

# 17084 Post-Truth politics

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Consider how far Donald Trump is estranged from fact. He inhabits a fantastical realm where Barack Obama's birth certificate was faked, and the father of a rival was with Lee Harvey Oswald before he shot John F. Kennedy.

Mr Trump is the leading exponent of "post-truth" politics—a reliance on assertions that "feel true" but have no basis in fact. His impudence is not punished, but taken as evidence of his willingness to stand up to elite power. And he is not alone.

If you believe that politics should be based on evidence, this is worrying. Strong democracies can draw on inbuilt defences against post-truth. Authoritarian countries are more vulnerable.

That politicians sometimes peddle lies is not news: Dictators and democrats seeking to deflect blame for their own incompetence have always manipulated the truth. But post-truth politics is more than just an invention of elites who have been outdone. The term picks out the heart of what is new: that truth is not falsified, or contested, but of secondary importance.

Feelings, not facts, are what matter in this sort of campaigning. Their opponents' disbelief validates the us-versus-them mindset that outsider candidates thrive on. And if your opponents focus on trying to show your facts are wrong, they have to fight on the ground you have chosen.

Post-truth politics has many parents. Some are noble. The questioning of institutions and received wisdom is a democratic virtue. A sceptical lack of deference towards leaders is the first step to reform.

But corrosive forces are also at play. One is anger. Many voters feel let down and left behind, while the elites who are in charge have thrived. They are scornful of the self-serving technocrats who said that the euro would improve their lives and that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Popular trust in expert opinion and established institutions has dropped drastically across Western democracies.

Post-truth has also been helped by the evolution of the media. The fragmentation of news sources has created an atomised world in which lies, rumour and gossip spread with alarming speed. Lies that are widely shared online within a network, whose members trust each other more than they trust any mainstream-media source, can quickly take on the appearance of truth. Presented with evidence that contradicts a belief that is dearly held, people have a tendency to ditch the facts first.

When politics is like pro-wrestling, society pays the cost.