Owning the libs: Post-truth in right-wing political discourse

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Abstract

Emerging in scholarly discussions about political discourse over the past decade, the terms 'post-truth' and 'denialism' refer to disagreement not on public policy strategies but on the nature of truth itself. Policy facts are now contested in ways that disrupt mainstream political narratives and weaken institutional legitimacy. In turn, the technocratic response of doubling-down on facts is faltering as the 'burn it down' vacuity of post-truth declares equivalent political legitimacy. This strident, self-assured irrationality offers few substantive policy visions, seeking only to bewilder and 'own' its perceived enemies including progressive 'elites,' science experts, and academics trying to understand the phenomenon. This article discusses disruption in the political discourse about fact-informed policy issues, focusing on a looming period of epistemic instability and the futility of using systematic analysis and logic to understand post-truth.

Keywords: post-truth, public policy, political economy, partisanship, epistemology, climate change, Covid-19

1. Introduction: post-truth in scholarship and practice

> *"You all don't get it. I live in Trump country, in the Ozarks in southern Missouri…They don't give a s*** what he* [Trump] *does. He's just something to rally around and hate liberals* [political progressives], *that's it, period…If you keep getting caught up in 'Why do they not realize this problem?'…then you do not understand what the underlying motivating factor of his support is. It's f*** liberals, that's pretty much it."*
>
> Excerpt from quote in Loy (2020)

Whose truth matters? This question lingers over today's numerous policy crises, most of which have complex scientific and social dimensions but no clear solutions. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated quick synthesis of medical knowledge and its integration into policymaking (Hodges et al., 2022; Atkinson et al., 2021; Cairney, 2021; Sear et al.,

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2020; Zaki & Wayenberg, 2020). However, misinformation, political pushback, and anti-science skepticism raged in Western democracies and elsewhere (Peci et al., 2022; Eberl et al., 2021; Mylan & Hardman, 2021). Similarly, climate change has continually faced minimization in the political sphere despite being scientifically confirmed by decades of research (Howlett, 2014; Dunlap & McCright, 2011). Both examples illustrate the disruptive power of post-truth and denialism as political strategies to discredit science and expertise.

Oxford Dictionaries defines post-truth,[2] the Word of the Year in 2016, as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." Bufacchi (2021, p. 350) extends this definition by referencing a strategy of willful obfuscation: "post-truth is a deliberate strategy aimed at creating an environment where objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion, where theoretical frameworks are undermined in order to make it impossible for someone to make sense of a certain event, phenomenon, or experience, and where scientific truth is delegitimized." While deception is no novelty in political discourse, the surge of false or misleading information over the past decade – in the United States, other Western democracies, and around the world – has elicited renewed scholarly attention, with post-truth becoming a catch-all term among researchers and political analysts. Relatedly, the term 'fake news' has been used by political actors seeking to undermine the credibility of their opponents and mainstream media. This article takes the term 'post-truth' to mean willful and strategic fact-denialism in service to political ends.

Did academic scholarship anticipate the rise of post-truth? Critical studies originating with Frankfurt School theorists challenged the notion of universally accepted narratives (or 'truths') in an effort to understand how power structures are discursively reinforced and how social norms shape the construction of knowledge (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011; McGuire, 1990). Such analyses were more diagnostic than prescriptive, despite calls for action-oriented and participatory social research (Hadfield, 2012; Kemmis, 2008). Given the rise of post-truth, could postmodern theories about socially constructed ideas be co-opted by a cynical strategy to obscure or erase politically inconvenient facts? It is difficult to imagine an academic idea like constructivism reaching such a destructive manifestation in, of all places, right-wing populism (Braun & Dodge, 2018; Lakoff, 2017; Speed & Mannion, 2017; Suiter, 2016). Indeed, one struggles to envision Donald Trump's former lawyer Rudy Giuliani (who once claimed that "truth isn't truth"[3]) and former Trump Senior Counselor Kellyanne Conway (who once labeled misinformation as "alternative facts"[4]) as *Rive Gauche* skepticists donning berets and pontificating about the foundations of human knowledge. Curious though this perverse application of an arcane academic idea might seem, the connection is incidental rather than causal (Fischer, 2020; 2019). It is unlikely that any right-wing politician has drawn inspiration, directly or otherwise, from the Frankfurt School; as such, critical theory

can scarcely be blamed for the post-truth movement. Nevertheless, as Fischer (2021) argues, it can be used to analyze post truth and illiberalism more generally.

