Donald Trump’s presidency was a wild ride for the American public. His populist attempt to turn American politics on its head was anti-democratic, anti-media, racist, and anti-science. Waging “war on truth,” Trump sought to fundamentally turn the political system toward the contemporary variant of right-wing conservatism. Despite losing the 2020 election, his populist “post-truth” politics is still very much alive and threatens to have a lasting effect on American politics. It is today impossible to understand US politics, including the role of scientific expertise in policy politics, without taking this ongoing post-truth populism into account.

Posing questions with no easy answers, this political phenomenon will continue to engage both pundits and scholars for some time. As one writer put it, “Trump and his enablers have accomplished something even more dangerous than trying to run a government on gut feeling and conspiracy theories” (Nichols, 2019). By attacking “the sources of authoritative knowledge” they have not only deeply divided the country, they have done it in a way that has “inoculated a large swath of the American public against ever being informed about anything, providing millions of Americans with a resistance to learning that will long outlive his administration” (Ibid). For many of them, the scientific community is simply anti-Trump and should best be ignored.

**Trump’s Populism: Fake News and Conspiracy Theories**

From the outset, Trump showed little interest in governing. Not only did he demonstrate scant knowledge about how the government works, he largely left the job to others, in many cases people with little or no expertise. Rather than showing much regard for the specifics of public policy and policymaking, Trump concentrated on...
advancing populist rhetoric. This was famously carried out on a daily basis via Twitter, sometimes sending out roughly thirty tweets per day, most often responding to what he called “fake news” about his administration.

4 This came to be widely discussed as “post-truth,” a phenomenon in which scientific facts take a back seat to emotionally charge populist rhetoric (Fischer, 2019, 2021). Insofar as post-truth politics refers to situations in which objective facts – the stuff of expertise – are less important in shaping public opinion than political appeals to emotions, Trump’s affective politics was centered around what came to be called “alternative facts” (MacIntyre, 2017). Given that rigorously pursuing truth with tested methods is generally considered to be the raison d’être of science, post-truth politics challenges its very core. Such a politics is thus described as a form of irrationalism that offers no firm basis for uncovering reliable policy-oriented facts required for the guidance of society.

5 Basic to Trump’s populism, like populism generally, is an effort to call “into question the institutional order by constructing an underdog as an historical agent” (Laclau, 2005, p. 13). His success in this effort seriously exacerbated a deep division between the underdogs and the powerful elites in the U.S. The populist rhetoric of the underdogs antagonistically focuses on mistrust of powerful political and economic elites, nativism, anti-immigration and opposition to foreigners, xenophobia and racist attitudes, ethnonationalism, and challenges to conventional understandings of science and truth. Giving rise to deep entrenchments, these political divisions came to be more defined in emotional terms than in policy differences (Silver, 2021).

6 The chief targets of this vitriolic brand of politics have been liberal politicians, the mainstream media, and policy experts. All of them have been dubbed by Trump as “enemies of the people,” with the exception of Fox News, which emerged as an official voice for Trump and his brand of populist rhetoric. As a consequence, Trump’s “know-nothing politics” has led to an interruption of the traditional flow of authoritative information, featuring strategic falsehoods that can appear very believable to those who consume them (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 122). Essentially, the strategy has worked to divide the information system itself, the result of which is now an underlying split between the mainstream media and those of the conservative movement, in particular the radical right. Today, people who belong to the radical right in the U.S. and, to varying degrees in other countries, can find alternative media promoting competing versions of daily reality itself. And, as part of the strategy, these alternative knowledge “silos” are facilitated by a cadre of right-wing policy experts who supply the counter-arguments, as often as not facilitated by right-wing think tanks (Laundry, 2020).

7 On offer is a parallel political reality that portrays the Democratic Party, advised by liberal policy experts, as engaged in a conspiratorial attempt to undercut the free market system with a socialist state directed by a dictatorial government of technocrats. The result is seen to be a dramatic restriction of Constitutionally guaranteed freedoms. As difficult as it can be to believe, a large percentage of the Republican Party public has signed on to this alternative story. When coupled with the contention that the election was stolen from Trump, Biden is rejected as the legitimate president. Consequently, the Republican strategy is to just say “no” to Biden’s policy programs. Indeed, despite Biden’s push for bipartisanship, not a single Republican in the Senate voted for his science-based Covid rescue legislation. There are, moreover,
party hopefuls rushing to Trump in Florida to ask for his blessings. All indications still show that the Republican Party belongs to the ex-president (Edsall, 2021).

**Alternative Facts: Attack on Science and Policy Evidence**

8 Trump often expressed negative opinions about scientific expertise and relied on his own alternative experts. In many cases, his decisions can be seen as relatively straightforward political efforts to support particular interests, such as the fossil fuel industry in the case of environmental policy. But in other instances, his machinations have been advanced mainly to echo the rhetoric of the right-wing media and the populist movement’s message.

