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An Epistemic Theory of Democracy

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1 Introduction

Part I: The Condorcet Jury Theorem
2 The Classic Framework
3 Extensions
4 Limitations
5 Independence Revisited

Part II: Epistemic Enhancement
6 Improving Individual Competence
7 Diversity
8 Division of Epistemic Labour
9 Discussion and Deliberation

Part III: Political Practices
10 Respecting Tradition
11 Following Leaders
12 Taking Cues
13 Pluralism: Differing Values & Priorities
14 Factionalism: Differing Interests

Part IV: Structures of Government
15 Epistocracy or Democracy
16 Direct versus Representative Democracy
17 Institutional Hindrances to Epistemic Success
18 Institutional Aids to Epistemic Success

Part V: Conclusions
19 The Relation Between Truth and Politics, Once Again
20 Headline Findings, Central Implications
21 Epilogue: What About Trump and Brexit?

Appendices

A1 Key to Notation
A2 Estimating Group Competence by Monte Carlo Simulation

References

CHAPTER 21

Epilogue: What about Trump and Brexit?

Our analysis in this book has been a conditional one. Assuming certain conditions (about competence, independence and sincerity) are satisfied, the pooling of votes by majority rule has epistemically beneficial properties. The conditions can be weakened and many of those epistemic benefits still follow. However at some point, when the conditions are violated too severely, the epistemic benefits of majority voting break down. Our argument can thus also be taken as an analysis of why democracy does not produce epistemically superior outcomes, when it does not, in epistemically radically non-ideal circumstances. That is the subject of this epilogue.

The day after Trump was elected, our colleagues inevitably poked fun at us for our work asserting 'the wisdom of crowds'. Joking aside, the election of Donald Trump and the vote for 'Brexit' (Britain's exit from the European Union) raise inevitable questions that cannot be ignored about the epistemic function of democracy.

We are confident that the analysis offered in this book has internal validity. The mathematics are as they are. Given the assumptions as specified, the conclusions are as we report. Whether those assumptions and the implications drawn from them correspond to the real world is, however, something else again.

Surely they correspond to *something* in the real world. That is to say, surely there are cases (quite a lot of them, actually) in which there is some fact of the matter and people engage in good-faith efforts to pool their information with one another's to find out what those facts actually are. But there are also cases where influential actors deliberately, and successfully, mislead others. Take, for example, the concerted campaign by the tobacco industry to discredit mounting evidence that

tobacco smoking causes cancer.[1] In the 1950s tobacco companies came together to establish

> the Tobacco Industry Research Committee, a sham organization designed to spread corporate propaganda to mislead the media, policymakers and the public at large. Their goal was not to convince the majority of Americans that cigarettes did not cause cancer. Instead, they sought to muddy the waters and create a second truth. One truth would emanate from the bulk of the scientific community; the other, from a cadre of people primarily in the employment of the tobacco industry. The ruse continued for almost five decades, until lawsuits against the industry forced the closure of the 'research institute' and the public release of its internal documents. Now anyone with an Internet connection can read the full details of the tobacco industry's expensive efforts to create an alternate set of facts about its products.[2]

The extent of such behaviour in politics has traditionally lain somewhere in between the two polar cases of honest information-pooling and utter deception.[3] The 'big lie' is a long established technique (but one historically not all *that* oft used)

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[1] The best analogue in our own day might be organized climate change denial.

[2] Rabin-Havt 2016; see similarly Harford 2017. It is perhaps no coincidence that it was the business world out of which Donald Trump emerged (Barstow 2016). Indeed, his confidant Roger Ailes, sometime CEO of Fox News, served as a secret operative for the tobacco industry resisting the Clinton health care reforms in 1993 (Dickinson 2011). But in terms of the influences on Trump, the impact of his mentor Ray Cohn – sometime chief counsel of Senator McCarthy's communist-witchhunting committee – must not be underestimated (O'Harrow and Boburg 2016).

[3] Arendt (1967/1977, p. 227) cynically says, 'no one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other'. Still, the last time before 2016 that a US presidential election could have plausibly been said to have been won on the basis of a literal falsehood was in 1960, when the foreign policy centerpiece of Kennedy's campaign was the claim that the previous Republican administration had allowed a 'missile gap' to arise between the USSR and the US. That was subsequently shown to be untrue. At the time, however, it was reasonably thought to be true by Kennedy and the wider public, on the basis of what were still the official US estimates of Soviet military capacity. Only those privy to top-secret briefings based on U-2 reconnaissance knew otherwise, and they could not reveal that information without giving away that still super-secret technology (Atlantic 2013; CIA 2013). Mind you, wars have subsequently been started on the basis of falsehoods (Vietnam, on the basis of false reports of attacks on US warships in the Gulf of Tonkin; Iraq, on the basis of false reports about Sadam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction); and elections elsewhere have been won on the basis of baldfaced lies (in 2001 in Australia, on the basis of lies about refugees throwing their children overboard to force the navy to pick them up and take them to Australia [Australia Senate Select Committee 2004]).

for securing political power.[4] And the frequency, if not necessarily effectiveness, of negative (and often not altogether truthful) advertisements designed to undercut the credibility of one's opponents has increased over the past decades.[5] But at least, until recently, politicians conspicuously caught in lies tended to be punished by voters, and in consequence politicians were historically very wary of lying.[6] While voters may have long been prone to a certain amount of bias, selective perception and motivated reasoning, they have traditionally been broadly concerned with promoting the truth at least as they see it.

In terms of our interest in the epistemic performance of democracy, we must distinguish two different questions. First is the question about the correctness of recent decisions of the electorate. Second is the question about the truth-conduciveness of the campaigns and processes that led up to those decisions. The first question is the one that triggered the snarky comments of our colleagues. Don't

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[4] The technique was enunciated most famously by Orwell (1949) in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – which rose to the top of Amazon's best-seller list the week after Trump's inauguration, when his former campaign manager started talking about 'alternative facts' (Charles 2017). But it was known to Abraham Lincoln, who in 1854 warned of the demagoguery of his nemesis Stephen Douglas in these terms: 'It was a great trick among some public speakers to hurl a naked absurdity at his audience, with such confidence that they should be puzzled to know if the speaker didn't see some point of great magnitude in it which entirely escaped their observation. A neatly varnished sophism would be readily penetrated, but a great, rough non sequitur was sometimes twice as dangerous as a well polished fallacy' (quoted in Blumenthal 2016). Or as Press Secretary Larry Speakes said *a propos* President Reagan's apocryphal stories, 'If you tell the same story five times, it's true' (quoted in Marcus 2016).

[5] Lau et al. 1999.

[6] Nyhan and Reifler 2015. As James Fallows describes the old rules, 'public figures would at least try to tell the truth most of the time and they would recognize it as a significant penalty if they're shown not telling the truth' (quoted in Rehm 2016b). Traditionally, 'knowledge of the risks of being caught has encouraged most politicians to minimize *provable* lies' (Fallows 2016a). Traditionally, straight-out lying has not been a particularly successful strategy of political manipulation in the long term (Goodin 1980, ch. 2). Of course, in Keynes' famous riposte, 'in the long run we're all dead' and it may well be that the lies will not be caught in time to do any good. That was Jonathan Swift's (1710) worry: 'it often happens that if a lie be believed only for an hour, it hath done its work, and there is no further occasion for it. Falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it, so that when men come to be undeceived, it is too late; the jest is over, and the tale hath had its effect: like a man who hath thought of a good repartee when the discourse is changed, or the company parted; or like a physician, who hath found out an infallible medicine, after the patient is dead.'

we agree that Brexit and Trump were surely the wrong choices? As citizens we certainly do. But as social scientists we have to tread more cautiously.[7]

Our concern in this epilogue is, therefore, with the second question alone. Our concern is not that voters made what we ourselves think were catastrophically incorrect decisions in supporting Brexit and Donald Trump for US president. We do – but that is beside the present point. Our point here is that in these two prominent cases voters continued to lend their support to those campaigns, even after they were clearly shown to be based on blatant falsehoods. Large numbers of voters seemed to be impervious to the truth of the central claims of those campaigns. Small wonder that the *Oxford Dictionaries* named 'post-truth' the 'word of the year' for 2016.[8]

Such apparent indifference of voters toward the truth should be highly worrying for an epistemic theory of democracy. Certainly, anyway, it should be if that were a pattern that is likely to persist, rather than being an aberration limited to those two campaigns alone.

The purpose of this epilogue is to offer our best guesses as to what, exactly, was going on with the votes for Brexit and Trump. In that way, we hope to provide at least a set of reflections (our evidence is of course no better than anyone else's, so reflections are the most they can claim to be) as to the implications of the events of 2016 for the general applicability of an epistemic theory of democracy.

21.1. The Political Lies of 2016

[7] After all, we might be wrong in our own assessments – as we think are others (Caplan 2007; Somin 2013; Brennan 2016) who bemoan 'voter ignorance' based purely on the fact that voters disagree with neoliberal economists, who we too think to be often in error. See similarly Killick (2017).

[8] Flood 2016. Wang 2016. Oxford Dictionaries 2016.

We begin by substantiating our claim that the Brexit and Trump campaigns were based on lies that voters could and should have known to be false on the basis of evidence that was readily available at the time they voted.[9] Whether voters actually knew what they could and should have known, or whether they actually believed the falsehoods to be true, is an issue to which we will we return in Sections 21.5 and 21.7 below.

21.1.1. Brexit Lies

In the UK referendum on the EU, the 'Leave' campaign made many tendentious claims.[10] But the one upon which we will focus here is the slogan emblazoned in huge letters on the side of the Vote Leave Battle Bus in which leaders of that campaign (including Boris Johnson and Michael Gove) traveled up and down the

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[9] A lie is, by definition, a falsehood that the speaker utters with the intent that the hearer believe it, the speaker knowing it to be untrue. Of course no outsider can really be sure what someone else knows, believes or intends. Some journalists hesitate to call Trump's falsehoods 'lies' for that reason (Baker 2017; Baker in NBC Meet the Press 2017). Others, after the fashion of a jury in a criminal trial, judge the weight of evidence to be such that beliefs and intentions can be ascribed and lies attributed accordingly (Fallows 2016; Dean Baquet 2016). Ironically, that is precisely the approach the alt-right website Breitbart suggested in relation to 'alternative facts' (discussed in section 21.9. below): Breitbart insisted that that is 'a harmless, and accurate, term in a legal setting, where each side of a dispute will lay out its own version of the facts for the court to decide' (Gabbatt 2017; see similarly Hughes in Stelter 2016). It is just worth mentioning however that any attorney who literally fabricated evidence – which is what the 'alternative facts' in question amount to – would of course be in contempt of court (Goodin 2010).

[10] Many of the Leave campaign's claims about immigration were highly dubious – particularly Nigel Farage's poster picturing long lines of would-be immigrants who were actually nowhere near Britain's borders. So too was the claim that Turkey was about to join the UK. And many of the 'sovereignty-undermining' court cases of which Leave campaigners complained involved decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, which is not part of the EU anyway (Grice 2017). Advocates of Leave claimed that the Remain campaign was built on Project Fear, which they claimed were lies about the economic consequences of Brexit. Evidence on that so far is mixed: in the first year since the referendum the stock market performed strongly (FTSE 2017), but Sterling dropped precipitously to a 31-year low against the US dollar in the immediate aftermath of the referendum and has only very partially recovered (Allen et al. 2016).

country. The slogan read: 'We send the EU £350 million a week. Let's fund our NHS instead. Vote Leave.'[11]

That claim was literally a lie in one respect, and it was seriously misleading in another. That was the official finding of UK Statistics Authority – *'an independent body operating at arm's length from government as a non-ministerial department directly accountable to Parliament'. And that finding was* released fully two months before the referendum vote and was widely reported during the rest of the campaign.[12]

The Leave campaign's claim was literally a lie in the sense that, while it is true that

> 'in 2014 the UK's official gross payments to the EU amounted to £19.1 billion [the basis for the '£350m per week claim], this amount of money was *never actually transferred* to the EU. Before the UK government transfers any money to the EU a rebate is applied. In 2014 the UK received a rebate of £4.4 billion. This means £14 billion was [all that was] transferred from the UK government to the EU in official payments.'[13]

That brings the amount actually transferred down, from £350m per week to just under £270m per week.

Even that sum is seriously misleading, however, because '£4.8 billion *came back* to the public sector in 2014.... Given these figures, ... the UK government's net contribution to the EU – ... the difference between the money it paid to the EU and the money it received – was £9.9 billion in 2014.'[14] That brings the actual net transfer down to just over £190m per week – just over half the £350m per week emblazoned on the side of the Vote Leave Battle Bus and featured prominently on its website and in its leaders' stump speeches throughout the referendum campaign.

After continued harassment from Vote Leave correspondents the Chair of UK Statistics Authority, Sir Andrew Dilnot, issued a further statement saying, '*The*

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[11] Of that claim, one *Financial Times* writer remarked, 'It is hard to think of a previous example in modern western politics of a campaign leading with a transparent untruth, maintaining it when refuted by independent experts, and going on to triumph anyway' (Harford 2017).

[12] Dilnot 2016a,b; UK Statistics Authority 2016. BBC 2016; Islam 2016a; Ship 2016.

[13] UK Statistics Authority 2016, emphasis added.

[14] UK Statistics Authority 2016, emphasis added.

continued use of a gross figure in contexts that imply it is a net figure is misleading and undermines trust in official statistics.'[15] *And even the chief funder of the Leave.UK campaign, Arron Banks, agreed in response that 'it's not smart to lie'.*[16] *Leaders of Vote Leave nonetheless persisted in these gross misrepresentations all the way to the end of the campaign*[17] *– only to repudiate them promptly thereafter.*[18]

21.1.2. Trump Lies

In the case of the Brexit Leave campaign, we have focused on one central lie. In the case of the Trump campaign, there is a plethora to choose among. Table 21.1 contains a *pot pourri* of some of Trump's more outlandish whoppers during the campaign, which he typically continued repeating even after they had been revealed as such.[19]

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[15] In what was, in the coded language of the British bureaucracy, a particularly stern rebuke to the Vote Leave harassers, Dilnot (2016b) upgraded this from 'potentially misleading' in his earlier announcement (Dilnot 2016a).

[16] Quoted in Islam 2016a.

[17] Gove, quoted in Islam 2016a. Boris Johnson insisted, 'We think it's relevant to keep people focused on the global figure, because that is the figure over which we have no control' (quoted in ITV 2016). Throughout the rest of the campaign that claim remained on the website of Vote Leave (Griffin 2016), the organization officially recognized by the UK Electoral Commission (2016a) as 'represent[ing] those campaigning for that outcome to the greatest extent'.