Where does the post-truth phenomenon leave scholars in their efforts to understand interactions between political discourse and scientific knowledge? To begin, it is important not to take the idea of post-truth as monolithic. I propose that it appears in two forms: tactical strategy and 'burn-it-down' cynicism. Theories about the politicization of truth (Block, 2018; Reyes, 2011), including agnotology (Croissant, 2014; Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008) and anti-intellectualism (Motta, 2018; Rigney, 1991; Hofstadter, 1964), provide a useful initial basis for understanding post-truth. Fischer's examination of policy argumentation through "meanings drawn from ideological value orientations…used discursively to interpret factual data in denial arguments" (2021; p. 2) implies that post-truth presents itself more as the first form (tactical strategy) than the second ('burn-it-down' cynicism). However, there may be a limit to the usefulness of theories drawing on assumptions about rationality when examining post-truth (Perl et al., 2018). To ascribe logic, foresight, and intentionality to the 'burn-it-down' imaginary of second-form post-truth (hereafter, 'post-truth') overlooks the prospect that, as an oppositional force, it lacks epistemological coherence and is defined solely by emotional grievance. In this way, it eludes analysis about the content of its ideas and is instead recognizable only for its rhetorical tools and methods.

This article explores two forces shaping how scholarship can view the post-truth phenomenon (primarily in the American two-party context). The first force is a yawning gap between political poles not merely in policy preferences but in understandings about reality. Without a consensus on initial understandings about policy challenges, debates can disintegrate into irreconcilable claims about what constitutes truth. The mainstream political discourse, practiced by conventional politicians, has few rhetorical tools or conceptual frames to confront challenges to truth itself. Consequently, the discourse is characterized not by meaningful deliberations but at best by actors 'talking past' each other and at worst by accusations, innuendos, and inflammatory rhetoric unmoored from reality. The second force is political stagecraft that substitutes for meaningful discourse. An ideology untethered to a robust and defensible epistemic system is free to operate only on emotions, and the worst of emotions seems to be the most politically profitable – fear, anger, and vindication. The abandonment of reason becomes an erratic force that is indecipherable to its bewildered political opponents. Liberation from the burden of logic elevates supposition and willful ignorance as the currency of debate. 'Owning the libs,' for the right-wing, becomes a matter of denying political opponents the opportunity to engage (and win) policy arguments on agreed epistemic terms. When a given policy stance becomes logically untenable, post-truthers evade the debate by obfuscating inconvenient facts through claims so absurd that they cannot be refuted within mainstream epistemics. The remainder of this article examines these two forces, drawing on scholarly arguments about post-truth in practice and pushing their implications to the farther reaches of thinking about epistemic disruption.

2. Common ground or irreconcilable difference?

Policy scholarship has profitably explored the contours of institutional distrust and the societal dynamics of power structures (Bertsou, 2018; Hardin, 2004; Hart, 1978). Recently shifting social and political contexts are foregrounding these phenomena in new ways. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic in the United States, medical experts like Dr. Anthony Fauci and experts at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention were vilified as operatives of a supposed anti-Trump 'deep state' (Hamblin, 2022). Similarly, the casting of climate change as a catastrophic existential threat has been characterized by climate deniers as "a scare tactic perpetuated by a truth regime made up of climate scientists, politicians and bureaucrats" (Fischer, 2021; p. 44). Challenges to authority are nothing new, but challenges to knowledge and expertise appear to be moving from the fringe to mainstream conservative politics – fuelled in part by distrust (Cairney & Wellstead, 2021; Arimoto & Sato, 2012) but also by something deeper: epistemic instability.

