessness than environmental damage does

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.

### *“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 thereby fail to respect them on equal terms. Of course, some views really are contemptuous and rightly dismissed. The problem is an extreme readiness to infer that others are morally contemptuous *simply because* they disagree with us. For example, many post-truth rhetoricians think of Republicans as *fascists*, which allows one to conclude that their opinions should be discredited. This way of thinking implies that others are evil or confident idiots, whereas *we* know better. It is *they* 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 is 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 creating 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.<sup>12</sup>

This rhetoric reveals another irony of the post-truth narrative. Those who lament post-truth society often say it threatens democracy—more than a few critics warn that post-truth is a precursor to totalitarianism<sup>13</sup>—but post-truth rhetoric contains elitist and anti-democratic assumptions. By distinguishing those who know the truth from those living in alternative realities, this rhetoric legitimizes the view that many citizens should not have political influence.<sup>14</sup> If citizens are so deeply misguided, why should we listen to them? The viewpoints

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not influence the likelihood that anthropogenic climate change is occurring, nor does it affect the truth of the claim “anthropogenic climate change is occurring.”

<sup>12</sup> As I’ve argued elsewhere, 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 (see Hannon 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Snyder says that “post-truth is pre-fascism” (Illing 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Defenders 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

of those deemed post-truth are to be written off rather than treated as 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. A number of prominent journalists have also advocated for a U.S. truth commission (see Lichtenberg and Friedman 2021). This type of rhetoric discursively advantages some over others by labelling one’s own views sensible, realistic, and legitimate.

Further, this attitude may fuel one of the most urgent problems facing America today: affective polarization, which 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 people to rate how well various positive traits (e.g., generosity, honesty, open-mindedness, and intelligence) and negative traits (e.g., meanness, selfishness, and hypocrisy) describe their political opponents (Iyengar et al. 2012; Garrett et al. 2014). Another measure is to ask people to rate the extent to which one trusts others to do what is right (Levendusky 2013).<sup>15</sup> Overall, affectively polarized citizens tend to dislike, distrust, and avoid their partisan others.

Affective polarization is bad for a number of reasons; for example, it impairs political trust of the other side (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015), hampers interpersonal relations with the other side (Huber and Malhotra 2017), and hinders economic exchanges with the other side (McConnell et al. 2018). Scholars largely 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.<sup>16</sup> (It also encourages those accused of being post-truth to view their accusers as smug, biased, liberal elites.) This way of thinking causes disagreement to devolve into demonization. It reinforces an us versus them mentality that promotes social divisions. It also 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.

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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.

<sup>15</sup> These are not the only measures of affective polarization. For a review, see Druckman and Levendusky (2019).

<sup>16</sup> Many other factors likely contribute to affective polarization, including partisan media (Levendusky 2013) and a decline in cross-cutting social identities between parties (Mason 2018). For a review, see Iyengar et al. 2019.

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The post-truth narrative assumes 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 in the rhetoric of post-truth, but it is quickly challenged by the complex history of democratic thought. Among scholars theorizing about the relationship between politics and truth, two notable ideas commonly emerge. First, the truth rarely helps us settle our most important disagreements. As John Rawls (1993) reminds us, appeals to truth are often too divisive and too deeply contestable for political purposes. Second, truth is not necessarily more valuable than other fundamental elements of democracy. What remains vital to a well-functioning democracy is its ability to give voice to different political groups and projects. 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.

Not everyone agrees with this idea. But according to at least one prominent view in political theory, democracy is largely about different visions of a well-ordered society. These visions may 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 rests 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 what Russell Muirhead (2014, 5) calls “the creative, open-ended, uncertain, and ultimately contestatory nature of democratic politics.” 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.

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