[18] That claim, along with everything else, was wiped from the Vote Leave website within days of the referendum (Griffin 2016). Gove, in launching his abortive bid for the Conservative Party leadership immediately after the election, reduced the sum promised to the NHS to £100m per week: 'Gove insisted he was not retreating from the slogan that implied all £350m would go to the NHS, but said that was likely to be the impression given' (Asthana and Mason 2016). Others – such as UKIP leader Nigel Farage immediately, and David Davis after he became Minister for Brexit – asserted they themselves had never made any such claim (Stone 2016b; Sparrow 2016a).

[19] One is reminded of Jonathan Swift's (1710) description of an English politician of his generation: 'his genius consists in nothing else but an inexhaustible fund of political lies, which he plentifully distributes every minute he speaks, and ... forgets, and consequently contradicts, the next half hour. He never yet considered whether any proposition were true or false, but whether it were convenient for the present minute or company to affirm or deny it.... I think he cannot with any justice be taxed with perjury... because he hath often fairly given public notice to the world that he believes in neither.'

Table 21.1: Fact Checking Trump's Lies

Trump claim	**Fact Check**[20]
'Our real unemployment rate is 42 percent' (18 Aug. 2015).	Actually, it is 5.3%. 'Yes, ... there are ... [42%] "not in the work force," but the vast majority of those people do not want to work. Most are retired or simply are not interested in working, such as stay-at-home parents.'[21]
'We can save as much as $300 billion a year' on prescription drugs purchased by Medicare (18 Feb. 2016).	Actually, '*total* spending in Medicare Part D [prescription drugs] in 2014 was only $78 billion'.
'On November 1... new numbers are coming out which will show 40, 50, 60 percent increases' in premiums for health insurance under the Affordable Care Act (26 Sept. 2016).	'This is a classic Trump claim. He cherry-picks the most extreme examples, applies them to the general population.... He says rates will increase by 40, 50, 60 percent — but the most common plans in the marketplace will see an average increase of 9 percent. The vast majority of marketplace enrollees receive government premium subsidies and will be protected from premium increases.'
'"There are scores of recent migrants inside our borders charged with terrorism," and "dozens and dozens more" per each case known publicly' (2 May 2016).	'The claim may be a ... reference to a list from the office of Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.) of 30 foreign-born individuals who were arrested on charges relating to terrorism in recent years.... The majority of the 30 cases

[20] All from Kessler et al. (2016) and links from that url, unless otherwise stated. Other factcheckers tell basically the same stories (Yuhas 2016).

[21] Kessler 2015.

	involved naturalized U.S. citizens – people who came to the U.S. as children or had arrived before 2011. We reviewed similar lists of cases from 2014 and 2015, involving 76 people charged with activities relating to foreign terrorist organizations. Of them, 57 were U.S. citizens, ... [either] naturalized [or] natural-born U.S. citizens..., and many of the naturalized citizens had arrived in the country as children.'
'No, you're wrong' that stop-and-frisk was ruled unconstitutional (28 Sept. 2016).	'In 2013, U.S. District Judge Shira A. Scheindlin, in the Southern District of New York..., issued a 195-page ruling... [holding] the city liable for violations of the plaintiffs' rights under the Fourth and 14th amendments..... The federal appeals panel denied the city's request to overturn Scheindlin's ruling.'
'"There were people over in New Jersey, a heavy Arab population, that were cheering as the buildings came down" on 9/11' (22 Nov. 2015).	Actually, 'Jerry Speziale, the police commissioner of Paterson, which has the second-largest Muslim population in the United States, [said], "That is totally false. That is patently false. That never happened. There were no flags burning, no one was dancing. That is bullshit."' In an attempt to defend his claim, 'the Trump campaign posted snippets of video clips from a local CBS New York City newscast at the time that reported on the arrest of "eight men" – not "thousands and thousands" – who were reported by neighbors as having celebrated the attack.'
'I was totally against the war in Iraq' from the beginning (23 Feb. 2016).	Actually, in an interview on 11 Sept. 2002, Howard Stern asked him, 'Are

	you for invading Iraq?' Trump replied, 'Yeah, I guess so.' The Fact Checker continues: 'Trump clearly was outspoken about his opposition starting in 2004... But by then — 17 months after the invasion — many Americans had turned against the war, making Trump's position not particularly unique. Trump has repeatedly cited his remarks in [an] August 2004 story to support his claim that he was "totally" against the war. In light of his repeated false claim citing this article, *Esquire* added an editor's note to [the online version of] its August 2004 story [that] reads: *"The following story was published in the August 2004 issue of Esquire. During the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump has repeatedly claimed to have been against the Iraq War from the beginning, and he has cited this story as proof. The Iraq War began in March 2003, more than a year before this story ran, thus nullifying Trump's timeline."'*

Beyond the particulars, the sheer frequency and brazenness of Trump's lying is utterly astonishing. Here is the *Washington Post*'s 2016 end-of-year assessment:

> There has never been a serial exaggerator in recent American politics like the president-elect. He not only consistently makes false claims but also repeats them, even though they have been proven wrong. He always insists he is right, no matter how little evidence he has for his claim or how easily his statement is debunked. During the campaign, Trump earned 59 Four-Pinocchio ratings ['whoppers' – the highest rating], compared with 7 for Hillary Clinton.[22]

[22] Kessler 2016a; for a summary of each see Kessler et al. 2016. George W. Bush, in contrast, 'subtly and systematically attempted to deceive the nation about most of his major policy proposals... while generally avoiding obviously false statements. Instead, Bush consistently uses well-designed phrases and strategically crafted arguments to distract, deceive and

Expressed in another way, '63 percent of the 91 Trump statements that the [*Washington Post*'s] Fact Checker has checked were given a Four Pinocchio rating — meaning they were... totally false'. To put that in perspective, a 'typical candidate gets Four Pinocchios somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of the time', and only '14.2 percent of Clinton's claims have been given Four Pinocchios'.[23]

Ordinarily factcheckers just focus on major claims, often ones referred to them by readers.[24] But the magazine *Politico* undertook to factcheck literally every one of Trump's statements for a week. They found that, during the four hours 43 minutes worth of speeches and interviews that Trump gave over the course of that week, he made 87 'misstatements, exaggerations or falsehoods'. That is a rate of one every 3.25 minutes.[25]

Trump's campaign responded to that report with characteristic bluster:

> There is a coordinated effort by the media elites and Hillary Clinton to shamelessly push their propaganda and distract from Crooked Hillary's lies and flailing campaign. All of these 'fact-check' questions can be easily verified, but that's not what blog sites like *Politico* want people to believe. Mr. Trump is standing with the people of America and against the rigged system insiders, and it's driving the media crazy. We will continue to speak the truth and communicate directly with the American people on issues they care most about, and we won't let the dishonest, liberal media intimidate us from

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mislead. The result is that all but the most careful listeners end up believing something completely untrue, while proving the President has lied is usually impossible' (Fritz, Keefer and Nyhan 2004, p. 4).

[23] Cillizza 2016; his numbers do not quite tally with Kessler's (2016), because his article was written just before the election, while a few factchecks were still underway. In keeping with his past practice, as president Trump earned Four Pinocchios for an interview with Time magazine about his lies (Kessler and Lee 2017).). Similarly, in his first formal meeting with congressional leaders after becoming president, Trump insistently repeated four-Pinocchio fictions about millions of illegal voters—and as president Trump launched a formal government investigation into that matter (Johnson and Zapotosky 2017), even after being called on the lies once again by fact checkers (Kessler 2017a; Lee 2017).

[24] Kessler 2013.

[25] Cheney et al. 2016.

> speaking candidly and from the heart. A Donald J. Trump presidency will make America great again.[26]

But the assertion that the facts bear out Trump's claims is, of course, just the big lie at work.[27] It certainly is true that *Politico* is a left-wing outlet. But facts are facts, and factchecking protocols are well established.[28]

21.1.3. How Lies Undercut the CJT

Now, in one way, all those lies might be neither here nor there from the point of view of the Condorcet Jury Theorem. Strictly speaking, all that the CJT says is that (as long as its assumptions are met) the majority among a large electorate will vote for the right outcome. And of course, it is logically possible that Leaving the EU was the correct outcome of the British referendum, whether or not the UK paid £350m per week to the EU, and that electing Trump was the correct outcome of the American election, whether or not thousands of Muslims in New Jersey celebrated the collapse of the Twin Towers on 9/11.

Formally, that response is perfectly appropriate. Epistemic theories of democracy are not public reason theories. Their emphasis is upon 'getting the outcome right', not 'giving one another good (true, honest, sincere) reasons'. Those two styles of democratic theory would respond very differently to lying in politics.

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[26] Jason Miller, Trump's senior communications advisor, quoted in Cheney et al. 2016.

[27] As was Trump's (2016a) assertion in his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention that 'here, at our convention, there will be no lies. We will honor the American people with the truth, and nothing else.' A *Washington Post* Fact Check identified 25 statements in that very speech as being either false or misleading (Kessler and Lee 2016).

[28] Poynter 2017. Trump continued making an average of 4.92 false or misleading statements a day for the first 100 days of his presidency, according to the *Washington Post* Fact Check (Lee, Kessler and Shapiro 2017).

Theories of public reason would see it as wrong in itself.[29] Epistemic theories of democracy see it as wrong only insofar as it is likely to compromise voters' capability to choose the correct outcome.

While it is possible for you to end up voting for the correct outcome even though your reasoning is based on false facts, it is unlikely that you will. If your reasoning is valid but based on false premises, your conclusions are more likely to be wrong than if they had been based on true premises, all else equal. Choices based on false reasoning are not necessarily incorrect, of course. But if they do end up being correct, that will be coincidental – a fluke. Philosophically we must not rule out flukes, but politically we should not count on them.[30]

False information designed to alter political attitudes is likely to undermine the reasoning of otherwise competent reasoners, leading them to incorrect conclusions and to vote in incorrect ways. Political lies, after all, attempt to change the way people behave in the voting booth. If those people are 'otherwise competent reasoners' (i.e., voters who would otherwise be likely to vote correctly[31]), the lies changing their votes would most often change them for the worse, epistemically speaking.

<u>21.2. In the US Anyway, the Big Liar Actually Lost</u>

Before we turn to the epistemically bad features of the campaigns themselves, it is worth having a closer look at the actual results of the popular vote.

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[29] When 'public reason' theorists sometimes talk of relaxing the 'sincerity' requirement, they do not mean to endorse uttering falsehoods but merely the giving of reasons for a course of action that would be genuinely good reasons for others to endorse it even if those are not the speaker's own reasons for so doing (Schwartzman 2011).

[30] A fluke is just that – a 'lucky stroke, an unexpected success, a piece of good luck' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, q.v. 'fluke' (n[3])). Gettier (1963) showed philosophers why they matter.

[31] I.e., assuming the standard CJT Competence assumption applies to them.

In the UK, Leave clearly won the majority of votes in the Brexit referendum. Furthermore, it almost certainly would have done so even if turnout had not been suppressed on the day by flooding that stranded many commuters and closed some Underground lines in strongly pro-Remain London.[32]

In the US, however, the plain fact of the matter is that Donald Trump lost the popular vote in the 2016 presidential election, and he did so by a relatively sizeable margin. Hilary Clinton beat him by almost 3 million votes. Out of a total of more than 136 million votes cast, that represents a margin of 2.10% in favour of Clinton.[33] Trump won the presidency due only to the vagaries of the archaic Electoral College. But from a CJT point of view, that is irrelevant – or so the argument might go.[34]

What that argument does not appreciate, however, is the fact that each of the states and territories represented in that Electoral College itself has a very large number of voters. Even the smallest, Wyoming, had over 250,000 people voting in the 2016 election.[35] With that number of voters we should expect the CJT to take full effect, not just in the electorate nationwide but also at the level of each of those state electorates. If the less truthful candidate were the wrong one to win, and people's votes tracked the truth with better-than-random accuracy, Trump should have lost in every (or virtually every) state – in which case the Electoral College would have been virtually unanimous in favour of Clinton. Needless to say, that did not happen in 2016.

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[32] Forster 2016. 'Leave' scored a clear popular majority of 1,269,501 votes; even if London turnout had been as high as the nationwide average, there would only have been under 100,000 extra London voters, not all of whom would have voted 'Remain' in any case (UK Electoral Commission 2016b).

[33] Wasserman 2017.

[34] It is also interesting – but likewise irrelevant, from a CJT perspective – that if some other vote aggregation procedure had been used instead of plurality rule Trump would quite likely have been defeated in the Republican Primary Elections before ever getting into the General Election. Maskin and Sen (2016) discuss the alternative of Condorcet pairwise comparison, but the same would be true of a Borda count.

[35] Wasserman 2017.

Of course, it is perfectly standard in most elections for one candidate to win some states and the other candidate to win others. That presumably just reflects the fact that the interests, values and priorities of people in those states differ. We have shown in chapters 13 and 14 how the CJT might modified to take account of such differences; the 2016 election is discussed in terms of that model in section 21.4 below.

For now, the crucial fact to note is simply this. The sheer fact the more truthful candidate won the majority of votes nationwide does not, in itself, vindicate the epistemic merits of the 2016 US presidential election. Some other explanation is required to account for the fact that she lost the majority of votes in so many places that, if voters were competent truth-trackers and truthfulness were all that mattered, she should have won easily.

21.3. Sending a Strategic Signal

Maybe the Brexit and Trump outcomes do not really represent the sincere will of the majority in another way. Maybe those outcomes represent, instead, attempts at strategic signaling that went wrong.

Here is one anecdote along those lines. A person who worked closely with Michael Gove and the Vote Leave campaign is reported as having said after the referendum, 'We weren't meant to win. That line, "you were only meant to blow the bloody doors off"[36] – it's true. The plan was to run the Remain side close enough to scare the EU into bigger concessions. None of us thought we were ever going to win.... It's all such a mess. I want a second referendum now.'[37]

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[36] The line from the film *The Italian Job* that Michael Gove's wife reportedly said to him the morning after the referendum (Vine 2016).

[37] Quoted in Sparrow 2016b.

Just how common such sentiments might be among those who voted to Leave can be surmised from a large-scale sample survey undertaken by the British Election Study after the referendum. In that survey some 6% of Leave voters reported regretting voting the way that they did. Furthermore, and tellingly for purposes of detecting strategic voting, the probability of voters saying they regretted voting to Leave was strongly associated with a voter's reporting that *ex ante* she or he did not believe that Leave would win. Fully one in ten Leave voters who thought ahead of the referendum that Leave had no chance of winning said, in that post-referendum survey, that they now regret voting for Leave.[38]

In the US, too, Trump was not expected to win, either by himself or by a great many of his supporters.[39] Many (probably most) of those who voted for Trump did so despite their perception that he had little chance of winning. The strategic voting question is this: just how many of those Trump voters voted for him precisely *because* they thought he was not going to win, and hence that voting for him would be a 'safe' protest vote?

