

Science & Society

When liars are considered honest

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This article introduces a theoretical model of truth and honesty from a psychological perspective. We examine its application in political discourse and discuss empirical findings distinguishing between conceptions of honesty and their influence on public perception, misinformation dissemination, and the integrity of democracy.

When honesty relies on sincerity rather than accuracy

People in liberal democracies value honesty in their politicians and prioritize honesty over ‘delivering the goods’ [1]. The perceived integrity of US presidents was an important driver of their approval in the 1980s and 1990s [2]. However, this pattern appears to have broken with the election of Donald Trump in 2016 who, according to fact-checkers, issued more than 30 000 false or misleading claims during his presidency[†]. Notwithstanding the documented record of falsehoods, Trump’s supporters considered him to be honest throughout his presidency. For example, 75% of Republicans considered President Trump ‘honest’ during an NBC poll in April 2018[‡].

How can serial liars be considered honest? This conundrum can be approached from a variety of angles. Here we apply the lens of recent theoretical work that has identified distinct subjective notions of honesty and truth [3–5]. The conceptual landscape of our analysis is shown in [Figure 1](#). The two panels in the figure differentiate

between the closely related, but distinct, concepts of honesty (panel A, left) and truth (panel B, right). Truth refers to the state of assertions vis-a-vis the world. A statement or belief is truthful if it corresponds to the state of the world, and it is false if there is no such correspondence [6]. Honesty, by contrast, refers to the characteristics or traits of a person. Honesty refers to a person’s ability to speak truthfully and with integrity, and their desire to avoid deception [7].

A crucial and novel aspect of our analysis is that it focuses on the psychological processes that translate the invariant conceptual properties of truth and honesty into a subjective, experienced perception of truthfulness and honesty. In the case of truth, those processes describe what people consider a reliable way to arrive at the truth. Building on previous work [8], we differentiate between an evidence-based and an intuition-based approach to truth. The former is based on the recognition that one’s beliefs must be based on analysis of evidence, whereas the latter is based on the idea that ‘gut feelings’, intuition, and attitudes are sufficient to establish the truth of an assertion.

Reliance on those alternative processes can give rise to very different ‘truths’ in the eyes of different beholders.

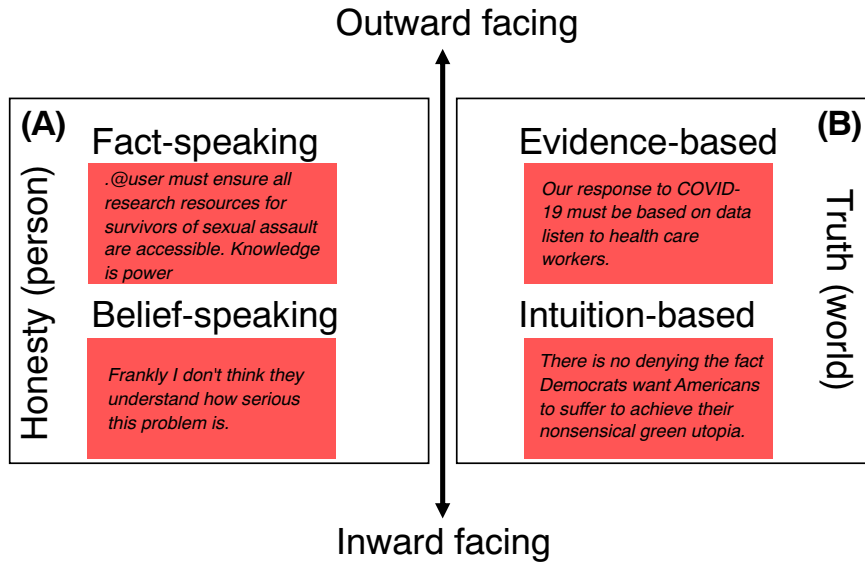
In the case of honesty, the psychological processes are reflected in the style of rhetoric that is deployed to make an assertion, and in the observers’ perception of that rhetoric. Building on previous work [3–5], we differentiate between fact-speaking and belief-speaking. The former, similar to an evidence-based approach to truth, considers the veracity of a statement and seeks to communicate the actual state of the world. The latter is concerned with sincere and authentic expression of beliefs and is thus more concerned with a person’s mental state than the state of the world.

The conceptual landscape in [Figure 1](#) can guide our approach to explaining the conundrum of Trump’s perceived honesty. When Donald Trump claims that vaccines cause autism, he is stating a clear falsehood, but he may nonetheless express a sincerely held – if mistaken – belief. Arguably it is the sincerity of expression that underlies his followers’ perception of honesty. Donald Trump’s tweets have been identified as being highly authentic [9], and given the public’s strong craving for authentic politicians^{‡‡}, the deployment of belief-speaking rhetoric offers a window into how Trump may be considered honest. By contrast, when evaluated from a fact-speaking or evidence-based perspective, Donald Trump’s claim about autism – and his more than 30 000 other falsehoods – cannot be seen as honest. This may explain why the vast majority of Democrats^{‡‡‡} do not consider Trump to be honest.

We have recently begun to apply our conceptual analysis to the supply and demand side of American political discourse. The supply side refers to speech by politicians and the focus there is on analyzing its veracity and style of rhetoric. The demand side refers to the public’s attitudes towards honesty and truth, and the focus there is on establishing the extent to which people rely on evidence or intuition as a pathway to truth.

The supply side

Much scholarly attention has been devoted to the problem of misinformation, but only recently has focus shifted to the supply side. For example, Lasser *et al.* [10] examined four million tweets posted by all members of the US Congress on Twitter between 2011 and 2022, and considered the quality of news sources shared in those tweets. That study found that Republican members of Congress generally shared more low-quality information than their Democratic counterparts, with that gap widening over time and a pronounced acceleration in 2020.