9 Most of Trump’s pronouncements as president have been viewed, in one way or another, as unadulterated self-serving propaganda. He claimed, for example, that there was a deep state conspiracy among government scientists, whose primary purpose was to damage him politically. Surrounding himself by loyal “yes men,” he felt free to say anything that came to mind with few constraints. He even managed to find an economist who stated that his function was “to try to provide the underlying analytics that confirm [Trump’s] intuition” (Terris, 2018).

10 Trump’s war on scientific expertise was particularly prominent in the cases of environmental and coronavirus policies. From the outset, expertise was assigned a backseat. It took him 19 months to name a White House science advisor, during which time he proposed large budget reductions to most science agencies. Often he pressured these agencies to adjust the reporting of their findings and policy recommendations to suit his political interests and personal preferences. In many cases, data was banned or particular studies were deliberately ignored. Frequently, excessive influence by the businesses affected by regulations was discovered. Often career scientists were asked to help classify products in ways that would make it more difficult for the agencies to monitor them (Terris, 2018).

11 Given the damaging effects this had on science-oriented institutions and researchers generally, policy experts throughout government complained that the distortion and depression of policy-oriented evidence weakened scientific integrity generally (Nichols, 2017). Although such undermining pertained to all policy issues, the attack on environmental experts was especially blatant from the beginning. Environmental experts in government were pushed aside and replaced with political appointees loyal to the president.

12 Trump’s first EPA administrator, Scott Pruitt was a climate denier of the first order. Spreading the disinformation of the right-wing media, he viewed climate change policies as a subversive strategy to secure a left-wing political program by other means. One of his first steps was to remove the EPA climate change page on the agency’s website, followed quickly by rescinding the climate policies of the Obama administration. This included withdrawing from the International Paris Climate Accord, which Trump called a “hoax.” Pruitt’s successor, Andrew Wheeler, not only continued these policies, but also banned scientists from participation in decision-making processes, replacing them with business lobbyists. In addition, he barred or fired independent experts who received research grants from the EPA (Wise, 2019).
William Reilly, the agency’s administrator under President George Bush, summed it up in no uncertain terms when he wrote: “there is no precedent for the attack on science, the sweep of it…” (Friedman, 2021).

Then, after the Covid-19 pandemic emerged, Trump turned his hostility on the medical community, again deflecting or obscuring expert opinion. At the outset, he sought to blame China and the World Health Organization for failing to inform the US and the rest of the world early enough about the dangers of the virus. To make this point, he threatened to stop U.S. funding to the WHO, even to withdraw altogether. Pressuring health agencies to support his own public announcements, Trump told his supporters not to worry, claiming that Covid-19 was no worse than the common flu, that it was very mild and it would just go away with warmer weather. As medical experts across the country pointed to surging viral transmissions, his response was to propose the use of “miracle” drugs for which there was no scientific evidence of effectiveness. These initial inactions, often echoing the oppositional anti-corona politics of Fox News, and even at times the conspiracies of QAnon, are estimated to have cost hundreds of thousands of lives in the first phase of the pandemic alone.

Further, Trump pushed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to the side, the organization with fundamental responsibility for preventing and dealing with disease outbreaks. Although medical specialists steadily advised policy decision-makers to follow the science, Trump appointed Dr. Scott Ascot, a man with no expertise in virology. Scott took charge of advising the White House on policy responses, overriding the Covid advisory bodies made up of leading epidemiologists and virologists. Ascot, it was widely reported, simply told the president what he wanted to hear. Later, Ascot was censured by his Stanford University colleagues for spreading disinformation.

Enter Biden

From the outset, Biden announced that his administration would be informed by scientific advice. Indeed, he elevated the White House science advisor to a cabinet level position. While Biden’s new administrators concede that there will always be disagreements over how science should inform policy, they found the practices of the Trump Administration to be well beyond what would normally be expected. In light of this, Biden has launched two major inquiries into the misuse of science and expertise in government under Trump, vowing to create new regulations and guidelines to govern future policy decisions. One of these investigations deals with interference in science across the government and the other is more specifically related to the role of expertise in Trump’s Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), considered to be the epicenter of the most egregious political manipulation.

As his first specific counter-measures, Biden rejoined the Paris Climate agreement, stopped the controversial Keystone Pipeline and placed competent administrators in key positions at the EPA. He also reestablished medical advisory bodies to guide an aggressive anti-Covid campaign aimed at getting Americans vaccinated in the shortest time possible.