Of course, a protest vote ('sending a message') is an expressive act as well; that is the topic of section 21.6 below. But in the circumstances here in view it counts as type of strategic voting, too. Unlike standard strategic voting where voters vote as if they were pivotal because they care about the outcome, in the case of 'expressive strategic voting' voters vote as they do precisely because they believe that they are *not* pivotal. The counterfactual test for identifying this type of strategic voting is that the voter would have voted otherwise if that vote would have determined the outcome of the election.[40] In that case, the vote is clearly a false indication of the voter's own true judgment of who is the best candidate.

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[38] British Election Study 2016. Economist 2016.

[39] Jacobs and House 2016. Kahn 2016.

[40] Of course in a large electorate it is almost never the case that any one person's vote will actually be decisive in this way. Still, that counterfactual constitutes the proper test to decide whether the vote is 'strategic' rather than 'sincere'.

We have little solid evidence of how many Trump votes were strategic in that sense.[41] We must largely rely on evidence that is anecdotal and circumstantial. But there is a fair bit of that sort of evidence. For one thing, Trump went into office with historically high 'unfavourable' ratings in the polls – and furthermore, those 'unfavourable' ratings actually increased as the date of his inauguration neared.[42] Anecdotal evidence suggests that at least some voters, distrustful of Clinton and fearing that she might win by a landslide, voted for Trump to deny her too great a mandate.[43] There is also reason to believe that Trump's 'movement' was always at least as much a protest movement as it was a movement that aimed at actually seizing power (protesting is one thing, actually governing is quite another...).[44] None of that is remotely conclusive, but all of it is consistent with the possibility that at least some of Trump voters might have voted for him purely strategically to send a protest message and would not have voted for him had they foreseen that he would actually win.

Further evidence along those same lines can be found in Trump voters' own assessment of his fitness for office. According to exit polls, an astonishing 23% of

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[41] Anecdotal evidence can be found in the compilation of tweets at '@Trump_Regrets' (Kassam 2017).

[42] Saad 2017.

[43] There is for example Lu's (2016) report of 'David Marcus [who] has recently argued that at least for him (as a resident of New York State), a Trump vote is the most reasonable form of protest vote. He doesn't like Trump. But he knows his state has no chance of going red, and he doesn't want Hillary Clinton to run away with a landslide popular vote.' Or for another example, Rhonnie Enterline (28, Sacramento, Calif.) explained to the *Washington Post*, 'If I weren't in California where my presidential vote doesn't count for much, I might not have voted for [Trump]. But, I thought, why not be part of sending a message to Washington?' (quoted in Kelly 2016).

[44] In his column the day after the election, Garrison Keillor (2016b) wrote: 'The Trumpers never expected their guy to actually win the thing, and that's their problem now. They wanted only to whoop and yell, boo at the H-word, wear profane T-shirts, maybe grab a crotch or two, jump in the RV with a couple of six-packs and go out and shoot some spotted owls. It was pleasure enough for them just to know that they were driving us wild with dismay — by "us," I mean librarians, children's authors, yoga practitioners, Unitarians, bird-watchers, people who make their own pasta, opera-goers, the grammar police, people who keep books on their shelves, that bunch. The Trumpers exulted in knowing we were tearing our hair out. They had our number, like a bratty kid who knows exactly how to make you grit your teeth and froth at the mouth.'

those who said they voted for Trump also said that they regarded him as 'not qualified to serve as president'; and 27% said that they did not think he 'has the temperament to serve effectively as president'.[45] Of course, it is perfectly possible that they voted genuinely intending to install him as president, notwithstanding his unsuitably, on the ground that they thought that the alternative candidate was more unsuitable. But another interpretation, equally or more plausible (particularly when set against the background fact that so many of his supporters did not expect Trump to win), is that at least some of those Trump voters were voting strategically, intending to send a message, not intending to send their candidate to the White House. It seems likely that at least some of them (who knows how many) might have voted otherwise, had they foreseen that Trump might actually win.

Here is one final bit of evidence (admittedly, circumstantial once again) of 'buyer's regret' surrounding Trump's election. The Republican campaign focused heavily on a promise to repeal the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare). In the Kaiser Foundation Tracking Poll just before the election, 69% of intending Republican voters said they wanted to 'repeal the entire law'; yet in the month after the election, that had dropped precipitously to 52%.[46] Nothing much had happened over the course of that month except the election. So that looks very much like a case of 'be careful what you wish for' – i.e., Republican voters regretting, if not necessarily their vote, anyway the consequences of their vote for their health insurance. Of course, their original vote may have been completely sincere and the regret may have set in only afterwards. But this pattern is also consistent with at least some Trump voters having voted strategically, intending only to 'send a message' and not sincerely intending that he should be elected president.

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[45] CNN 2016.
[46] Kirzinger et al. 2016.

Who knows how many Trump voters were actually thinking like that.[47] It may have been only a relatively small number. Still, even a small number of strategic voters might have made all the difference where the margin of victory is even smaller.

Furthermore, the number of voters engaged in this sort of 'expressive strategic voting' is likely to be larger than the number engaged in strategic voting of the more ordinary sort. Ordinary strategic voting is designed to change the result of the election, and the chances of succeeding in that are usually pretty slim. Expressive strategic voting, in contrast, is designed to send a protest message, and the success of that messaging does not depend on changing the result of the election. Knowing it is unlikely that her vote will change the outcome of the election dissuades a voter from engaging in strategic voting of the former sort but liberates her to engage in strategic voting of the latter sort, by voting for a candidate for whom she would not have supported had she expected her vote to be pivotal.

Notice finally that, given the logic of such expressive strategic voting, such votes are invariably concentrated on one side of politics – namely, the side that was generally expected to lose ahead of the voting. So it could well be true that, had everyone voted sincerely, neither Brexit and Trump would have won.

21.4. Differing Priorities

A highly plausible explanation of the – to many of us, surprising – outcomes of the UK EU referendum and the 2016 US presidential election is that voters on opposing sides simply had different interests, priorities or values from one another.

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[47] Polls taken around his 100 day anniversary in office show that 'just 4 percent of Trump's supporters say they would back someone else if there was a redo of the election' (Blake 2017d).

Empirically, that certainly seems true. The standard analysis of both cases is that the priorities of metropolitan elites simply differed from those of voters in the deindustrialized hinterlands. That much is plain from the electoral maps that reveal sharply geographically differentiated bases of support for Trump and Brexit respectively.[48] And it is confirmed by polls showing that voters for the two opposing sides identified very different issues as being the 'most important'.[49] This also explains why, despite winning the popular vote quite decisively, Clinton lost many swing states especially in the Rust Belt.

Normatively, the question is simply whether even the more modest claims for the epistemic merits of majority outcomes sketched in chapters 13 and 14 can be sustained with respect to the Trump and Brexit majorities. As we observed in those chapters, where people have different interests, priorities or values, each voter is voting on the basis of what he or she believes to be the correct outcome from the point of view of his or her own interests, priorities or values, which differ from those of other voters. In such circumstances, the most that the CJT can claim (which is still quite a lot, if it is true) is the majority winner will be the outcome that is correct from the point of view of the interests, priorities or values of the majority of voters – assuming that each voter is better than random at choosing the correct outcome for furthering his or her own interests, priorities or values.

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[48] For the US see < http://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/president> and for the UK see <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/eu-referendum/eu-referendum-result-visualisations>.

[49] In the 2016 US election, exit polls showed Trump voters were far more likely to say that 'immigration' or 'terrorism' were the most important issues, compared to Clinton voters (by 64% to 33% and 57% to 40% respectively); Clinton voters were far more likely to nominate 'foreign policy' (60% to 33%) and, oddly enough, 'the economy' (52% to 41%) (CNN 2016). In the UK Brexit referendum, an eve-of-poll survey found Leave voters were far more likely to say that 'immigration' and 'Britain's right to act independently' were 'most important to you in deciding how to vote' (by 35% to 2% and 45% to 18% respectively); Remain voters were far more likely to say 'jobs, investment and the economy generally' (by 60% to 8%) (YouGov 2016a).

But is that competence assumption warranted in the case of Brexit or Trump voters? Perhaps it is in terms of the values and priorities manifested by Leave voters in the Brexit referendum – Leave presumably is indeed the correct outcome if, as post-referendum polling suggests, the priorities of Leave voters were to restore British sovereignty over laws that applied in Britain, to reduce immigration (at least from within the EU) and to reduce or eliminate costly British contributions to the EU.[50] Whether Leave is in the objective *economic* interests of those who voted for it in other senses is another question, however. EU regional funds go disproportionately to regions that voted in favour Leave, which would of course result in those funds being cut off, for only the most salient example.[51] But if this referendum was less about the paycheck and more about identity, perhaps Brexit is just what the majority wanted.

Similarly in the US, it may be that Trump's diffuse slogan, 'Make America Great Again', resonated with his voters' values and priorities. Maybe his vague promises to prevent jobs from moving abroad and restricting immigration resonated with their values and priorities, too. Or anyway maybe it *sounded* as if voting for Trump was the right way for them to promote those values and priorities. Given how little detail he offered, however, it would have been hard to say for sure. Indeed, given how much he lied about everything else during the campaign, it would have been hard to say whether there was even a better than random chance of that being true.

Whatever doubts we might have whether voting for Trump was the right way for his supporters to promote their own values and priorities, those doubts are redoubled when it comes to the question of whether voting for him was the right way for his supporters best to serve their own objective interests. Again, Trump's

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[50] Luck 2016.

[51] Dean 2016. EU funds might be replaced by ones from the UK central government, of course; but if they were, then that would reduce the '£350m per week' savings from leaving EU that would be available for the UK government to spend elsewhere (on the NHS, as Leave promised, for example).

policy proposals were so sketchy and incompletely specified, at the time of the election that no voter could have had the remotest way of determining whether they were genuinely in his or her own objective interests. Given how much he lied about everything else, voters could not even be confident that there was a better-than-random chance that he would do what he promised, insofar as he did make any specific promises. And indeed, on many topics the balance of evidence available to them should have suggested that the policies Trump was most likely to pursue were not in their objective interests.

Consider for example the Republicans' promise to repeal Obamacare, one of the central and most specific planks of their campaign and one that Trump immediately acted upon in one of the first Executive Orders he signed upon assuming the presidency. The fact of the matter is that it is only because of Obamacare that a great many of Trump's poor and unemployed Rust Belt supporters have insurance to protect them against the extremely high costs of US medical care. The non-partisan Congressional Budget Office estimates that, on the initial Republican plan for repeal-and-replacement (H.R. 3762), 'the number of people who are uninsured would increase by 18 million in the first ... year following enactment of the bill' and 'premiums... would increase by 20 percent to 25 percent'.[52] Assuming that estimate is correct, the interests of a great many of Trump's voters in affordable health insurance will be ill served by that policy.[53]

That is the case not only objectively but subjectively as well, judging from focus groups with Trump supporters in Rust Belt states in December 2016. In those discussions,

> Several [participants] described their frustration with being forced to change plans annually to keep premiums down, losing their doctors in the process. But asked about policies found in several Republican plans to replace the Affordable Care Act — including a tax credit to help defray the cost of premiums, a tax-preferred savings account and a large deductible typical of

[52] CBO 2017.

[53] In certain clear respects, at least: perhaps in other respects they think of themselves as having a 'dignity' interest in being able to afford to pay for health insurance without a state subsidy.

catastrophic coverage — several of these Trump voters recoiled, calling such proposals 'not insurance at all.'[54]

There is one final way to try to make sense of how people might have seen voting for Trump or Brexit as being in their objective interests. Maybe they were thinking 'nothing could be worse than the status quo, and at least they will shake things up'. Trump put the point precisely like that in attempting (largely unsuccessfully) to appeal to black voters, asking, 'What the hell have you got to lose?'[55] Interviews with many of Trump's white working class supporters indicate that they, too, were thinking along those lines.[56] In Britain, many backed Brexit based on similar reasoning.[57]

Again, that may well be an accurate characterization of the thinking of some (perhaps many) Trump and Brexit voters. They voted for change simply out of deep despair with the status quo. But for the chapter 14 version of the CJT to apply, it must be the case that such voters were actually correct in thinking that 'nothing could be worse' than the status quo.[58] When terminal cancer patients volunteer to participate in trials of new drugs, bioethicists worry that the quality of their consent might be compromised by the 'therapeutic illusion', leading them to suppose that what the researchers intend only as an experiment with a new drug might actually have positive therapeutic effects.[59] From the point of view of willing research subjects, however, it is not at all a bad bet: after all, there is some chance (however

[54] Altman 2017.

[55] Bump 2016. Newt Gingrich summarized the 'Principles of Trumpism' to the Heritage Foundation a month after the election in the phrase 'he repeated again and again: "Donald Trump's gonna kick over the table"' (Gingrich 2016, quoted in Godfrey 2016).

[56] Kelly 2016.

[57] In the postmortems on Brexit, one 62-year old London jobseeker was quoted as saying, 'Leaving the EU might make my life shit, but it's shit anyway. So how much worse can it get? I've got nothing to lose.... ' (Martin Parker, quoted in Ryan 2016).

[58] A more sophisticated, and more plausible, version of this line of thought would be couched in terms of 'the probability is sufficiently high that they will do something sufficiently better for me than the status quo'. Maybe that is what some supporters of Trump and Brexit were thinking; but the more extreme formulation in the text is how they actually put it.

[59] Casarett 2016.

small) that the drug will work; and terminally ill cancer patients genuinely do have nothing to lose. Does anyone seriously believe that Trump and Brexit voters can say the same with anything like the same confidence?[60]

Thus, it may well be that their distinctive priorities, values and interests drove a majority of voters to support Trump in the US and Brexit in the UK, contrary to the priorities, values and interests of the rest of the electorate. But whether the moderately happy CJT conclusion we adduced in chapters 13 and 14 follows is in doubt. Certainly, as regards their interests, and perhaps even their values and priorities, it is far from clear that voting for Trump or Brexit really was indeed the correct way for those people to best further their own objectives.

21.5. Opinion Leaders Lied, and Voters Believed Them

Let us now turn our attention to the campaigns and their epistemic flaws. Trump and leaders of the Brexit Leave campaign lied; we know that from section 21.1 above. We also know that a lot of people paid attention to what they said. Surveys found, curiously enough, that Boris Johnson (who had previously been twice fired for lying) was the political leader most trusted by Britons who voted to Leave the EU.[61] And Donald Trump, whose preferred mode of messaging is the 140-character tweet, has over 20 million Twitter followers and 'an audience attentiveness score of

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[60] Bump 2016. Ehrenfreund 2016. A former George W. Bush speechwriter summarizes the strategy thusly: 'Because poor neighborhoods can't get any worse, why not try something new? Because America is already a jihadist battleground, why not take a radical and discriminatory new direction on immigration? Because the planet is in chaos, why not entirely reorient American foreign policy toward alliances and great power rivals? Things, after all, can't get any worse.' Michael Gerson then pointedly adds: 'The problem is: Things can get a lot worse, and quickly' (quoted in Tumulty and Nakamura 2017).