During the Trump presidency, regressive action against science-based policies was swift and resolute: withdrawal from global climate agreements, rollback of environmental regulations, and erasure of language about climate change from government websites (Davenport, 2018). In general, understanding policy visions relies on the crucial assumption that a coherent ideology grounds decisionmaking in predictable ways. By contrast, crisis denialism of the sort championed by the Trump administration gestures towards uncomfortable analytical territory – intentional ignorance of scientific fact. While some fact-denial appears tethered to an ideological core (i.e., the wisdom of markets and crowds as against that of experts[5]), efforts to analytically rationalize post-truth pretends away the nihilist embers of 'burn-it-down' cynicism. From a theoretical perspective, can crisis deniers be viewed as perverse constructivists conscientiously resisting the social embeddedness of science? Or are they simply angry people lashing out at change, including what they fail to understand? If the latter, what more is there to be learned beyond the fields of developmental and social psychology?

To examine this inscrutable side of the truth spectrum, it is helpful to visit the notion of cognitive framing. Borrowing a market-based logic, one can argue that political failings and collective irrationalities are individual ones scaled-up; this proposition steers policy inquiry to applications of individual psychology. For example, prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) can be used to position the (primarily right-wing) post-truth movement as the collective action of individuals in a 'loss-frame' (i.e., one's perception of loss or disadvantage with respect to economic, social, or political issues). This loss-frame suggests that there is nothing to lose by being willfully ignorant or embracing outlandish claims and conspiracy

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[5] *New York Times* columnist Bret Stevens, in a discussion with Gail Collins, succinctly articulated the divide between expert and popular knowledge from the right-wing perspective: "This is a major difference between liberals and conservatives. Modern-day liberals are often quite happy to defer to the wisdom of experts, at least when it comes to subjects like public health or economics. Whereas those of us who are conservative tend to be — skeptical. We prefer the wisdom of crowds, or markets, to the wisdom of the purportedly wise. It goes back to William F. Buckley Jr.'s famous line that he'd rather 'be governed by the first 2,000 people in the telephone directory than by the Harvard University faculty.'"
(https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/opinion/ukraine-hunter-biden-time.html accessed 2 June 2022)

theories. In such cases, the notion of a 'plausibility structure' (rationality or meaning found only within a particular ring-fenced worldview; see Fischer, 2021; p. 24) is not applicable because truth and meaning are not objectives of post-truth. The movement requires no intellectual ballast or plausibility, only personal loyalty (in many cases, to charismatic leaders).

The current manifestation of regressive politics seems to believe that 'my truth' supersedes not only 'your truth' but also truth itself; in other words, 'my truth' may not need to be true at all, but it deserves respect from mainstream society as legitimate truth-equivalence. The nuanced distinction is that, for post-truthers, scientific facts are constructed unfairly in social space (e.g., among predatory political agents and their expert enablers) and therefore not above reproach. The alternative epistemic – post-truth's own logics and constructed realities, such as they exist coherently – affords a peculiar role to those who dismiss the need for fact-verification: not to inform society at large but to amuse sympathizers (van Prooijen et al., 2022) and baffle opponents (a *sine qua non* of 'owning' them). This role partly explains the thirst to embrace outlandish conspiracy theories that have overtly political dimensions (e.g., that Bill Gates created the Covid-19 virus to profit from the vaccine and institute population surveillance[6]). It is prudent to ask, then, whether people embrace conspiracy theories in the face of contradicting information only to assert a territorial claim to their own thoughts – a bid for intellectual self-determination that declares independence from any authority whatsoever.[7] This rugged cognitive self-sovereignty appears, for example, in pushback against knowledge elites and in growing right-wing antipathy toward education (Berkshire & Schneider; 2022; Lerer & Peters, 2021). Whatever the forces driving it, post-truth is best evaluated not for the validity of alternative truths it proposes (as this is not the objective of post-truth) but for the degree to which the movement weaponizes mainstream truth out of political cynicism and 'nothing-to-lose' resignation. Political anger and 'payback' appear to be motivating factors, as discussed in the next section.

