Truthfulness, pluralism and the ethics of democratic representation

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Abstract

It is sometimes suggested that even democratic politicians need to dirty their hands in ways that render hypocrisy, lying and deception unavoidable and even justified. By contrast, we draw on John Rawls' *Political Liberalism* to argue that the 'reasonable disagreements' occasioned by the 'fact of pluralism' that make democratic politics necessary can only be resolved in ways congruent with democratic norms if politicians are truthful in Bernard Williams' sense, and adhere to the related virtues of 'sincerity' and 'accuracy'. Supplementing Eric Beerbohm's 'relational model' of campaign ethics with Suzanne Dovi's account of the 'good representative', we argue that these both entail the virtues of truthfulness. We contend the contemporary crisis of representation associated with the rise of technocracy and populism can be linked to the ways both undermine these virtues through their common rejection of pluralism and the related need for truthfulness. Consequently, both involve deformations of 'good' democratic representation.

Keywords

democracy, ethics, leadership, populism, representation, technocracy, truthfulness

Introduction

Lying, misleading and deception are often treated by scholars and the general public alike as the norm for politics (Oborne, 2005). As Hannah Arendt (1972 [1971]: 4) observed, 'truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings'. Echoing Plato, a number of scholars consider even liberal democracy as necessarily resting on a 'noble lie' for its legitimacy (Canovan, 1990: 5–9; Shklar, 1984: 68–69), while a neo-Machiavellian tradition has considered that democratic leaders must learn 'how not to be good' and be prepared to lie on occasion (Machiavelli, 1995 [1513]: ch. 15, especially 48–49; Tillyris, 2016: 2; see Bellamy, 2018, for an overview and critique). Indeed, certain academic commentators go so far as to suggest that 'the quest for a mendacity-free politics may be quixotic and dangerous to democratic governance' (Weissberg, 2004: 167). Yet, a neo-Kantian

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tradition has always challenged such arguments (Bellamy, 2022: 23–27) and insisted that lies and deception are 'the most insidious' of vices, the use of which 'preclude accountability' (Thompson, 1989 [1987]: 39) and thereby 'strikes at the very essence of democratic government' (Bok, 1980 [1978]: 172).

Declining popular trust in politicians and the democratic process seems to support these neo-Kantian criticisms of political mendacity (Allen and Birch, 2015). For example, a recent British Social Attitudes Survey 41 (2024: 28–29) revealed that almost one in six or 58% of respondents 'almost never' 'trust politicians of any party in Britain to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner', a belief underpinning the view of a high proportion of the 79% respondents who consider 'the British system of governing' to require 'quite a lot' or a 'great deal' of improvement, with the Edelman (2020) trust barometer recording similar findings in which three in five respondents agreed politicians have become more likely to lie or mislead the British public.

This belief in the dishonesty and untrustworthiness of politicians has been promoted and typified by the rise of technocracy and populism. On the one hand, mainstream politicians have increasingly established and deferred to expert regulatory bodies in key areas of policy-making (Mair, 2013). Such bodies are designed to be independent and insulated against electoral pressures, and their deliberations are presented as objectively true, and as such beyond challenge (Brennan, 2016). As a result, though, they risk being unresponsive to the concerns of ordinary people (Christiano, 2021). That has allowed populists to charge mainstream politicians with promoting a 'big lie' about the inevitability and benefits of the prevailing neoliberal economic and political world order and of serving the interests of a global elite, not least with regard to immigration and open borders (Zürn, 2022). Such claims typified both the pro-Leave Brexit campaign and Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. On the other hand, the very populist politicians making these accusations stand accused in their turn of making false, misleading or deceptive statements, not only about their policies but also their personal behaviour and private affairs (Oborne, 2021). Meanwhile, lies and hypocrisy have facilitated a disregard for truth more generally, with unfounded opinions and fake news increasingly accepted as common currency, leading to the 'fictionalisation' of politics (Davis, 2017). Indeed, though Arendt may have regarded a lack of truthfulness as endemic to politics, she accepted that the undermining of 'a common and factual reality' was 'indeed a political problem of the first order' (Arendt, 2006 [1967]: 237). We contend that this problem can only be addressed to the extent that political actors can be incentivised to be truthful.

This article explores why truthfulness should be a virtue of political representatives, and how its absence undermines democratic representation (Hansson and Kröger, 2021). Developing the arguments of those who consider truthfulness a crucial ethical feature for the functioning of democratic processes (Beerbohm, 2016; Bok, 1980 [1978]; Thompson, 1989 [1987]), we relate the qualities of accuracy and sincerity Bernard Williams (2002) associates with truthfulness to Suzanne Dovi's (2007) account of the virtues of a good representative. We suggest that the neo-Platonic and neo-Machiavellian arguments adverted to above, which consider lying a necessary part of politics, prove central to technocracy and populism respectively, ultimately undermining their claims to democratic legitimacy. Both reflect a disregard for pluralism and the reasonable disagreements to which they give rise and that render democratic politics necessary. Yet, if representative democracies are to settle these disagreements in ways that treat citizens with equal concern and respect, allow for the authorisation and accountability of representatives and

enable them to reach fair compromises, then politicians must possess the virtue of truthfulness.