[61] YouGov 2016b. In previous incarnations, Johnson had 'been sacked twice, and on both occasions ... for dishonesty: once by the *Times* for making up a quote, and again by the former Tory leader Michael Howard, for lying to his face about an extramarital affair' (Freedland 2016; Major 2016).

75%'.[62] In short, in both the UK and US cases there were strong opinion leaders who lied.

But did the voters actually believe their lies? In the UK, we have survey evidence showing that they did. A poll conducted shortly before the referendum found that 47% of all respondents believed to be true the claim that 'Britain sends £350 million a week to the European Union', and only 39% believed it to be false.[63] Furthermore, in polling after the referendum, nearly one in five Leave voters named that claim as their *primary reason* for voting to Leave the EU.[64]

We do not have systematic polling in the US pertaining to each of Trump's many lies. But we do have anecdotal evidence that at least some of his voters genuinely believed at least some of the 'fake news' promulgated by Trump and his supporters. Perhaps the most famous example concerns the 'Pizzagate' myth, generated by social media and subsequently fueled by a tweet from Michael G. Flynn, a member of Trump's transition team and son of Trump's national security advisor designate at the time. That story linked 'Hillary Clinton, her campaign chairman and the owner of [the pizza shop] Comet Ping Pong to [an] alleged sex-slave conspiracy'.[65] A North Carolina man, Edgar Maddison Welch, 'became so fixated on [that] fake news story that he drove [to Washington]... determined to take action.... For 45 minutes... Welch, cradling an AR-15 assault-style rifle, roamed the Comet Ping Pong pizza restaurant looking to prove an Internet conspiracy theory.... With D.C. police amassing outside..., Welch finally walked out with his hands up — but not before he finished his search. He had come to rescue the children, court papers say he later told police, and now was convinced that none was being harmed there.'[66]

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[62] According to TwitterCounter (2017).

[63] Ipsos MORI 2016, p. 6.

[64] Luck 2016, p. 8.

[65] According to one report, 'despite being widely debunked and described by the police as "fictitious" [that story] was still believed by 9% of registered voters' (Naughton 2017).

[66] Hermann et al. 2016. *Washington Post* Editorial Board 2016.

To such anecdotal evidence, we can add a certain amount of polling data. Some pertain to specific statements on which Trump backers insistently endorse his version of the facts despite clear evidence it is false. Here are two examples. In a post-election poll, 52% of Republicans said that Trump really won the popular vote.[67] And in another post-inauguration poll, respondents were shown two photos of the Washington Mall, one taken during Obama's 2009 inauguration and the other taken during Trump's 2017 inauguration; when asked in which photo there were more people, 15% of Trump supporters denied the clear evidence of their own eyes and asserted that the 2017 photo showed more people on the Mall.[68]

We can add to that other polling data on the more general question of whether voters consider each of the candidates as 'honest and trustworthy'. Neither Trump nor Clinton scored highly on that among the electorate as a whole.[69] But each did well among his or her own voters.[70] Fully 94% of Trump voters reported believing Trump to be 'honest and trustworthy', despite his having been shown to have been lying so repeatedly.[71] Perhaps respondents did not believe Trump's specific assertions, but they nonetheless thought him to be speaking some 'deeper truth'. We will discuss that possibility in section 21.7.2 below. Still, the responses taken at face value seem to constitute at least prima facie evidence that a large proportion his supporters actually believed Donald Trump's many lies.

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[67] Oliver and Wood 2016.

[68] Schaffner and Luks 2017. Whether people really believed that, or whether they were just saying that in order to support Trump, is of course an open question. Other evidence suggests that 'partisan bias' (and motivated reasoning and confirmation bias more generally) is overcome with only rather modest 'accuracy incentives' (Prior et al. 2015).

[69] Clinton by 64% to 36%, Trump by 64% to 33% (CNN 2016). But when other polls asked which candidate they regarded as more honest, around 45% persistently said 'Trump' – astonishingly enough, given the evidence reported in section 21.1.2 above (Cillizza 2016).

[70] 94% of Trump voters considered him 'honest and trustworthy', as did the same percentage of Clinton voters her. When exit polls asked 'which candidate is honest?' only 29% of all voters responded 'neither is' (CNN 2016).

[71] CNN 2016. A month into his presidency, 78% of Republicans still said they trusted Trump rather than the media 'to tell the truth about important issues' (Sargent 2017a). As Jonathan Swift (1710) quipped in an earlier era, 'as the vilest writer hath his readers, so the greatest liar hath his believers'.

In chapter 11 above we have discussed the phenomenon of opinion leadership from a CJT perspective. There we argue that, if voters follow opinion leaders rather than exercising their own independent judgment, those voters are (at best) collectively only as likely to be correct as their opinion leader is. If an opinion leader is wrong (whether innocently or intentionally so) in the guidance he provides, voters following him will be misled accordingly and the wrong outcome may well win a majority as a result.

In terms of the Condorcet Jury Theorem as it is standardly construed, the fault lies with a failure of the Independence Assumption as applied to voters who follow opinion leaders. But in the case of opinion leaders who deliberately lie, there is a second failing as well – a second-order failure of Sincerity. In our previous discussions, we have implicitly been assuming that opinion leaders at least make a good-faith effort to lead their followers to what they themselves genuinely believe to be correct outcomes. Opinion leaders might be wrong about that and accidentally mislead their followers in consequence. But when they deliberately lie, they intentionally mislead their followers – certainly in what to believe, and quite probably in how to vote as well.

Formally, nothing changes in the chapter 11 analysis of opinion leadership, of course. The probability that the majority of an opinion leader's faithful followers supports the correct outcome is still fixed by the probability that the opinion leader himself will support the correct outcome. The only difference is that, with lying opinion leaders, that probability is likely to be lower than with truthful opinion leaders. The analytics are identical – the upshot is merely more depressing.

In chapter 11 we were relatively sanguine about the dangers of opinion leadership. Our grounds were that the overall effects of opinion leadership would be likely to cancel out if (a) there are multiple, independent opinion leaders commanding different segments of the electorate as followers or (b) there are many independent, lower-level opinion leaders mediating the influence of top-level opinion leaders, then. But those happy predictions fail when top-level opinion

leaders have direct, unmediated access to voters, via Twitter and Facebook and such like, or when too many opinion leaders are interconnected with one another and send the same message. Both were the case, definitely with the 2016 US presidential election and arguably with the UK EU referendum as well – again, making the implications for chapter 11's analytics more depressing as applied to those two cases.

21.6. Affective Explanations

In Section 21.3, we already briefly looked at strategic protest voting – voters hoping to send a 'warning shot' message without changing the outcomes. But what precisely do these voters intend to communicate? Here we will examine a suite of 'affective' explanations for the outcomes of the two 2016 elections under discussion.

These explanations are sometimes lumped together under the heading of 'expressive voting'.[72] The essence of that claim is that a voter votes to 'express' something (which can be accomplished by the sheer act of voting in itself) rather than for any consequentialist reasons that depend on his or her vote actually changing the outcome of the election.

For CJT purposes, however, it matters less whether people are voting for consequentialist or non-consequentialist reasons. What matters is instead what voters are trying to express – namely, whether or not they are expressing, through their votes, choices that they think to be tracking the *truth*. As we have argued in section 4.3.3 above, it is perfectly coherent for a voter to vote perfectly truthfully and sincerely for what he or she believes should be the correct outcome of the election, without being under any misapprehension whatsoever that his or her vote has any realistic chance of causing that outcome to prevail. Hence in our discussion of

[72] Brennan and Lomasky 1993.

affective voting we will be sensitive to what affects were involved and what truth value, if any, they might have.

21.6.1. Expressing Emotions

In naming 'post-truth' its word of the year for 2016, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'.[73]

The appeal to emotion, and a corresponding indifference to facts, is far from new in politics, of course.[74] But in the 2016 US presidential election, it was carried to new heights. As President Obama remarked of his successor, 'Trump understands the new ecosystem, in which facts and truth don't matter. You attract attention, rouse emotions, and then move on. You can surf those emotions.'[75]

Trump spokespeople sometimes forthrightly admitted that they were playing on emotions that were not only ungrounded in facts but indeed flatly contrary to them. Take for example this CNN interview with Newt Gingrich. When the interviewer challenged Trump's false claims about soaring crime rates, Gingrich replied,

> 'The average American — I'll bet you this morning — does not think crime is down, does not think they are safer.'
>
> 'But we *are* safer and it *is* down', says [the interviewer], citing FBI data to that effect.

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[73] Flood 2016.

[74] As Elizabeth Drew commented on Ronald Reagan's first tilt at the presidency in 1976, his appeal had 'to do not with competence at governing but with the emotion he evokes. Reagan lets people get out their anger and frustration, their feeling of being misunderstood and mishandled by those who have run our government, their impatience with taxes and with the poor and the weak, their impulse to deal with the world's troublemakers by employing the stratagem of a punch in the nose' (quoted in Rich 2016).

[75] Obama 2016.

> 'No', says Gingrich. 'That's your view.... What I said is also a fact', Gingrich continues, as if patiently explaining something obvious to a child. 'The current view is that liberals have a whole set of statistics that theoretically might be right, but it's not where human beings are.'
>
> Confronted with the fact that the crime statistics cited come from the FBI — hardly a 'liberal' organization — Gingrich makes it clear that *he doesn't care*. 'No, but what I said is equally true. People feel more threatened. As a political candidate, I'll go with how people feel, and I'll let you go with the theoreticians.'[76]

In the UK, Brexit campaigners deliberately took a leaf from the early Trump campaign in that respect. Arron Banks, the chief financial backer of the Leave.EU campaign, attributed its success to hiring a Washington firm that taught them that 'facts don't work'. He went on to say, 'The Remain campaign featured fact, fact, fact, fact, fact. It just doesn't work. You have got to connect with people emotionally. It's the Trump success', both in the primary elections of which Banks was speaking and in the general election that followed.[77] Trump's strategy in that respect was mimicked by the Leave campaign in the Brexit referendum.

How ought we to evaluate those emotional appeals in terms of the Condorcet Jury Theorem? One approach, along the lines of chapter 13 above, might be to say that, so long as people are more likely than not to be correct about what worries them and what it would take to ease those concerns, the vote of the majority is highly likely to point to the correct outcome for purposes of easing the majority's concerns. But when people's worries are based on false facts, then there seems little reason to believe that people will indeed be more likely than not to be correct (or even better than random) about what actions would be best suited to easing their concerns.

[76] Loofbourow 2016.
[77] Booth et al. 2016.

21.6.2. Expressing Identity

Certainly one aspect of identity – 'party identity' – ended up being central to Trump's victory. During the campaign it did not look as if it was going to be. Republicans, both elite and mass, had been wary of supporting Trump after what many regarded as his 'hostile takeover' of their party. Former Republican presidents refused to endorse him; Barry Goldwater's daughter denounced him. Yet, in the end Republican voters came around. In the wake of the dual gratuitous interventions by the FBI Director late in the campaign, undecided Republican voters reluctantly got behind their party's candidate – and that seems to have been the main reason the polls (which Clinton had been leading comfortably throughout the previous month) closed so dramatically in the closing days of the campaign.[78] Come election day, exit polls showed the same proportion of self-identifying Republicans voting for Trump as of self-identifying Democrats voting for Clinton.[79]

That self-identifying Republicans should identify with the Republican candidate is one thing. That economically hard-pressed Rust Belt voters should identify with the occupant of a gold-plated penthouse atop a Manhattan mini-skyscraper bearing his own name is quite another. Personal style is a large part of the story, perhaps. Whatever personality disorder drives Trump, it leads him to behave in ways reminiscent of a short-order cook in a Tuscaloosa greasy-spoon restaurant – behaviour that clearly resonates with a large swathe of voters in flyover America.[80] That is how an 81-year-old Pennsylvania restaurant owner explains Trump's appeal to so many of his formerly Democratic customers: 'With the

[78] Silver 2016.
[79] CNN 2016.
[80] McAdams 2016. James 2016.

majority of them, I think it was his ordinary man's conversation. It wasn't rehearsed. He said it like he felt it was. They all identified with the guy.'[81]

In addition to Trump's presentational style – his limited vocabulary, fractured grammar, persistent misspellings – there is something else that attracted Rust Belt voters.[82] That is what sociologists term the 'hidden injuries of class'.[83]

> Trump's Twitter rants – their explosive and unmediated primal fury – tap into a deeper wellspring than just economic anxiety. His in-the-moment, consequence-free, grandly unedited Twitter style is a potent fantasy for working-class people who have to step cautiously through the daily discouragements of their lives....
>
> These are people who lack agency. Who are resigned to a bite-your-tongue-and-take-crap relationship with their world; a battery of daily demeanments. These come from a brew of horrendous bosses; credit-stealing and slothful coworkers; disconnected and oblivious senior management; overbearing in-laws; demanding children; idiot foremen; and non-responsive insurance company bureaucrats (who themselves have no agency.)
>
> Enter Trump. Every time he responds to a big attack or a micro-slight, however undisciplined and dramatically over-aggrieved it might be, the cathartic joy meter lights up like the Christmas tree in the lobby of Trump Tower.
>
> Good for you, Donald. You don't take any shit. If I were a billionaire neither would I.[84]

Needless to say, the sheer fact that Donald Trump's Twitter tantrums make left-behind voters feel good – the fact that he does outrageous things that they wish they

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[81] Quoted in McCarthy 2017. Similarly, a woman at a Trump rally explained that 'he's down to our level. He's not like past presidents who prepare a beautiful speech but it's not coming from the heart. He speaks it like it is' (quoted in Pilkington 2016).

[82] Milbank 2017. Sclanfani 2017.

[83] Sennett and Cobb 1993; Jütten 2017. The president of the American Enterprise Institute explains it in terms of how 'people are stripped of their sense of dignity... when they feel superfluous to society, when they feel that they are not needed... Donald Trump was talking to people in the parts of America that have been truly forgotten and left behind now for generations in a way that... helped people understand that he understood...' (quoted in Capehart 2017). For more in-depth analyses of the current American malaise in these terms, see Hochschild (2016) and Isenberg (2016).

[84] Hanft 2016.

could do – in no way proves that he is the *correct* candidate to support, even just in terms of their promoting their own values and priorities much less their interests.

Some political theorists say that it is good, from a democratic point of view, if people elect representatives who are 'just like themselves'. The reason they say that is that, if voters do so, their representatives in the legislature are likely to vote just the same way as their constituents would have done had they been there.[85] There is no reason to think that that is true of Trump, however. Strongly though his supporters might identify with Trump's *behaviour* and his *personal style*, that is no guarantee whatsoever of any identity of interests, values or policy preferences or priorities. If voters use these as cues (in ways we discuss in chapter 12), they misfire spectacularly.

At best, any association is random. And it might be worse than that, insofar as whatever it is in Trump's behaviour that his supporters see as akin to their own actually has a much different source (if, for example, he is just a psychologically disturbed rich kid). Hence a chapter 13 style CJT defence of the epistemic merits of a majority in favour of his election seems on shaky ground in this respect as well.