3. Descent into a politics of payback and absurdity

At their extreme, post-truthers seem committed only to 'owning the libs'[8] – that is, defeating and embarrassing the political left wing (Blake, 2022; Friedersdorf, 2021).[9] This owning is a

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[6] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/technology/bill-gates-virus-conspiracy-theories.html (accessed 2 June 2022)

[7] Consider the long-running preoccupation of the American political right-wing with the idea of 'thought police' (Bruce, 2010) and 'political correctness' (Spencer, 1994).

[8] The term 'lib' is contemptuous slang for 'liberal.' In the United States, 'liberal' refers generally to the left wing (as represented principally by the Democratic Party or Green Party) and adherents of socially 'progressive' ideals (as opposed to 'conservative' ideals). The term, as used in this article, is not to be confused with its use in the UK or in some Commonwealth countries, where it refers generally to adherents of (largely fiscal) 'free-market' conservative ideals. For a recent discussion about differences between 'liberal' and 'conservative' ideologies, the alignment of those ideologies with American political parties, and the influence of loyalty on party choice, see Barber & Pope (2019).

[9] Deserving a footnote is additional content from the social media post quoted at the beginning of this article. This comment exemplifies some salient aspects of post-truth and the phenomenon's relevance to discussions

accessible lure needing little intellectual reflection to embrace, and it signals a discursive capitulation in which terms of debate are shifted away from interpretations of facts and toward 'alternative facts' ranging from plausible to comically outlandish. Indeed, the post-truth movement, as reflective of Bret Stevens' 'wisdom of crowds,' is not renowned for its nuanced policy stances on, for example, the monetary system, national intelligence, and foreign affairs – let alone public health and epidemiology. Accordingly, the movement's intellectual vacuity escorts post-truthers to predictable eventualities. They may leave the task of fact-finding to the diminishing supply of sources they trust (e.g., Fox News and other partisan media outlets like OANN and Breitbart). They may interpret information through the prism of a skeptical and grievance-ridden worldview – a shelf-ready lens that translates nuance and complexity into familiar frames, comfortable narratives, and delicious opportunities for rage. The less common eventuality is that post-truthers educate themselves about what they do not know and withhold from producing or sharing information about topics they do not understand or do not want to take the time to understand (Hartley & Vu, 2020); this is likely the least alluring option for the median post-truther, as the Dunning-Kruger effect suggests (Dunning, 2011). When none of these options generates a satisfying feeling, 'owning the libs' becomes a safe harbor – a battle whose victory is easy to declare in its ambiguity.

In addition to intellectual vacuity, ideological vacuity gives post-truthers the epistemic freedom to wallow in simplistic grievances attributable to 'libs.' In the United States, these grievances include policy assaults on 'family values' and the Christian religion (e.g., transgender rights, gay marriage, and abortion), liberal bias in the media, and conspiracy theories including election fraud, elite globalist cabals, and participation by politicians in human trafficking.[10] For the post-truth movement, broad societal consensus is not the point; opposition of this extreme sort thrives only in political and discursive chaos. The airing of grievances and punishment of political enemies (Fischer's 'evil other'; 2021, p. 12) is as far as post-truth ventures intellectually or strategically, and any glimmer of discursive coherence is intended only to bolster the plausibility of weaponized claims in the minds of aggrieved parties searching for their safe identitarian harbor. Even after being elected or gaining broad influence, post-truth politicians must reinforce the perception of victimhood to maintain an us-against-them narrative; this behavior reflects post-truth's strong ties to populism (Sengul, 2019; Harsin, 2018). In this way, the movement's lack of sincerity short-circuits any efforts by the opposition to find a collective middle ground. The

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about epistemics and collective understandings of facts (Loy, 2020): "Have you noticed he [Trump] can do pretty much anything imaginable, and they'll [Trump supporters] explain some way that rationalizes it that makes zero logical sense? Because they're not even keeping track of any coherent narrative, it's irrelevant. F*** liberals is the only relevant thing…That's why they just laugh at it all because you all [outside observers] don't even realize they truly don't give a f*** about whatever the conversation is about. It's just a side mission story that doesn't matter anyway. That's all just trivial details – the economy, health care, whatever. F*** liberals."