Our argument unfolds as follows. The first section begins with some definitions and then identifies the circumstances occasioning the need for democratic politics with what John Rawls (1993) called 'the fact of pluralism'. This fact arises from what he called 'the burdens of judgment' and allows for 'reasonable disagreements' about what truly constitutes the public, common or collective good of any political community (Rawls, 1993: 36–37, 55–57). However, while 'the burdens of judgment' inhibit anyone claiming objective knowledge of the true view of a society's common good, they also entail that different reasonable views should be treated with equal respect and concern. We shall argue that such equality requires that the political process involves truthfulness in political deliberation as part of an effort to achieve inclusive collective outcomes all can find acceptable – even if they disagree with aspects of them. Finally, we defend this argument from the neo-Machiavellian position that hypocrisy and lies are inevitable features of even democratic politics.

The second section extends this argument to representative democracy and the virtues of representatives. Supplementing Eric Beerbohm's relational model of the ethics of electioneering (Beerbohm, 2016) with Suzanne Dovi's (2007) account of the virtues of the good representative, we argue that the three virtues identified by Dovi (2007), namely, fair-mindedness, critical trust, and good-gate keeping – all rely on truthfulness. As she observes, possession of these virtues supports representatives granting all citizens equal status in both the process and outcomes of deciding collective policies.

The third section argues that the crisis of democratic representation associated with technocracy and populism results from their shared rejection of pluralism and with it the need for truthfulness. Both produce 'disfigurements' of democracy (Urbinati, 2014: chs. 2, 3) that prove incompatible with the virtues of good representation and the search for inclusive collective decisions that exemplify equal concern and respect. The fourth section concludes by suggesting how enhancing the role of parties might support both political competition and regard for truthfulness among politicians (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2006, 2020; White and Ypi, 2011), fostering in the process a revival of representative democracy.

On truth, truthfulness and the circumstances of democratic politics

What is truthfulness, and why is it important for democracy? Following Bernard Williams (2002), we associate truthfulness with the virtues of accuracy and sincerity. Truthfulness involves accuracy in the sense of being scrupulous to avoid conveying false or misleading information that may not be well-founded. It involves sincerity in the sense of the avoidance of being dishonest or deceptive as to one's beliefs and motivations. In most contexts, accuracy entails sincerity and vice versa: a truthful person is someone who speaks both accurately and sincerely. As we shall argue below, both these qualities prove necessary for democratic representation, debate and decision-making to treat citizens with equal concern and respect.

Truthfulness needs to be distinguished from Truth *per se*. The logical truths of mathematics and the empirical truths of the natural sciences both derive from epistemological methods that involve truthfulness, in which accuracy and sincerity prove mutually

reinforcing. On the one hand, the experimental method of natural scientists requires accuracy in measurement and reasoning that conforms to the logical criteria inherent to mathematics. On the other hand, it must also be a public and replicable process – and hence involves scientists being sincere by not manipulating the evidence, for example by hiding inconvenient results. Where appropriate, policy-making needs to build on these soundly reasoned and empirically ascertained logical and factual truths. Truthfulness involves acknowledging these truths. For example, a politician who denies anthropogenic global warming must be considered at best an ignoramus, incapable of accuracy, at worst a charlatan, lacking in sincerity – and possibly both. However, for political purposes, these kinds of logical and factual truths do not in and of themselves dictate which are the most justified policies for a political community to take in the light of them. Such decisions also involve normative considerations for which no clear epistemological method exists for grounding which policies are the best or most true.

As Rawls (1993: 55–56) observed, our practical reasoning on matters as diverse as the most desirable health care system, the optimal tax rate, or which sentence best fits a given crime, labours under what he called the 'burdens of judgment'. The factual information required for deciding which policy we ought to adopt to best address any natural, social or economic problem can be complex and its exact bearing on the matter at hand is open to varying assessments. Meanwhile, a number of normative considerations may be in play, which can not only be weighed differently depending on the ethical theory one applies and one's understanding of the facts but also involve values that can be understood and specified in diverse and possibly incommensurable ways. As a result, reasonable disagreements will arise even among people who put forward coherent arguments for their case, draw on well-ascertained facts and respect basic rights and appeal to shared moral norms. What people consider the most plausible way of interpreting and balancing the relevant facts and normative considerations will tend to reflect their own experiences and knowledge, which not only are unavoidably limited and liable to be oriented towards their own concerns but also inevitably differ from those of people with different experiences and knowledge (Bellamy, 2022: 37).