21.6.3. Having Fun

Another broadly affective explanation of the Trump success may be just this. Perhaps his supporters did not believe, or even care, what he was saying. Maybe they were just having fun. Maybe it was purely entertainment, and in voting for Trump they were saying nothing more than they 'want the show to go on' – just as they might 'vote' for a reality television contestant who amuses them to remain on the show for another week. And maybe the same was true to a lesser extent with the

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[85] Miller and Stokes 1963.

UK Brexit referendum, where everyone remarks upon how one of the leading Leave campaigners, Boris Johnson, insistently plays the part of a 'clown' and a 'buffoon'.[86]

Again, the blurring of 'news' and 'entertainment' is far from new. Just recall the 'yellow journalism' that sold all those Pulitzer and Hearst newspapers in the 1890s. Or, in more recent times, think of the sorts of 'newspapers' that you see at supermarket checkout counters.[87] No one buys them because they believe the truth of their stories of alien abduction or Martians landing in Soldier's Field. People buy them for their entertainment value, not their news value. Or anyway, most people do.

Arguably the Trump phenomenon was largely about entertainment. Undoubtedly that was so in its early stages.[88] Right throughout the campaign, however, 'cable news networks routinely broadcast Trump rallies not for their civic content but for their ratings boost', as Trump's surrogate Newt Gingrich boasted in an address on 'The Principles of Trumpism' to the right-wing Heritage Foundation a month after the election. [89]

Much about Trump's rallies did indeed suggest that they were about entertainment more than anything else. The pulsating old rock anthems and the call-response chants remind one of nothing more than a small town high school

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[86] Frayer 2016.

[87] 'An army of crazed monkeys. John Belushi's drug dealer. Lee Harvey Oswald's autopsy photo. The contents of Henry Kissinger's trash cans. A woman who used her son's face as an ashtray. The presidential candidacy of Donald Trump... Over the years, an array of jaw-dropping oddities has drawn readers to the *National Enquirer*... Now it is the real estate developer's turn on top' (Gillette 2016). But the *National Enquirer* is the semi-respectable face of supermarket tabloids. For an even more extreme case, consider the *Weekly World News* (Heller 2014).

[88] Here is the report of CNN interviews with 150 Trump supporters early in the campaign: 'When he hit the campaign trail [immediately after announcing his candidacy], the crowds quickly swelled. Thousands were soon turning up at school gymnasiums, auditoriums and local event halls to see Trump in person, forming long, winding lines that often spilled into overflow rooms. In the first weeks and months of Trump's campaign, plenty of attendees admitted they were there to catch a glimpse of the former host of the "The Apprentice" – maybe even shake hands with the TV star' (Lee et al. 2016).

[89] Vyse (2016), glossing Gingrich (2016). See also Halloway 2016. By one estimate, Trump received $2 billion worth of free media coverage during the first half of the primary election campaign alone (Confessore and Yourish 2016).

football pep rally (an impression strongly reinforced by the fact that Trump's rallies were indeed typically held in pretty small venues in pretty small towns). Most tellingly, perhaps, is the fact that in his seemingly extemporaneous rambles at those events Trump himself repeatedly made much of the fact that everyone was 'having fun'.

Trump often opened his rallies a rhetorical question, 'Is there anyplace more fun to be than at a Trump rally?'[90] He repeated it often. As a protestor was being roughly evicted from one of his rallies, Trump famously said, 'Try not to hurt him [but] if you do I'll defend you in court...' – immediately adding, once again, 'Are Trump rallies the most fun? We're having a good time.'[91] Recalling the rally in which he famously instructed a mother with a crying baby to leave the room, Trump conjured up this image in his mind's eye: 'Everyone's having fun, we're smiling, I'm waving. Everyone's having fun...'[92]

Of course, it's perfectly possible for political rallies to be genuinely enjoyable without their being *nothing but* pure entertainment. Still, one highly plausible way of reading Trump's rallies, and his campaign more generally, would be as pure entertainment. To adapt a pithy phrase from a former Australian prime minister, Trump simply 'threw the switch to vaudeville'.[93]

Sometimes entertainment can have cognitive content. It does in the case of satirical skits or jokes, for example.[94] Perhaps certain of the entertainment aspects of Trump's campaign, too, contain the kernels of some genuine truths.[95] Clearly, participants' sense of identity can sometimes be accurately represented and reinforced (as well, of course, as being sometimes created *de novo*) through pep rallies, whether high school football teams or for presidential candidates. If the

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[90] Kizenko 2016.
[91] Moyer, Starrs and Larimer 2016. Blake 2016.
[92] Flores 2016.
[93] Paul Keating, quoted in Kelly (2009, p. 35).
[94] People are counting on that heavily in the wake of Trump's victory: as the cover of *Atlantic Monthly* put it, 'Can Satire Save the Republic?' (C. Jones 2017).
[95] That is to say, maybe they were akin to the 'true fictions' discussed in section 21.7.2 below.

entertainment aspects of the Trump campaign somehow accurately conveyed the interests, values or priorities between the candidate and his audience, then perhaps a CJT story of sorts can be told about them for that reason as well (along the lines of chapter 13 and section 21.4 above).

Insofar as people embraced the Trump campaign 'just for fun', however, they were simply not being serious.[96] And from an epistemic point of view, their votes for their favourite performer should not be taken seriously, in deciding who should occupy a far more consequential role than that.

21.7. Epistemic Insouciance

Why did voters let political actors get away with falsehoods and lies? Quassim Cassam has coined the helpful term 'epistemic insouciance'. 'Insouciance in the ordinary sense [suggests] unconcern, carelessness or indifference.' Epistemic insouciance, 'the form of insouciance to which,' Cassam believes, 'some politicians are prone, is indifference or unconcern with respect to whether their claims are adequately grounded in reality or in the best available evidence.'[97]

Harry Frankfurt more prosaically calls it 'bullshit'. Here is how he distinguishes that from lying (what Cassam would call 'epistemic malevolence', the subject of the section 21.9 below):

> When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he consider his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, ... except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with

[96] Mel Brooks describes Trump as 'just a song-and-dance man' who 'didn't expect to win' the election. 'He didn't take it seriously. Three hundred million Americans didn't take it seriously. Now they do' (quoted in Queenan 2017).

[97] Cassam 2016, p. 2.

> what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.[98]

Donald Trump displays this attitude in spades.[99] He simply 'doesn't seem to care whether [his assertions] can be proven false five minutes later'.[100]

> Donald Trump either cannot tell the difference between truth and lies, or he knows the difference but does not care. Tiniest example: On a single day during the campaign, Trump claimed that the National Football League had sent him a letter complaining that the presidential-debate schedule conflicted with NFL games (which the NFL immediately denied), and then he said the Koch brothers had begged him to accept their donations (which they also flat-out denied).
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> Most people would hesitate before telling *easily disprovable* lies like these, much as shoplifters would hesitate if the store owner is looking at them. Most people are fazed if caught in an outright lie. But in these cases and others, Trump never blinked. .... David Fahrenthold (and Robert O'Harrow) of *The Washington Post* offered astonishing documentation [from his testimony in a 2007 lawsuit he had brought against an unflattering biographer] of Trump being caught in a long string of business-related lies and simply not caring.[101]

Here of course we are concerned to explain the outcomes of the Brexit referendum and the 2016 US presidential election. Hence, we are concerned with the attitudes not only of leaders but also of their followers. To what extent might the success of campaigns based on lies in those two cases reflect 'epistemic insouciance' on the part of voters, as well as of their leaders?[102]

Consider what it would mean, for the Condorcet Jury Theorem, if that were thoroughgoingly true. If voters were completely indifferent to the truth when

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[98] Frankfurt 1988p. 131.

[99] Frankfurt (2016) himself supposes Trump more often to be lying, on the grounds that he either knew or could and should have known his statements were untrue. But by Frankfurt's own definition, someone can remain a bullshitter whilst saying all sorts of things knowing them to be untrue, just so long as he does not say them *because* they are untrue.

[100] Fallows in Rehm (2016b). See similarly Swift's (1710) description of English politicians of his day.

[101] Fallows 2016. Fahrenthold and O'Harrow 2016.

[102] We analyze the related phenomenon of 'epistemic agnosticism' among the mass public in section 21.10 below.

casting their ballots, then no epistemic claims can be made on behalf of the outcome of the voting. The fact that the majority voted one way or another would be of epistemically no moment, if voters were not even trying to track the truth in the way that they voted.

To foreshadow: We shall show that voters may well have displayed a fair bit of epistemic insouciance in both the British referendum and the American election of 2016. As we shall also show, however, there are various different ways of and reasons for being indifferent to the truth of politicians' utterances. If voters displayed epistemic insouciance toward some facts but not others, then there might be ways in which some modest CJT-style epistemic claims for the merits of the majority could be vindicated. We doubt that the empirical facts are such in order for them to be so; but we acknowledge it as possible.

21.7.1. Voters Were Indifferent on the Topics of the Lies

One version of the epistemic insouciance argument connects with our discussion of people's 'different priorities' in section 21.4 above, and we can dismiss it equally quickly.

The speculation here is that voters may have been prepared to overlook certain of politicians' lies because they were indifferent to the things about which the politicians were caught lying. Perhaps people just did not care about those things; and they thought the politicians were actually telling truth on those matters that genuinely concerned them. As one commentator speculated, 'Who cared if Trump denied sexually harassing women, when he was so boldly telling the truth about the fear, rage, racism, xenophobia and misogyny that many of his supporters felt but

had hesitated to voice?'[103] This is an argument often advanced by Trump's surrogates (albeit sometimes in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary).[104]

That explanation does not particularly ring true of the 2016 American election, however. The reason is simply that Trump lied about so very many things, it is hard to believe that any given voter simply did not care about *any* of them. Indeed, impartial factcheckers caught him lying about virtually every issue central to his campaign.[105] Trump did not lie just about things of peripheral interest to his supporters. His lies would have undercut all the central messages of his own campaign, or anyway they would have done so for anyone prepared to accept incontrovertible evidence from impartial factcheckers.

Neither does this explanation ring particularly true of the Brexit referendum. According to post-referendum polling, the lie upon which we have here been focusing – that the UK was sending £350m per week to the EU – was the principal reason behind the votes of fully one in five of Leave voters, and presumably at least a secondary consideration for a great many others.[106] Again, what was being lied about was hardly a peripheral issue for Leave voters.

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[103] Quoted in Prose 2016. Another woman, asked 'about the impact on her daughter of potentially having someone in the White House who brags about groping women's genitals', replied: 'I'll teach my own daughter to be independent and stand up for herself; that's my job, not the president's' (quoted in Pilkington 2016).

[104] Reneging on Trump's campaign promise to release his tax returns as soon as his IRS audit was over, his spokesperson Kellyanne Conway announced two days after his inauguration that 'he's not going to release his tax returns' explaining, 'People don't care'. A Washington Post-ABC poll just the week before 'showed that Trump's continued refusal to release his tax returns continued to be an unpopular decision, with 74 percent of Americans saying he should make the documents public, including 53 percent of Republicans' (Wagner 2017). Perhaps more plausibly, Newt Gingrich said in response to Trump's disastrous first week in office, 'The average American isn't paying attention to this stuff. They are going to look around in late 2019 and early 2020 and ask themselves if they are doing better. If the answer's yes, they are going to say, "Cool, give me some more." .... There are two things he's got to do between now and 2020: He has to keep America safe and create a lot of jobs.... If he does those two things, everything else is noise' (quoted in Baker et al. 2017).

[105] Kessler et al. 2016.

[106] Luck 2016.

21.7.2. True Fictions

A second version of the epistemic insouciance argument turns on a notion of 'true fictions'.

Ronald Reagan – to whom Donald Trump bears many biographical and behavioural similarities, despite their stark ideological differences[107] – was a master of 'true fictions'. Reagan was forever couching his political points in terms of anecdotes.[108] Often they were made up or half-remembered plots of movies he had once seen.[109] The stories were apocryphal – 'of doubtful authenticity; spurious, fictitious, false; fabulous, mythical'.[110] But they spoke to a deeper truth. They were stories that 'should be true', even they were not. Like 'myths', Reagan's false stories evocatively encapsulated some generalities that were arguably true, even if the particular anecdotes themselves were not.[111]

Trump's falsehoods are importantly different in many ways from Reagan's anecdotes, however.[112] The latter were offered purely as illustrative of some more general principles that were supposed to stand in their own right. The truth of those general principles did not depend in any way on the truth of the anecdotes. The propositions espoused in Trump's lies, in contrast, purport to provide evidentiary

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[107] Rich 2016.

[108] As did, famously, Lincoln before him (Masur 2012).

[109] As in the case of a story he told to a 1983 meeting of Congressional Medal of Honor winners, of a World War II pilot who remained in his crippled airplane as it crashed rather than letting his injured gunner die alone. It was in fact the storyline of a 1944 move, *A Wing and a Prayer*. When 'asked if anyone bothered to check the accuracy of accounts presented as factual in presidential speeches', Reagan's Press Secretary replied: 'If you tell the same story five times, it's true' (Cannon 1991, p. 39-40).

[110] As in the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition.

[111] Hanska 2012. For an insightful appreciation of the role that 'fanciful imagination' might play in 'the growth of empirical knowledge' see Novitz (1980). See Wilson and Sperber (2012) on the related phenomenon of 'loose uses of language'.

[112] Among them, 'Reagan's stories were often about the distant past or unspecified people illustrating themes he wanted to stress. Trump's tweets, by contrast, often include falsehoods about recent, clearly specified events. And, unlike Trump, the more upbeat Reagan didn't use his words as retribution for personal slights' (Decker 2016).

support for the positions he espouses, in which case it genuinely *does* matter if (as is so often the case) they are palpably false.

Another version of that sort of argument might be offered to vindicate Trump's lies, after a fashion. That version is based on the notion of 'truthful hyperbole' – a non-sequitur that Trump (or his ghostwriter) coined in his book *The Art of the Deal*.[113] 'The ... key to the way I promote', Trump writes, 'is bravado. I play to people's fantasies.... People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole. It's an innocent form of exaggeration....'[114] As Aristotle says in the *Poetics*, when appealing to 'the vulgar' it is necessary for a person to 'overact his parts'.[115]

At the traditional Harvard post-mortem on the 2016 US Election, Trump's former campaign manager Corey Lewandowski explained that 'the problem with the media' is that 'you guys took everything that Donald Trump said so literally. The American people didn't. They understood it.'[116] As another commentator elaborates:

> When Donald Trump says he wants to build a huge wall, the media and his critics seem to think he is imagining something like the Great Wall of China stretching from Tijuana to Brownsville. But Trump's supporters interpret his words differently. They hear him saying that he's going to take a hard-line approach to border security and illegal immigration. He's not going to mess around. So when his supporters hear him walking it back a bit—for instance, saying it could be a fence not a wall at places—they knew what he meant all along. They understood he was speaking figuratively about the wall.
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> When he talks about ripping up trade deals, he's not saying that he is going to shred the 741-page North American Free Trade Agreement and 348 pages of annexes. His supporters take him to mean that he is going to take a much tougher approach to NAFTA and other trade deals, that he is going to enforce trade agreements much more rigorously, and that the U.S. wasn't going to be a chump any longer.[117]

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[113] Mayer 2016. On the interpretation of hyperbole see Wilson and Sperber (2012, pp. 50-1)
[114] Quoted in Lozada 2015.
[115] Aristotle 1965, 1461b-1462a.
[116] Tumulty and Rucker 2016.
[117] Cook 2016.