[10] https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html (accessed 2 June 2022)

disingenuous politics of conservative victimhood feeds from its own navel and is resolutely hostile to compromise and self-reflection.[11]

Embedded within the post-truth movement's indignant core, if not explicitly, are some issues that objectively require policy attention – socio-economic inequality and lack of equal access to government services in healthcare and education. These are two of only a precious handful of opportunities to bring both political sides together. If motivations are sincere, there lies an opportunity to productively discuss not only policy interventions but also the nature and sources of policy knowledge (what Fischer (2021) describes as 'sociopolitical knowledge'[12]). When a sincere desire for dialogue and compromise is lacking among post-truthers, politicians, political pundits, and academics wring their hands about how to rationally re-engage – failing to realize that they themselves have been unwittingly 'owned' because discussion and compromise were never on the post-truth agenda. This discursive dead-end hearkens to a potentially deeper crisis in two-party systems: political tribalism and dualism, opportunism and subterfuge, a widening gap between points of view, and denialist rhetoric taking a destructive and conspiratorial turn. Any overtures to compromise are seen by post-truthers as weakness and betrayal. These are indeed the bitter and regressive politics of payback.

What role can theory play in understanding this mess? As argued by Fischer (2021), interpretive policy analysis offers a systematic framework for cracking the puzzle, as do concepts like collaborative and participatory governance. The Advocacy Coalition Framework illustrates similar challenges by demonstrating how parties with differing core beliefs can rally around a particular policy objective. However, where do such frameworks turn when a deep-seated epistemic cleft emerges between post-truthers and everyone else? What can be done when parties differ not over rudimentary policy tools and tactical strategies but over deep-seated issues like the veracity of climate science, the presence of systemic racial and gender bias, and the nature of knowledge itself? Is collaboration still possible after the proverbial well is poisoned with self-evident, rhetorical flimflam?

In addressing these questions, it is helpful to consider that post-truthers do not frame their movement as an epistemic revolution; they arguably do not think that deeply or that far ahead. My proposition is that their performative absurdity intends only to baffle those trying to understand it. Logic and analysis are said by post-truthers to be terms of an oppressive

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[11] Deserving another footnote is additional content from the social media post quoted at the beginning of this article (Loy, 2020): "You've got to understand the one core value that they [Trump supporters] hold above all others is hatred for what they consider weakness – because that's what they believe strength is, hatred of weakness…Kindness = weakness. Honesty = weakness. Compromise = weakness…They consider liberals to be weak people that are inferior, almost a different species, and the fact that liberals are so weak is why they have to unite in large numbers, which they [Trump supporters] find disgusting, but it's that disgust that is a true expression of their natural superiority. Go ahead and try to have a logical, rational conversation with them." This view is also reflected in, among other places, an *Atlantic* article entitled "The Cruelty is the Point" (https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/the-cruelty-is-the-point/572104/ accessed 2 June 2022).

[12] According to Fischer (2020), "unlike the positivist approach to scientific knowledge, which strives for empirical impartiality, such sociopolitical knowledge, focused on social meanings, is a normative fusion of ideas, values, factual information, situational circumstances, probable consequences and political interests." (p. 35)

discourse promoted by elite agents of knowledge (e.g., consultants, scientists, and academia); the upshot is that mainstream policy knowledge leads most often to conclusions and outcomes that post-truthers simply dislike, for any number of reasons. Bafflement felt by those trying to understand post-truth is the intended consequence of 'owning' – that is, the movement's final desperate claim to independence from inconvenient facts is to have its tactics remain indecipherable to mainstream terminological and epistemic structures. In their grievance-laden loss-frame, post-truthers have nothing to gain by submitting to rational observation or being legible to an analytic construct they fail to understand and wholly reject. When examining an ideology intent on achieving nothing specific but to demean and embarrass its opponents, even the most systematic analysis provides no satisfying conclusions. So, stop trying to figure it out. The shifting goalposts and discursive equivocation are an epistemic shell game without the ball. Perhaps I, too, have been 'owned' in attempting to understand this movement.