These are all positive steps that make a difference. But when it comes specifically to countering the continuing post-truth campaign against scientific expertise, the Administration should not neglect the advice offered by the influential Nature magazine (Editorial, 2017). Pointing out that science is a complicated endeavor, often
fraught with disagreements among scientists, the editors argue that one needs to be careful when referring to some opinions as “anti-science.” As they put it, “equally credentialed researchers fall out on whether carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere have passed a tipping point, or on the health risk of sugar.” Indeed, many Republicans who oppose climate change policies are not necessarily anti-science. It can also be that would-be “anti-science” measures do not relate to science per se. As they write, “US politicians who seek to weaken the Environmental Protection Agency, for instance, tend to want to weaken all sorts of federal programs that they see as examples of ‘big government’ interfering in local issues.” In this regard, science has to be recognized as only one factor that political decision-makers have to take into consideration in choosing policy positions on complex issues.

In dealing with this challenge, Democrats should be careful not to repeat the previous mistakes of those who have tried to come to grips with post-truth and anti-science. Instead of just criticizing or writing off post-truth politics as ignorant or irrational, they need to recognize that more is at stake than just facts. That is, better facts and fact-checking, while important, do not to speak to underlying dimensions of post-truth politics. Various studies have shown that the real concern tends to be about the social and political implications of the facts, rather than the facts themselves (for an extended discussion see Fischer, 2021). It is in this sense that post-truthers often use the phrase “alternative facts,” as a way to point to other societal considerations that they hold to be more important. Indeed, they frequently reject experts who offer empirical evidence while failing to recognize or acknowledge that the meaning of the data does not speak for itself.

Post-truth populists, as already pointed out, believe they are confronting a technoliberal regime that does not work for them, a system in which they do not feel heard or represented (a concern shared, in fact, by populists on both the left and right). Their denial is thus as much or more a rejection of the sociopolitical system as it is the scientific facts related to climate change or Covid-19. This position could surely prove to be dangerously irrational for them in the long run, but it is not the case that they have no issues in need of attention.

Science’s problem is that it is serving – intendedly or unintendedly – an existing system and its knowledge regime. QAnon followers reject it by saying that science is a method, but not a belief system. They argue that science is politically corrupted by liberalism and is thus illegitimate. In this sense, it is not expertise per se, but rather the system that is taken to be the problem. For science, however, this political interpretation, if not its consequences, can be the same. From this perspective, scientists can only win the trust of these people by serving a more just societal system. Short of this, given that scientific experts cannot change the system, they need to recognize that their research largely serves particular social and political purposes and speak to that. Professional communities need to understand that their findings are introduced into a system that ascribes social and political meanings to them. Without addressing this, one way or another, their expertise is seen to be tacitly complicit. Standing behind the standard claim to be neutral only contributes to the problem.
Reorienting Science-Based Policy Expertise

This raises questions that require a rethinking of scientific communication, a field unto itself. The effort should begin by recognizing that all subscribers to the post-truth idea are not the same. Those who are only interested in creating chaos with disinformation have to be approached differently than others who misguided believe the falsehoods. These are malevolent characters for which there is little that can be done other than finding ways to shut them out (blocking their twitter accounts, for example). The second category of followers are in significant part susceptible to disinformation because of social anxieties and economic hardships that leave them worried about their futures. With these people, one can try to reason about facts and science.

In this regard, it is interesting to note, even if only parenthetically, that there is some recent polling data that offers some reason for qualified optimism on this front. A global study that included the United States shows that trust in science and expertise has begun to rise. In the United States there was nearly a ten percent increase since 2018 in the number of people who said that they had “a lot of trust in scientists.” One potential explanation for this can be the increased contact that people have had with the medical community as result of Covid, in particular with their own doctors. One should also not overlook a decrease of anti-science disinformation of the sort that was regularly spewed out from the Trump White House (Imbler, 2021). At the same time, however, the findings continue to confirm the partisans divide, with far more Democrats trusting science than Republicans.

As part of the efforts to increase these numbers, liberals need to recognize that a politics based on an overly technocratic understanding of policymaking, including a one-dimensional overemphasis on science in governing Coronavirus policy, typically alienates those who need to be won over. The temptation to demonize the political right as irrationally anti-science thus stumbles over a one-sided emphasis on cold instrumental facts promoted by most scientific experts. They also need to acknowledge that the science related to climate and Covid is also complicated and not always without its problems. Thus, just “listening to the science” is not always a sure guide to effective decision-making. Moreover, science alone can seldom settle issues in the public realm (Fischer, 1995).

Policy experts need to acknowledge the emotional nature of human beings and understand, as such, that passionate demands advanced by citizens, even when misguided or irrational, are not simply the enemy of reason. Indeed, as contemporary research makes clear, we need to recognize that emotions undergirding the post-truth movement exist in many ways as warning signals that call attention to anxiety-making problems that need attention. Politics, we should not forget, is about dealing with problems that passions bring forward, whether policies related to Black Lives Matter, or electoral fraud, or Covid medical statistics.