As one commentator pithily puts it, 'The press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally.'[118] Trump's supporters understand that he may not do everything he says, but they think he will nonetheless 'try to stay in the spirit of the original statement'.[119] Reinforcing that message, Trump pledged to his legions in his unprecedentedly partisan Inaugural Address, 'I will never let you down.'[120]

The trouble with 'truthful hyperbole' from an epistemic point of view, of course, is that one can never know what is the 'truthful' bit and what is the 'hyperbole'. Does the defence of 'truthful hyperbole' as a form of 'true fiction' amount to a claim that the direction of the vector is as described, and only its length is exaggerated? Or is the claim that its length is as stated, but the direction might be a little off? Or is the suggestion that both might be off? And in all cases, by how much? It is anyone's guess – and when the 'truthful hyperboles' are surrounded by a tissue of other lies, one's best guess could well be worse than random.

21.7.3. Actions, Not Words, Are What Matter

A final version of the epistemic insouciance analysis might build on the 'trust me' motif discussed above. In a catchphrase associated with Richard Nixon, a previous US president driven from office for duplicity, 'Watch what we do, not what we say'.[121] It is a phrase that Trump himself obliquely invoked during the campaign in

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[118] Zito 2016.
[119] Cook 2016.
[120] Trump 2017a.
[121] The actual words were those of John Mitchell, Nixon's law partner and later his Attorney General (Safire 1988).

order to deliberately contrast himself with 'politicians who are all talk and no action'.[122] He set about earning the 'Man of Action' sobriquet conferred on him by the Speaker of the House of Representatives after their first post-election meeting by signing a flurry of Executive Orders during his first days in office.[123]

Something like that might also have been at work behind the Brexit campaign. After all, referendum voters had no way of knowing what exact terms, if any, might be negotiated as the terms of divorce between the UK and the EU.[124] Referendum voters might have perfectly reasonably discounted the propositional content of Leave campaigners (on the grounds that 'they had to say that') and instead have been trusting what its leaders would actually do, once the referendum campaign was over and their victory won.

A similar story might be told about at least some of Trump's backers. Here is one telling piece of evidence. The Kaiser Foundation convened post-election focus groups involving Trump voters in Rust Belt states to discuss their views on health care plans. Participants were initially asked what they disliked about Obamacare and what they wanted to see in any replacement plans. Then conversations turned to actual Republican proposals for replacing Obamacare.

> When told Mr. Trump might embrace a plan that included these elements [of which they disapproved], and particularly very high deductibles, they expressed disbelief. They were also worried about what they called 'chaos' if there was a gap between repealing and replacing Obamacare. But most did not think that, as one participant put it, 'a smart businessman like Trump would let that happen'.[125]

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[122] Trump 2017a.

[123] Trump 2016b. S. Jones 2017. Much of that action was more symbolic than real, at least in the first instance, insofar as many of those Executive Orders require the action of others in order to be implemented, and it was far from certain that that would be forthcoming (Parker and Sullivan 2017).

[124] Furthermore, as we said in section 21.3 above, some might have voted strategically to Leave merely to strengthen the UK's hand in negotiations to remain in or anyway affiliated with the EU.

[125] Altman 2017.

Much of Trump's rhetoric has a 'trust me' character to it, and clearly many of his voters do.

Asked to explain her vote for Trump the day after the election, one of his supporters said, 'My vote was my only way to say: I am here and I count.'[126] In both his speech accepting the Republican nomination and in his Inaugural address, Trump appealed to that old Roosevelt-Nixon trope, 'the forgotten men and women', promising that they 'will be forgotten no longer'.[127] But what exactly he would do, having remembered them, was always left pretty radically unspecified.[128] His appeal was always substantially, 'trust me!'[129]

In a pre-inauguration interview Kellyanne Conway, Trump's former campaign manager and Counselor-designate, urged people to think about Trump in just that way. 'Why is everything taken at face value?' she asked. 'You always want to go by what's come out of his mouth rather than look at what's in his heart.'[130] The interviewer rudely but rightly interjected, 'How do I know what's in his heart except by what comes out of his mouth?' But Trump's supporters think they know.[131]

Again, there is a rational gloss that could be put on that sort of claim. After all, candidates always promise many things, but as president they inevitably have to

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[126] Diana Maus (61, Suffern, NY) in Kelly 2016; Garrison Keillor (2016a) quipped in reply, 'People who shoot up theaters may feel the same way.' A propos the Brexit referendum, a 62-year-old London jobseeker explained that he ordinarily would not have voted: 'I couldn't really care less about the EU. [But] people are sick and tired of being ignored. I don't suppose I'm the only one to use this opportunity. It was a chance to kick the whole establishment where it hurt, for us to send pain the other way. And we took it' (Martin Parker, quoted in Ryan 2016).

[127] Trump 2017a. Schrag 1969.

[128] In his RNC acceptance speech Trump (2016a) said, 'I have visited the laid-off factory workers, and the communities crushed by our horrible and unfair trade deals. These are the forgotten men and women of our country.' He said he would strike better trade deals and bring manufacturing jobs back to America. But how, exactly, would he do that? That is what is always left awfully vague.

[129] As Joe Lockhart, President Clinton's former press secretary, observed, Trump's message in every post-election interviews was, 'People out there, trust me. Don't trust what you read or you see' (in NBC Meet the Press 2017).

[130] Blake 2017a.

[131] As one woman at a Trump rally replied when asked about some of his more questionable statements: 'words come out in the wrong way at times; you put your foot in your mouth' (quoted in Pilkington 2016)

face situations no one could have anticipated during the campaign. Therefore, it is only sensible for voters to assess candidates as much, or more, on their 'character' than on their specific policy proposals. Of course their assessment of a candidate's 'character' is adduced, in no small part, from what specific policy proposals that candidate makes during the campaign. But the voters' real task is to elect a person whom they can trust to do what they would have wanted in circumstances neither they nor the candidate could have foreseen.[132]

Of course, in the case of Trump the standard political science term 'character' is unfortunate, since he is a man of reprehensible character (as even many of his most ardent supporters might concede).[133] But on the analysis just offered, 'character' is anyway something of a misnomer. It is not a question of whether the candidate is a good Boy Scout, or even someone you would seat next to your daughter. 'Character', on the analysis offered above, is really much less moralistic than that, and much more just a matter of 'political dispositions' – how he is likely to react in unanticipated political circumstances.

Trump's voters thought that they knew the answer to that. We have our doubts, given the scarcity of specifics in Trump's election campaign promises, the history of his firms' bankruptcies and other broken promises. We have similar doubts whether Brexit voters had any good grounds for any beliefs whatsoever about what form Brexit might take or for trusting politicians to negotiate the deal that they themselves would have preferred. But no matter. What we are trying to do here is merely to explain why some voters might have fallen for Trump and Brexit,

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[132] Barber 1972. Hardy 2017.

[133] '[T]here is something brutally, refreshingly realistic about Trump's manner, or about the whole Trump persona. He is a deeply flawed man, but he doesn't try very hard to pretend otherwise. Even his most enthusiastic supporters, or many of the ones I've talked to, are happy to acknowledge Trump's failings. They may argue about which traits are failings and which are mere foibles hyped by his critics, but they did not vote for him because they thought him scrupulously honest or because they believed his character to be unimpeachable. Indeed, there must be very few people on either side who believe Trump to be a thoroughly good man. Effective in his way, maybe. Capable of disrupting what ought to be disrupted, almost certainly. But good?' (Swaim 2017).

and what it might mean for the CJT if that were indeed the true explanation of their victories.

21.8. Everyone on Facebook Agrees With Me

There are many ways in which the truth might come under threat. Some of them are politically innocent. Others are more politically charged.

First, let us consider some more innocuous versions of the story, based purely on natural tendencies at work within the new media environment upon which people increasingly depend for their news. Perhaps it was like that way all along in some places (Britain with its tabloid press, for example); perhaps it was like that in other eras.[134] But in mid-twentieth-century America, anyway, everyone tended to get their news primarily from the same handful of broadcast and print media, which by and large held to high standards of neutrality and impartiality; their reports were authoritative, and generally taken to be such by the population at large.[135] With the rise of the internet and especially of platforms, however, that is decreasingly true.[136]

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[134] Newton and Brynin 2001. Francis Bacon commented similarly in 1620 about his generation's equivalent of 'information bubbles' in *Novum Organum* (Floridi 2016).

[135] Thus, after Walter Cronkite's 1968 post-Tet broadcast saying that he thought the Vietnamese war would not be won, President Johnson said to his aides, 'If I've lost Cronkite I've lost middle America' (Martin 2009). Cross-national studies continue to show that exposure to public service broadcasting increases citizens' knowledge of current affairs, compared to exposure to commercial broadcasting (Soroka et al. 2013).

[136] Berry and Sobieraj 2011. Indeed, 'In the final three months of the US presidential campaign, the top-performing fake election news stories on Facebook generated more engagement than the top stories from major news outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Huffington Post*, NBC News, and others.... During these critical months of the campaign, 20 top-performing false election stories from hoax sites and hyperpartisan blogs generated 8,711,000 shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook. Within the same time period, the 20 best-performing election stories from 19 major news websites generated a total of 7,367,000 shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook' (Silverman 2016). According to its preamble, this is what motivated a bill introduced into the California state legislature immediately after the 2016 US election to require school children be taught how to recognize fake news (Dodd 2017).

People now get much of their 'news' from more boutique sources, tailored to their own particular interests and perspectives. To some extent they do so deliberately. Cass Sunstein entered a prescient warning that future internet users would be able to construct their very own personalized news feed, 'Daily Me', that told them only what they were interested in and wanted to hear.[137] Today, search engine and social network algorithms (more of which below) do that for you. But people still deliberately choose, in similar fashion, whom to include as their Facebook friends and which Twitter feeds to follow.[138]

In part, it is merely a matter of people’s 'likes'. You can obviously 'like' something (find it interesting or amusing) without believing for a moment that it is true. But self-sorting based on 'likes' sometimes has an epistemic side to it as well. People are not unreasonably inclined to give more credibility to reports coming from people they deem to be trustworthy, understood as believing other things that they themselves also believe to be true.[139]

Another driver of that phenomenon is purely commercial. The algorithms underpinning Google and other search engines are designed to show people web pages that are similar in relevant respects to those that they have previously viewed – in no small part in the hopes someone who has purchased something from a previous web site will be tempted to make similar purchases from subsequent ones as well, or at least stay on similar pages to see more adverts controlled by the engine or network. Commercially, that makes perfectly good sense. And from the point of view of the customer – or even those who are just using the search engine to find related material, with no intention of buying anything – that feature of the search engine is genuinely to be welcomed.

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[137] Sunstein 2001, pp. 3-23; 2017a. Jamieson and Cappella 2008. Lelkes, Sood and Iyengar 2017.

[138] And, at least on some evidence (Bakshy et al. 2015), that reduces exposure to differing political perspectives even more than the operation of algorithms alone – although still far from eliminating it completely.

[139] This is a variation on Hume's (1777) argument 'On Miracles': if someone tells you he just saw someone walking on water, do you upgrade your belief in miracles or downgrade your estimation of that person's credibility as a reporter of true facts?

From an epistemic point of view, however, those search engine algorithms are a disaster. They create information 'bubbles', in which a person perpetually gets fed new information that reinforces the information he initially received, however idiosyncratic and unrepresentative the original bit of information.[140] People who once searched for information on conspiracy theories keep getting fed more and more conspiracy theories, and so on. 'The net result', as the inventor of the internet Tim Berners-Lee observes, 'is that these sites show us content they think we'll click on – meaning that misinformation, or fake news, which is surprising, shocking, or designed to appeal to our biases can spread like wildfire.'[141]

The strength of those algorithms is well captured by this anecdote from internet activist Tom Steinberg, posted on Facebook immediately after the Brexit referendum result was announced:

> I am actively searching through Facebook for people celebrating the Brexit leave victory, but the filter bubble is SO strong, and extends SO far into things like Facebook's custom search that I can't find anyone who is happy *despite the fact that over half the country is clearly jubilant today* and despite the fact that I'm *actively* looking to hear what they are saying.[142]

There is another driver of that phenomenon which, while not exactly 'innocent', is at least not politically motivated. People are rewarded more, both psychologically and financially, the more other people who click on their websites or share their internet postings. That incentivizes people to post fabulous, sensational, incredible stories – whether true or not – purely as 'clickbait'.[143]

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[140] Pariser (2011) coined the term 'filter bubble', but nowadays the term is rife. See, e.g., Ash (2016) and more generally O'Neil (2016). For a rich empirical analysis of how a 'Breitbart-led right-wing media ecosystem' created an almost hermetically sealed bubble for Trump supporters during the 2016 US presidential election, see Benkler et al. (2017).

[141] Quoted in Solon 2017. For a sustained analysis of how homogenous clusters of users ('echo chambers') facilitate the spread of misinformation on the internet, see Vicario et al. (2016).

[142] Steinberg 2016.

[143] Ohlheiser 2016. Stories abound. One is of two unemployed restaurant workers who signed on as writers to the alt-right website LibertyWritersNews with 300,000 Facebook followers in the month before the 2016 election, and who 'say they are making so much money that they feel uncomfortable talking about it because they don't want people to start asking for loans'

Such clickbaiters are pure 'bullshitters', in Harry Frankfurt's sense above. Unlike others (who will be the subject of section 21.9 below), these clickbaiters do not deliberately post stories that they know to be false – certainly anyway they do not deliberately post them *because* of their known falsehood. Instead, those clickbaiters simply do not care about the truth of their posts, one way or another.[144] But in not caring, of course, they end up posting a good deal of information that is patently false.[145]

Shortly after the 2016 US presidential election, Google and Facebook announced they were taking steps to ban fake news sites and deprive them of advertising revenue.[146] If successful, such steps may help ameliorate this particular part of the problem for future elections. Obviously, however, the damage they did in the 2016 elections is already done. And laudatory though it may be for Facebook to flag that some post is 'Disputed by 3rd party factcheckers', 'the damage of a popular fake-news story is usually well done by the time it is fact-checked and flagged'.[147]

(McCoy 2016). Another is of the small Macedonian town of Veles, home to 'more than 150 domains' dedicated to generating fake news for profit.