4. The unsatisfying way forward: muddling toward mutual understanding

In closing, it is helpful to regard the current era's gratingly relentless political contention as an equilibrium state generated by perverse co-dependency. This perspective provides a clue to how the post-truth era may evolve in the long-run. Given that the movement feeds off resentment against the alleged hubris of political and knowledge elites, doubling-down on facts and the credibility of expertise (particularly by a scientific community cynically perceived to be in total consensus; see Moore & MacKenzie, 2020) provides post-truthers with an opportunity to claim that elites still do not 'get it.' In turn, the policy-technocratic and scientific communities appear ever more valid and trustworthy in the eyes of the mainstream body politic as long as post-truth remains a vivid foil in its raging irrationality. Both sides benefit from this tension in the eyes of their own supporters, so there is little incentive to defect from their respective positions in the interest of compromise.

The intersection of knowledge and governance highlights Wildavsky's (1979) famous aphorism 'speaking truth to power.' However, it appears that the post-truth movement is focused on speaking anything besides truth to power. Donning the cloak of plausibility, even for wilfully deceptive claims, has historically been a strategy for engaging with mainstream political discourse on rational and evidence-based terms. However, plausibility appears to be only a peripheral concern to the post-truth movement, where outlandish claims and conspiracy theories are more about fomenting discursive chaos and frustrating opponents. Has rationalism overplayed its credibility, particularly as large subgroups of the population remain frustrated with their economic or social circumstances and see no other strategy?[13] In

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[13] The origins of post-truth, as a largely right-wing phenomenon often associated with illiberalism and anti-democratic ideas, are often associated with grievance born of socio-economic inequality. However, there are numerous other explanations. For example, Nichols (2021) argues that illiberal sentiments result from the general ennui of higher living standards and exploitation by political opportunists of grievances both real and contrived. Referencing suburban London life, Ballard (2006) offers a similar explanation with regard to the collective ennui of comfortable affluence: "the suburbs dream of violence. Asleep in their drowsy villas, sheltered by benevolent shopping malls, they wait patiently for the nightmares that will wake them into a

this vein, does the way forward call for epistemic modesty and a force of reason that is at once gentler but more assertive? Or is the post-truth era a waiting game – even a war of attrition – in which rationality and logic could be gradually eroded to the point where neutral observers are unable to recognize truth at all? These are questions for further research.

Any overture to compromise is, in my view, likely to come from the non-post-truth camp because a permanent state of contention appeals more to post-truth logic. At the same time, epistemic instability (e.g., the diminishing credibility of legacy policy ideas and narrative frames) is a looming reality that must be recognized by rational politicians and policy analysts. My colleague Glen Kuecker and I (2022) have called for changes in mainstream policy thinking amidst epistemic instability: "remaining flexible, resourceful, and open minded is the only way policymakers can assume the posture needed for this epistemic shift" (p. 61). For this scenario to be realized, one should expect both sides – and post-truthers in particular – to commit on some level to sincere dialogue and compromise. However, the prospects for such commitment are dim when considering how far apart the sides are, not only politically but also factually and epistemically. Scholarly ideas about collaboration, participation, and deliberation have existed for some time, but should the policy field contort itself trying to understand a movement so irrational and destructive – let alone using theoretical frames developed in a bygone era of relative epistemic stability and fact-consensus? If post-truth is a puzzle worth solving, more research is needed and it may look nothing like what currently exists. As I state in a recent book review (Hartley, 2022; p. 380), "epistemic disruption and transition must, in my view, become principal analytical frames moving forward."

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more passionate world." The desire for struggle, regardless of the cause, is referenced at the macro level of global society by Fukuyama (1992), who states "They will struggle for the sake of struggle. They will struggle, in other words, out of a certain boredom: for they cannot imagine living in a world without struggle. And if the greater part of the world in which they live is characterized by peaceful and prosperous liberal democracy, then they will struggle against that peace and prosperity, and against democracy."

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