Solutions to post-truth are not easy to come by. Biden has sought – wisely – to lower the political temperature. To this end, he has simply refused to throw fuel on the fire by not mentioning Trump’s name or explicitly responding to most of the claims advanced by post-truthers. He has, in this respect, approached the current situation as if things are now “normal” and it is time to get on with business, knowing full well that the times are anything but normal. In terms of getting on with business nothing could be more important than making progress in dealing with a societal system that is
economically and socially unjust. Reducing the anxieties created by these inequities is essential. This is a tall order, but one can hope that Biden’s American Recovery Plan, economic infrastructure plan and possible tax increases on corporations and the rich can in different ways contribute to this. Nothing would do more to undercut post-truth politics than a dramatic resurgence of a socially just political economy.

The challenge also has to confront the need to regulate media sites that trade in disinformation. The spread of disinformation about science on social media has become both economically profitable and politically advantageous for particular groups and needs to be reined in. Although this can raise complicated political and legal issues, including censorship, there’s no shortage of competing solutions. Missing, though, has been the political will to do it. The Biden Administration should prioritize efforts to get behind the growing push to find ways to block the deliberate spread of misinformation, perhaps a task for a new Science Cabinet-level Department.

Not least important, there is the need for a new discursive politics (York, 2018). Deliberation alone is not the solution to post-truth resistance. However, given that discourse is part of political struggle, there is a role for public deliberation. Although there are no guarantees, deliberation can be an important precondition for ameliorating post-truth politics. Toward this end, there should be new political efforts to create regular discursive interactions that bring together the everyday intelligence of the broad public and the expertise of the scientific community. Potentially opening a way for more meaningful discussions, this could improve the chances of finding enough common ground to permit new and different policy ideas to be discussed. The advantage here is that such deliberation can help to chisel away at the entrenched information silos that shape the politics of the competing political tribes. What we know is that if these groups do not interact with one another, there is very little chance of a post-truth breakthrough.

Toward this end, expert communities could adopt a Deweyan perspective and assume a public enlightenment function. The task here would not only involve presenting the relevant data, but also offering a discussion of what they mean for political and societal relationships. Rather than hiding behind the canon of scientific neutrality, expert communities, especially with the help of social scientists and communications scholars, could work to establish a range of public forums for this purpose. Perhaps with the help of an institution such as the National Academy of Sciences, this kind of effort could draw on practical lessons from a number of deliberative models, such as deliberative polling and citizen juries. The most impressive deliberative practice, in this regard, was developed by the Danish Board of Technology, which decided to replace its narrow technical focus with a public enlightenment function. To good purpose, this permitted panels of citizens to interrogate experts before TV cameras in the Danish Parliament.

Both future elections and meaningful policy deliberations will ultimately depend on the success of a mix of these kinds of efforts (Marsden & Meyer, 2019). But the longer the present divisions continue to define politics in the United States, the longer it will take to move forward an effective policy agenda. It could be that Biden’s nonpartisan tone sets the right voice for this, but this will be a long struggle and such political efforts will need the help of a larger national discourse. The absence of open interactive discussions about topics such as climate change, coronavirus or electoral fraud, leaves a vacuum which those orchestrating post-truth politics can all too easily fill. In an effort to help close this vacuum, such deliberative innovations can offer a place to start.
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NOTES

1. Speaking of conservatism in the United States today can be difficult. Although it is commonplace to speak of right-wing conservatism, this does not apply to traditional conservative thought based on a serious political philosophy that rejects all forms of extremism in favor of advancing a stable social order. The contemporary right-wing departure from traditional conservative principles in the United States is most clearly evidenced in the radical...
right’s political assault on the sanctity of the Constitution and the social and political order it enshrines.

2. In a more detailed discussion of science one could take note of the fact that science pursues truth through the processes of doubt governed by the principles of verification. As such, the core of the scientific method can ironically give support to the purveyors of ‘post-truth’ to the extent to which they seek to sow doubt about science and expertise. Because the core of the method is itself ‘doubt’ the possibility of falsifying any particular scientific finding is essential to establishing it. This caution, built into scientific procedures – along with the need to continually revise scientific conclusions – can easily be twisted to serve ‘post-truth’ purposes. But to the degree that this is done by deniers, it typically involves more than a degree of deception and hypocrisy deliberately designed to generate misinformation.

3. Populist, ironically, fail to recognize that they are themselves following political elites, in particular Trump and his political associates such as Steve Bannon.

4. Failure to acknowledge that science can make errors can plan into the hands of its post-truth opposition.

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