[144] As Neetzan Zimmerman, a sometime Gawker specialist in viral stories, says, 'Nowadays it is not important if a story's real. The only thing that really matters is whether people click on it. If a person is not sharing a news story, it is, at its core, not news' (quoted in Viner 2016).

[145] One prominent hoaxter, Paul Horner, posted false news hoping it would get picked up by Trump supporters, exposed and then make then look bad. Needless to say, that backfired. As he explained, 'I just wanted to make fun of that insane belief, but it took off. They actually believed it. I thought they'd fact-check it, and it'd make them look worse.... [T]hat's how this always works: someone posts something I write, then they find out it's false, then they look like idiots. But Trump supporters — they just keep running with it! They never fact-check anything! Now he's in the White House. Looking back, instead of hurting the campaign, I think I helped it. And that feels [bad]' (quoted in Dewey 2016).

[146] Isaac 2016. Wingfield et al. 2016. Naughton 2017. Persily 2017, pp. 72-5. Weedon, Nuland and Stamos 2017.

[147] Persily 2017, p. 73. That is particularly likely because of the slow process by which Facebook refers items for factchecking: 'Facebook is working with five fact-checking organizations – ABC News, AP, FactCheck.org, Politifact and Snopes – to launch the initiative. If enough of Facebook's users report a story as fake, the social network will pass it onto these third parties to scrutinize. If a story is deemed to fail the fact check, it will be publicly flagged as "disputed by 3rd party fact-checkers" whenever it appears on the social network' (Jamieson and Solon 2017).

In consequence of all these factors, people experience 'alternative realities' on the internet. What one person reasonably believes, given the information that he obtains there, can be radically different to what another person with a different internet experience might equally reasonably believe. As President Obama once quipped, 'If I watched Fox *I* wouldn't vote for me!'[148] In his Farewell Address, Obama bemoaned the creation of these 'alternative realities' in the following terms:

> [I]ncreasingly we become so secure in our bubbles that we start accepting only information, whether it's true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that is out there.... In the course of a healthy debate, we [rightly] prioritize different goals, and the different means of reaching them. But without some common baseline of facts, without a willingness to admit new information and concede that your opponent might be making a fair point, and that science and reason matter, ... we're going to keep talking past each other.[149]

This is indeed an unfortunate outcome. But, as we have here seen, there are some relatively innocent reasons that it might have occurred. There are also, however, some much less innocent drivers, to which we now turn.

21.9. Epistemic Malevolence

There are various more politically charged ways in which the truth can come under threat. One familiar way is through 'epistemic populism' – political leaders telling people to ignore reliable sources of information and to trust their own instincts.[150]

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[148] Obama 2016.

[149] He went on to say that the 'selective sorting of the facts. It's self-defeating because, as my mom used to tell me, reality has a way of catching up with you'; one can but hope it is so (Obama 2017; see similarly Obama 2016).

[150] That is what was involved when Trump told people to ignore the mainstream news media and to trust whatever they find on the internet (Borchers 2016; Swan 2016). That pattern appears in a pre-Brexit referendum interview with Michael Gove: the interviewer challenged Gove to defend his advocacy of Leaving the EU when so many economists, business and labour leaders and even the Chief Executive of the NHS 'all say that you... are wrong'; Gove's reply was that 'I think the people of this country have had enough of experts' (quoted in Islam

Another familiar way is through 'epistemic authoritarianism' – a political leader telling people, after the fashion of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, that the truth just is whatever he or she says it is.[151] Here we shall concentrate on a third way, which we call 'epistemic malevolence'.[152] The malevolence here in view is instead targeted at facts as such—it is the aim to prevent true facts from emerging at all, or to prevent them from getting widespread currency if they do.

On the first full day of his presidency, Trump went to the CIA and gave a rambling address that was highly inappropriate in ever so many ways. Among other things, he claimed in it that more people attended his inauguration than any other – which was blatantly untrue, as was evident from photographs that had already been published offering a side-by-side comparison of his inaugural audience and Obama's first.[153] Later that day, his press secretary went down to the White House pressroom and reiterated that lie in no uncertain terms.[154]

The next day, Trump's former campaign manager and new White House Counselor, Kellyanne Conway, was asked: 'Why put [the Press Secretary] out there for the very first time... to utter a provable falsehood' about the size of the crowd at the inauguration? 'It's a small thing. But the first time he confronts the public it's a falsehood?' Conway offered this memorable reply: 'You're saying it's a falsehood....

2016b). The British Election Study's (2016) post-referendum survey showed that Gove's reading of the mood of the electorate, or at least of Leave voters, was indeed correct: the probability of voting to Leave was strongly associated with agreement to the proposition, 'I'd rather put my trust in the wisdom of ordinary people than the opinions of experts.'

[151] Putin today (Kovalev 2017), and Stalin before him (Arendt 1967/1977), are perhaps the clearest exemplars. But Trump's insistently reasserting claims that have been factchecked and shown to be clearly false smacks of that. So too does the comment of his former campaign manager and Counselor-designate, Kellyanne Conway, when replying to a question at the Harvard post-election conference about whether Trump's behaviour really is 'presidential behaviour': 'He's the president elect so that's presidential behavior' (quoted in Sullivan 2016). But perhaps former *New York Times* editor Bill Keller is right to suggest that the most chilling evidence is to be found in Trump's bare-faced lying in his January 2017 speech at the CIA: 'He was spouting obvious falsehoods to an audience for whom facts are matters of life and death. The implicit, and truly dangerous, message to the intelligence community was "don't bring me bad news; just tell me we're winning"' (quoted in Farhi 2017b).

[152] Baehr 2010. Cassam 2016.

[153] Trump 2017c. Rucker et al. 2017.

[154] Kessler 2017c.

[O]ur press secretary gave alternative facts to that.' The incredulous interviewer rightly pressed her on that: 'Wait a minute. Alternative facts? ... Four of the five facts he uttered were just not true. Look, alternative facts are not facts. They are falsehoods.'[155] And clearly they were: the claims of the president and press secretary were contradicted by the photographs[156]; they were contradicted by official Metrorail ridership statistics[157]; and so on.

Why on earth would any president deliberately engage in such behaviour, in his very first day in office?[158] With Trump, who knows? It might be that a fragile *nouveau riche* ego, already deeply suspecting it is somewhere it does not belong, simply cannot bear the thought of being associated with anything demeaned as 'small'.[159] Or maybe Trump really believes his own lies – maybe his grip on reality truly is just that infirm.[160] Or maybe he is using his preposterous tweets as a smokescreen to distract from the many nefarious policies put in place through executive orders signed on the same days.[161] Or perhaps Trump is just deploying the political equivalent of 'an old sports strategy: foul so much in the first 5 min of the

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[155] Sinderbrand 2017. Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary, made a similar Freudian slip in a news conference, saying, 'I think sometimes we can disagree with the facts'; but it seems clear from context that what he really meant to say was that we can disagree *about* the facts (Blake 2017c). It is far less clear from context that what Conway really means to say was 'additional' (rather than 'alternative') facts, as she subsequently rather disingenuously claimed (Pengelly 2017).

[156] Kessler 2017b.

[157] The press secretary admitted as much in his first formal news conference – the first one in which he actually took questions rather than merely having a rant – two days later (Blake 2017c).

[158] Cowen (2017) offers yet another speculation: 'By requiring subordinates to speak untruths, a leader can undercut their independent standing, including their standing with the public, with the media and with other members of the administration. That makes those individuals grow more dependent on the leader and less likely to mount independent rebellions against the structure of command.'

[159] Amis 2016.

[160] Rubin 2017. His first television interview post-inauguration, imploring the interviewer to examine all his framed photos of his inauguration crowd, certainly sounded like Nixon at his most needful petitioning Kissinger to join him on his knees in prayer (Johnson 2017). Freeman (2017) comments similarly on Trump's 'neediness', jocularly via a commentary on the length of his neckties.

[161] Balz 2017. Dionne 2017.

game that the refs can't call them all. From then on, [you're free to play] a more physical game.'[162]

Another far more nefarious explanation is also consistent with much that Trump has done and said, however. That explanation certainly seems to fit the intentions of many of Trump's protégées and backers. Conspicuous among them is Stephen Bannon, Trump's campaign manager who became for a time Chief Strategist in his White House, who had previously been chief executive of the alt-right 'news' site Breitbart. Also included among 'Trump's backers' deploying this strategy are Russian officials and agents, if the US Director of National Intelligence's report is to be trusted.[163]

The strategy in question involves the intentional promulgation of false stories, knowing them to be false, and doing so precisely because you know them to be false.[164] If people actually believe the false story in support of your preferred position, so much the better.[165] But the larger aim of promulgating fake news is

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[162] Sally Jenkins, quoted in Cillizza 2017.

[163] US Director of National Intelligence 2017.

[164] For just one example, from literally thousands, consider the 'fake news masterpiece' concocted by Cameron Harris, since fired from his position as an aide to a Republican state legislator in Maryland. During the autumn of 2016 when Trump was behind in the polls and preparing his supporters for defeat by asserting the election was being rigged, Harris concocted the story, 'Tens of thousands of fraudulent Clinton votes found in Ohio warehouse'. Harris was himself surprised by the success of the story that netted him $1000 per hour he invested in it: 'Given the severe distrust of the media among Trump supporters, anything that parroted Trump's talking points people would click. Trump was saying "rigged election, rigged election". People were predisposed to believe... At first it kind of shocked me — the response I was getting. How easily people would believe it. It was almost like a sociological experiment' (Shane 2017).

[165] Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) find that 'of the known false news stories that appeared in the three months before the election, those favoring Trump were shared a total of 30 million times on Facebook, while those favoring Clinton were shared eight million times' and that 'the average American saw and remembered 0.92 pro-Trump fake news stories and 0.23 pro-Clinton fake news stories, with just over half of those who recalled seeing fake news stories believing them'. They attempt to minimize the impact of that fake news, however, by saying, 'for fake news to have changed the outcome of the election, a single fake article would need to have had the same persuasive effect as 36 television campaign ads'. But that may not be as implausible as it sounds. People notoriously discount paid political advertisements. And, in any case, they see an awful lot of them. The same source upon which Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) base their calculation also reports that, on average, each person in the study saw 75

independent of people actually believing it. The aim is instead simply to discredit, in the eyes of your followers, all sources of information, true or false. As one commentator puts it, 'It's not an information war. It's a war on information.'[166]

This is a strategy that has been pursued by certain fragments of the American right for some time, and with devastating effect on public trust in the mainstream media.[167] The strategy was taken to even further extremes by Breitbart 'News' under the leadership of Stephen Bannon.[168] Trump powerfully associated himself with that strategy, not only during the campaign but also as president when declaring – in the first official non-ceremonial fixture of his presidency, an address to the CIA no less – that 'I have a running war with the media. They are among the most dishonest human beings on Earth.'[169]

No doubt in part this is an attempt at muzzling the press. In an interview with the *New York Times* the very first week of the Trump Administration, Bannon declared – telling the interviewer 'I want you to quote this' – that the media is 'the opposition party'. He added, 'the media should... keep its mouth shut and just listen

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advertisements during a presidential election campaign and 'in some areas..., voting-aged adults see as many as 339 spots' (Spenkuch and Toniatti 2016, p. 11).

[166] Peter Pomerantsev, quoted in Ignatius 2016.

[167] Jamieson and Cappella 2008. Gallup Polls have a series of polls asking Americans, 'How much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media – such as newspapers, TV and radio – when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?' The proportion of respondents saying 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' ranged in the low-to-mid 50% range until 2004, at which point it dropped to 44%; it trended downward since then, dipping particularly in election years, standing at just 40% in 2015 (Riffkin 2015).

[168] As the former spokesperson for Breitbart said in interview, 'There is no question that Trump's confrontational and combative tone towards the media is choreographed by Bannon. It's textbook Breitbart. If the facts aren't on your side, attack the gatekeepers of the facts. ... From Team Trump's perspective, ...their objective will be to cast as much doubt as possible on traditional sources of information to ensure the environment is ripe for them to win in 2020' (Kurt Bardella, quoted in Farhi 2017b).

[169] Trump (2017b), echoing rhetoric throughout his campaign (Baron 2016).

for a while'.[170] In an interview the next day the president himself endorsed Bannon's sentiments.[171]

But the success of the larger strategy does not depend in any way upon the media itself going silent. Nor does it depend upon succeeding in persuading people to get their news from the internet, which is much more of a hotbed of Trump-friendly fake news, rather than the mainstream media (although Trump encourages that, too[172]). The larger strategy is simply to instill widespread distrust in all sources of information – including the evidence of one's own eyes (as in the case of the side-by-side photos of the crowds at Trump's and Obama's inaugurations).[173]

From the perspective of this strategy, that is the real point of generating false news as was so widely done by various agents throughout the 2016 US election campaign and around the world, perhaps by Russian agents among many others.[174] The point is not so much to persuade people to believe them (although perhaps so much the better, from the point of view of the purveyors, if people do) as to dull people's sensitivity to truth in any form.[175] It is a strategy that, in US politics, dates

[170] Grynbaum 2017b.

[171] Wagner 2017. Trump followed up on that, tweeting: 'Somebody with aptitude and conviction should buy the FAKE NEWS and failing @nytimes and either run it correctly or let it fold with dignity' (Farhi 2017a).

[172] Trump constantly told his rallies, 'Forget the press, read the internet.... I... get a lot of honesty over the internet... Study over things. Don't go for the mainstream media' (Borchers 2016).

[173] This particular variant on the strategy has come to be known as 'gaslighting' after the 1938 play and later movie of the same name (Gibson 2017).

[174] Connolly et al. 2016. Reuters 2017. The Pope himself equated 'fake news' to '"coprophilia – an abnormal interest in excrement. Those reading or watching such stories risked behaving like coprophagics, people who eat faeces, he added' (Sherwood 2016).

[175] According to a RAND Corporation analysis, that is how the current Russian propaganda model works: 'either through more direct persuasion and influence or by engaging in obfuscation, confusion and the disruption or diminution of truthful reporting and messaging' (Paul and Matthews 2016, pp. 1-2). 'They're not trying to say that their version of events is the true one. They're saying: "Everybody's lying! Nobody's telling you the truth!"' (Richard Stengel, sometime managing editor of *Time* magazine and US Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, quoted in Ignatius 2016).

back at least to George W. Bush's White House and its public relations guru, Karl Rove.[176]

What James Fallows calls 'the chaos-generating logic of Trump's seemingly illogical stream of nonstop lies big and small' can be traced, more recently, 'to reality TV, to Breitbart and Steve Bannon, and to Vladimir Putin's advisor Vladislav Surkov'.[177] The latter's strategy is particularly instructive:

> [O]riginally from the *avant-garde* art world...., [w]hat Surkov has done is to import ideas from conceptual art into the very heart of politics. His aim is to undermine peoples' perceptions of the world, so they never know what is really happening. Surkov turned Russian politics into a bewildering, constantly changing piece of theater. ...[N]o one was sure what was real or fake. As one journalist put it: "It is a strategy of power that keeps any opposition constantly confused." [He creates] a ceaseless shape-shifting that is unstoppable because it is undefinable.[178]

That is of a cloth with Trump's media strategy: the combination of empty spectacle, empty words, discrediting everyone, crediting conspiracy theories without any evidence, hogging attention and 'gaslighting' makes it hard for people to know what, if anything, to believe to be true.[179]

The clearest expression of this attitude came in a post-election panel discussion on NPR in which CNN commentator and ardent Trump advocate Scottie Nell Hughes famously said: 'facts, they're not really facts... There's no such thing... anymore [as] facts'.[180] Although she subsequently claimed she had misspoken, the *Atlantic*'s James Fallows rightly replied, 'I think it actually is an intended result of

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[176] Whom Fallows (2016) assumes to be the unnamed 'senior advisor to Bush' who belittled 'what we call the reality-based community', saying: 'That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and ... we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do' (Suskind 2004).