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Figure 1. The conceptual landscape of truth and honesty. (A) Distinct conceptions of honesty with examples of fact-speaking and belief-speaking taken from a database of tweets posted between 2016 and 2022 by US Congress members [4]. Honesty is concerned with the attributes of a person. (B) Distinct conceptions of truth. Truth is not concerned with an individual's position but with how the state of the world is characterized. The top part of each panel refers to conceptions of truth or honesty that are outward-facing and hence are concerned with veracity and make contact with the world. The bottom part refers to inward-facing conceptions that consider primarily the mental state of an individual and are not directly concerned with the state of the world. Abbreviation: COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019.

This set of congressional tweets formed the basis for an analysis within the landscape in Figure 1 [4]. We analyzed those four million tweets with the aid of dictionaries that were developed and validated to capture fact-speaking and belief-speaking [4]. Using distributed dictionary representations (DDR) [11], we assigned to each tweet two scores based on how similar it was to quintessential intuitive belief-speaking (words such as ‘feel’, ‘guess’, ‘suppose’) and evidence-based fact-speaking (‘analyze’, ‘evidence’, ‘evaluate’). The advantage of the DDR approach is that we are not simply counting the occurrence of words in text because each dictionary word is converted into an ‘embedding’, that is, a high-dimensional vector representation that captures a word’s meaning in relation to language overall. Thus, text can be high in belief-speaking or fact-speaking without containing many, or indeed any, of the specific words in the dictionary.

For both parties, both belief-speaking and fact-speaking increased considerably after Trump’s election in 2016. Striking differences between parties emerged, however, when we related the content of tweets to the quality of news sources they linked to. We used NewsGuard ratings to ascertain the quality of a domain being shared in a tweet. NewsGuard rates the trustworthiness of news domains on a 100-point scale based on established journalistic criteria such as differentiating between news and opinion, regularly publishing corrections, and so on, without, however, providing fact-checks of individual articles.

For both parties, the quality of the domain increased with increasing fact-speaking. By contrast, for belief-speaking, we found that for Republicans, a 10% increase in belief-speaking was associated with a 12.8-point decrease in the quality of the cited source. For tweets by Democratic

members of Congress, no such association was observed. It appears that the expression of beliefs is a potential gateway to misinformation, which in this case was exploited by Republicans but not by Democrats.

On their own, those findings do not explain why Donald Trump was considered honest by his supporters, but they do establish the pervasive presence of a notion of honesty that relies on sincerity rather than accuracy in American political speech. To understand why Trump might be considered honest by his followers, we must turn to an analysis of the demand side.

The demand side

The day Trump was inaugurated, his press secretary wrongly stated that the inauguration had had the largest attendance ever, a claim easily debunked by consulting photos of other inaugurations. However, in an experiment where participants had to select which inauguration photo (Trump vs. Obama) showed a larger crowd, 26% of highly educated Trump supporters chose the incorrect, less-crowded photo of Trump’s inauguration [12], revealing a preference for loyalty over fact.

Nearly 3 years after the 2020 election, in August 2023, around 70% of Republican voters continued to question the legitimacy of President Biden’s electoral win. More than half of those who questioned Biden’s win believed that there was solid evidence proving that the election was not legitimate^{iv}. However, the purported evidence marshalled in support of this view has been repeatedly and thoroughly discredited [13]. False election beliefs have been found to persist even under conditions known to reduce ‘expressive responding’, that is, responses that express support for a position but do not reflect true belief [14]. It thus appears that – at least among supporters of Donald Trump – there is widespread willingness to accept claims that by evidentiary criteria constitute falsehoods.

Box 1. Implications for policy and society

For democracy to function, citizens must agree on a set of facts and share common knowledge about the integrity of democratic processes such as elections. The apparent mutually reinforcing relationship between supply and demand for sincerity over truth thus endangers democratic processes.

According to the latest report by the World Economic Forum^v, misinformation stands out as the most significant short-term global risk, capable of disrupting elections and exacerbating societal polarization. Political leaders are expected to wield even more substantial influence in defining truth, shaping public opinion, and determining how people perceive and evaluate information in the future. Our examination of these systems points to the shared responsibility of both politicians and the public to counter those trends.

What remains as an agenda for future research is to determine whether the observed acceptance of falsehoods is tied to people's endorsement of belief-speaking and an intuitive approach to truth, or whether some other mechanism might be at play. For example, people's tolerance for falsehoods has been linked to their reliance on the 'gist' of a message which may be true even if a particular claim is not [15].

Concluding remarks

Our analysis has implications for politics, policy, and society (Box 1). Healthy political debate involves both fact-speaking and belief-speaking: political ideas often cannot be contested based on facts alone. Political views also express beliefs and values and are thus partly subjective. Nonetheless, democratic debate is derailed if it is exclusively based on beliefs and disregards factual accuracy.

Numerous interesting and important research questions arise from our analysis. Under what circumstances might people discount sincerity as the sole marker of honesty? Conversely, under what circumstances will people value the importance of factual accuracy? Are there interventions that might be deployed to nudge people towards valuing accuracy without curtailing their democratic rights? Answers to those questions may be essential to secure a democratic future.

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Declaration of interests

No interests are declared.

Resources

ⁱwww.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/

ⁱⁱwww.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/poll-republicans-who-think-trump-untruthful-still-approve-him-n870521

ⁱⁱⁱ<https://medium.com/echelon-indicators/polling-the-republican-primary-electorate-on-the-eve-of-the-first-debate-44ccbae70e8a>

^{iv}<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/08/03/politics/cnn-poll-republicans-think-2020-election-illegitimate/index.html>

^vwww3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_The_Global_Risks_Report_2024.pdf

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