[177] Fallows 2016.

[178] Curtis 2014.

[179] Yuhas 2017.

[180] Quoted in Rehm (2016b).

this campaign and administration to [make people] think, well, really there aren't any facts, it's all opinion... I believe that the job for the media and civil society now is essentially to say there are such things as facts. So the line may be drawn here.'[181]

The larger strategy is to 'disempower institutions that protect the truth'.[182] President Trump took to Twitter to declare, 'The FAKE NEWS media... is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American people'[183]; and among those who had voted for him, 88% agreed.[184] Retired Gen. Michael Hayden, one time head of both the CIA and NSA, describes this as 'a systematic effort to invalidate and delegitimize all the institutions, governmental and nongovernmental, that create the factual basis for action ... so they won't push back against arbitrary moves'.[185]

Part and parcel of that strategy is for its practitioners to appropriate the term 'false news' themselves and to apply it indiscriminately to any reports that they do not like, be they true or false.[186] Thus, for example, when CNN reported that

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[181] Fallows in Rehm (2016b). Later in the discussion Hughes backed off the 'no facts' claim to say that 'any facts that they might be able to report nobody believes because [the reporter has] interlaced his opinion' in his reports of the facts. She gives an example: 'look at reports ... [in outlets] like Daily Caller, Breitbart, *Washington Times*, ... and you will say those are not facts. Well guess what? It's a two-sided mirror because they say the same about your reporting.' And in a subsequent follow-up she added, 'My comment was that if you were a Trump supporter, you believed the words his campaign was saying were fact. If you were a Clinton supporter, you believed the words her campaign were stating was fact. However, both sides did not believe nor acknowledge the other as fact. Just like in a court of law where both sides honestly believe they are right. When a prosecutor comes in he states his "facts" of the case. The Defense Attorney does the same. It is up to the jury to decide what is the truth. Of course I believe there are facts in this world; what I was referencing, as I stated, was in regards to this campaign cycle. Facts to one side were seen as opinion or untrue to the other' (Hughes, in Stelter 2016).

[182] Douglas 2017. And it works, at least according to the editor of one small-town Michigan newspaper, who said, 'You can give readers 50 facts that show that Trump is wrong, but when he portrays us in the media industry as the bad guys, that seems to outweigh all those facts' (Jeff Payne quoted in Pilkington 2017).

[183] Grynbaum 2017a.

[184] Sargent 2017b.

[185] Gersen 2017.

[186] President Trump candidly tweeted, 'Any negative polls are fake news' (Marcus 2017). In response to this sort of behaviour, the *Washington Post* (2017) editorialized, 'So overused and misused is the phrase ['fake news'] – by those seeking to disparage things they simply dislike or disagree with – that it loses real meaning.' See similarly: Blake 2017b; Borchers 2017; Sullivan 2017b.

President-Elect Trump had been briefed by the US intelligence community that Russia had assembled a dossier of embarrassing material that might render him vulnerable to blackmail, Trump responded by accusing CNN of promulgating 'fake news'.[187] While it may well be the case that the contents of the dossier are not true (the CNN made no claim that they were), there was nothing remotely 'fake' about the news report of the indisputable fact that Trump had received just such a briefing. For Trump to say otherwise simply devalues the language – which is part of this strategy. Once inaugurated, Trump doubled down on his insistence that anything unflattering to him appearing in the mainstream media was 'fake news'.[188]

A final element of the strategy of undermining truth claims altogether is for purveyors of lies to insist that others must accord equal epistemic respect to their fabrications as to the genuine evidence. The mainstream media's traditions of impartiality and 'equal time' serve us well epistemically when everyone honestly and honorably asserts only what they genuinely believe to be true. But they serve us ill when people deliberately lie, asserting propositions they know to be false for some strategic purpose unconnected to any quest for truth.[189]

There has been much debate within the mainstream media as to how best to cover someone like Trump. Many old-school editors insist that 'more and better of the same sort of journalism as always' – more and more fact checking and so on – would be the best response.[190] But factchecking of such transparent falsehoods is a soul-destroying time-suck that diverts journalists from investigations that might be of more consequence.[191] In any case, there is a fair bit of evidence that factchecking pays decreasing dividends – once someone has been caught in fifty whoppers,

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[187] Trump 2017b. Nossel 2017. Wemple 2017a.

[188] Sargent 2017a. Similarly in Sweden, a right-wing Facebook group, Mediakollen, emerged pretending to be a fact checker but actually serving as 'itself a tool of disinformation..., in effect, a fake fact checker' (Jackson 2017). Breitbart similarly posted partial truths and patent falsehoods in ostensibly fact-checking the *Guardian* reporting about illegal immigration, which it disingenuously described as 'fake news' (Carroll 2016).

[189] Patterson 2016.

[190] Baron 2016. Hiatt 2017.

[191] Wemple 2017b.

reports of a fifty-first (even if the substance is such that, objectively, it really should be a very big deal) evokes very little response from the public at large.[192] Factchecking might even backfire, insofar as further reporting of the falsehood (if only to refute it) helps the falsehood stick in people's minds.[193]

Others advise, second, that we to 'get out there with true facts first' before liars have a chance to spin their falsehoods.[194] But liars are creative (who could have imagined all the sorts of falsehoods Trump would come up with?), so it seems impossibly hard to implement that strategy in such a way that would forestall all successful political lies.

A third approach that has been mooted, but not seriously (or anyway systematically) attempted, would be for the press simply to boycott the White House pressroom of a proven liar. But that would be hard to organize a successful boycott among all the media actors in such a highly competitive environment. And of course even if the mainstream media boycotted the White House pressroom, rightwing media like Fox News and Breitbart would remain.[195]

A fourth approach is to educate the public in how better to detect falsehoods. Shortly after the 2016 election a bill was introduced into the California state legislature along those lines, for example.[196] The OECD's director of education agrees that 'exposing fake news' by helping students learn how to 'distinguish...

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[192] Cook and Lewandowsky 2011; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; 2015; Harford 2017. Or worse: Major Garrett of CBS News recounted how, during the 2016 presidential campaign, 'Any fact checking I did ... was prima facie evidence that I was biased. And that I was wrong. So fact checking Trump was proof, not that he was wrong, but that he was right, and that anyone who would raise a question about the underlying relationship between what he said in the facts was biased. And therefore, [it can be] legitimately disregarded from the beginning. So it wasn't as if there was a conversation about this. It wasn't as if facts were litigated back and forth. The very raising of a question about the factual basis of a Trump assertion was proof you were wrong and biased. And that is the atmosphere that I found myself existing in as a reporter' (Garrett in Rehm 2016a).

[193] Cook and Lewandowsky 2011, p. 2.

[194] Paul and Matthews 2016, pp. 9-10.

[195] Rosen, Wemple and Downie 2017.

[196] Bever 2017. Dodd 2017. The idea, if not the specific legislation, was endorsed by the CEO of Apple, Tim Cook (Rawlinson 2017).

what is true from what is not... is something that ... schools can do something about'; and Sweden has already instigated such a policy.[197] In the US, the Washington Post Fact Checker has provided an easy 'guide for detecting fake news'.[198]

A fifth approach is to follow the lead of Germany and legislate to 'compel large outlets such as Facebook and Twitter to rapidly remove fake news that incites hate, as well as other "criminal" content, or face fines as high as 50 million euros ($53 million)'.[199]

A sixth approach is simply to reset the default assumption of how to respond to someone who has persistently been caught lying. Whereas we ordinarily ought to assume that people are telling the truth unless we have evidence to the contrary, once we have enough evidence that some particular person persistently lies we to ought assume that that person is lying unless evidence is produced to the contrary.[200]

21.10. Epistemic Agnosticism

The success of the strategy of epistemic malevolence just discussed depends crucially upon listeners mistaking epistemic saboteurs who are actually strategically lying to them for genuine epistemic peers.

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[197] Andreas Schleicher, quoted in Siddique 2017. Priest and Birnbaum 2017.

[198] Kessler 2016b. Sullivan 2017a.

[199] Faiola and Kirchner 2017. See further Priest and Birnbaum 2017.

[200] As one commentator says, 'I don't believe a word he says, and neither should you' (Bernstein 2017; see similarly Fallows 2016). Kellyanne Conway, Trump's former campaign manager and subsequently White House Counselor, said in one interview, 'We believe in a free and fair media, but with freedom comes responsibility. It would be great for the media to be less presumptively negative and skeptical and more open and honest about their past unfair and untoward coverage of [Trump].... I was really astonished to see respected print and electronic journalists outwardly admit during the campaign that Donald Trump forces them to suspend the objective standards of journalism' (Heim 2017). But on this analysis, through his own behaviour Trump has forfeited any claim (either moral or epistemic) to be presumed to be a truth teller.

The right response, when confronted with conflicting reports on some matter of fact that come from people whom you rightly regard as epistemic peers is often thought to be to 'split the difference' when you can or, when you cannot, to 'suspend judgment' and treat the matter as an 'open question'.[201] When out of a misplaced sense of fairness or impartiality, or respect for someone's official position, people treat reports from deliberate liars in that same way, they are led – quite wrongly, from an epistemic point of view – to the same state of epistemic agnosticism, treating as open questions matters of fact that are really firmly settled.[202]

The tendency to take into account false claims from others, even against your own better judgment, has various sources. Some are sociological and psychological.[203] Some may even be neurophysiological. In fMRI studies, evidence has been found to suggest that the neurophysiological mechanisms that ordinarily inhibit lying weaken the more lies one tells.[204] Extrapolating from those studies, we might imagine that related neurophysiological mechanisms making us resent being lied to weaken the more often we have been lied to.

Be all that as it may, there is clear evidence of deep skepticism among both the US and UK electorates about any and all purported truth claims politicians made during the 2016 campaigns. Nearly half of UK voters believed that both sides were

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[201] Such was the classical approach anyway, culminating perhaps with Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics*: 'the denial by another of a proposition that I have affirmed has a tendency to impair my confidence in its validity.... And it will be easily seen that the absence of such disagreement must remain an indispensable negative condition of the certainty of our beliefs. For if I find any of my judgements, intuitive or inferential, in direct conflict with a judgement of some other mind, there must be error somewhere: and if I have no more reason to suspect error in the other mind than in my own, reflective comparison between the two judgements necessarily reduces me...to a state of neutrality' (Sidgwick 1907, bk 3, ch 11, § 2, iv). Contemporary commentators take more varied views on the matter; for an overview see Goldman and Blanchard (2015).

[202] Relentlessly negative reporting, of the sort that has become increasingly common, can have the same effect. As Patterson (2016) writes, 'indiscriminate criticism has the effect of blurring important distinctions. Were the allegations surrounding Clinton of the same order of magnitude as those surrounding Trump? It's a question that journalists made no serious effort to answer during the 2016 campaign.'

[203] See for example Asch (1955), Janis (1972) and the many studies that have followed on from them.

[204] Garrett et al. 2016. Engelmann and Fehr 2016.

'mostly telling lies' in the Brexit referendum campaign.[205] Similarly in the US election, a *Washington Post* correspondent's analysis of why repeated reports of Trump's serial lying gained no traction among his supporters was that those people were thinking, 'So what if he doesn't all the time tell the truth? Politicians never do.'[206]

Right-wing activists have mounted a concerted effort, through pseudo-scientific 'shadow statistics' websites, to discredit even official government statistics. Judging from a poll released a month before the 2016 US election, that strategy seems to have worked wonders: 44% of Americans said they distrust official US government economic data.[207] The *Washington Post* commentator reporting this story describes this as 'part of his broader narrative of numerical nihilism' – and it is hard to see how it could be described as anything else.

Inducing people to take an agnostic attitude toward all factual claims can be epistemically almost as damaging instilling beliefs in the truth of false facts. It liberates those in power to implement policies that could only be justified – if they had to be justified, which in an environment of general epistemic agnosticism they do not have to be at all – by arguments based on falsehoods.

21.11. Conclusion: Epistemic Democracy under Threat

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[205] Ipsos MORI 2016, p. 5. In a post-referendum comment, Minister for Brexit, David Davis, dismissed the importance 'the £350m on the side of the bus' lie promulgated by the Leave campaign (discussed in section 21.1.1 above), saying that the voters 'dismissed those things [and] made their judgment on other things' (Stone 2016a).

[206] Margaret Sullivan in Rehm (2016b). Hochschild and Einstein (2015b, pp. 607-8) quote one conservative commentator explaining Trump's long-standing claim that Obama was born in Kenya rather than the US in this way: 'what Donald Trump is doing is questioning things and saying, "Why do we have to just accept everything?" To hold the birther view is to affiliate oneself with an attitude, not a truth claim.... Your average Trump supporter may [simply] think that the proper attitude to have toward America's politicians is contempt.'

[207] Among those who reported themselves as likely to vote for Trump, 'the share is 60%, with nearly half saying they don't trust government economic data "at all"' (Rampell 2016).

What, then, is the real explanation for the Trump and Brexit victories? Probably all of the above, in some measure. Our best guess (and we would claim no more authority for it than that) is this. In the UK, differing priorities, values and interests (likely misperceived) were probably the dominant drivers. In the US, 'fools led by knaves' is probably a larger part of the story – with voters being made more foolish by the malicious undermining of all standards of truth, and knaves being more knavish for their deliberate role in so doing. But as we say, there were almost certainly elements of all the explanations canvassed above at work in both countries.

What are the implications for epistemic theories of democracy? That voters might make mistakes has been part of that story all along. And it has also long been recognized that even large groups of people might be mistaken when they all follow too uncritically the same opinion leaders. What the events of 2016 have brought home with particular force is how much each of those standard caveats must be amplified when voters are systematically subjected to deliberate misinformation and efforts to undermine all bases of information.

The next step in elaborating the epistemic theory democracy lies in finding ways to overcome the deleterious effects of such deliberate lies in politics. But that is not a challenge for epistemic theories alone. It is a challenge for democratic theory of all forms.

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