Take again the example of global warming and climate change (Bellamy, 2022: 38). Reasonable disagreements of the Rawlsean kind can occur over issues such as who has responsibility for mitigating climate change – for example, should developed countries accept greater responsibility than developing countries – or which of a range of policies, such as carbon taxes and carbon off-setting, might be regarded as the most effective, or which policies might be fairest, both among current generations and towards future generations, and so on (Gardiner, 2006). These disagreements can give rise to a wide range of policy recommendations, some of which will be in conflict with others. However, none of them need deny either the fact of anthropogenic global warming or the desirability of providing a coherent and evidence-based proposal as to how it might be most successfully and equitably tackled.

Rawls considered that the 'burdens of judgment' mean that a liberal society, which allows citizens to think and act autonomously, will inevitably be characterised by 'the fact of pluralism' due to people pursuing different 'conceptions of the good'. This pluralism gives rise in its turn to 'reasonable disagreements' among citizens as to which collective policies ought to be pursued and how (Rawls, 1993: 53–58). For example, they may reasonably disagree about who and what should be taxed, at which level and how, and on what the resulting funds should be spent. The need for at least some collective decisions among people who reasonably disagree about the nature and content of those decisions

form what Jeremy Waldron (1999: 107–113) and Albert Weale (2007: 12–18) have referred to as the 'circumstances of politics'. In these circumstances, we need a fair decision-making process that treats those who will be subject to it with equal concern and respect.

However, given the necessity for such a process derives from disagreements over the scope and substance of the collective decision itself, the standard for judging such a process as fair cannot be that it produces the 'right' outcome in some objective sense. Notwithstanding the 'wisdom of crowds' (Surowiecki, 2004) and the Condorcet Jury theorem (List and Goodin, 2001) that suggest that, given certain assumptions, the more people involved in making a decision, the more accurate it is likely to be, a democratic process can rarely be regarded as having the epistemological qualities of producing objectively true outcomes. In this regard, the desirable properties of a democratic process will be more procedural and intrinsic than substantive and instrumental (Anderson, 2009). Namely, it treats those with a roughly equal stake in collective decisions as possessing an equal status with regard to them, and as such as worthy of having their views and interests being given equal consideration in the decision-making process (Cordelli, 2020: 63). At the same time, though, a process possessing these intrinsic values can be expected to be instrumental to producing outcomes that citizens will recognise as 'theirs' and leading to the equal advancement of their interests (Christiano, 2008).

A democratic process based on one person one vote has been widely regarded as meeting these criteria in a formal sense by treating the views in contention in an equitable, impartial and neutral manner (May, 1952). However, such voting standardly takes place after a period of collective debate and deliberation, in which citizens – both directly and indirectly, via their representatives – seek to make their different views and interests known to each other, and convince their fellow citizens at least to take them into account, even if they are not fully convinced by them. Our contention is that this process entails truthfulness if it is to treat those engaged in and affected by it with equal concern and respect. That is, representatives need to put forward their positions as cogently and factually as possible, as required by the virtue of accuracy, and in good faith, thereby satisfying the virtue of sincerity. Not to do so is effectively to seek to manipulate one's interlocutors by creating a false impression in them that one has interests and views deserving of consideration and credible policy proposals for tackling collective problems when this is not the case (Goodin, 1980: 62–63).

Three issues raising potential objections to our defence of truthfulness deserve mention here. In different ways, they challenge the view that democratic politicians can be consistently sincere or accurate given that politics is often a dirty business. Contrary to the claim made here, they suggest that pluralism can either create or reflect circumstances in which the 'responsible' politician, in Max Weber's (1994 [1919]: 359–361) sense, cannot avoid lying or deceit.

The first issue relates to the need for democratic politicians to build a coalition of supporters, who often prioritise different policy goals despite sharing a broad ideological perspective. Once in government, they will inevitably be forced to prioritise some goals at the expense of others – especially if they have to enter a coalition with other parties in order to govern. The resulting compromises have been regarded as instances of what Jeremy Waldron (2018: 221) calls 'routine dirty hands' (see too Bellamy, 2010a: 422–424; Hollis, 1982: 396), whereby for the sake of a public purpose – to enter the government and pursue policies they deem to be in the public interest that would otherwise be neglected or reversed – a politician sacrifices certain moral principles (Thompson, 1989

[1987]: 11). For example, the leaders of a given party may be committed both to abolish nuclear weapons – the use of which they consider immoral – and increase welfare, which they consider a matter of social justice. However, the only available coalition partner makes the continuance of the nuclear deterrent the price for agreeing to an increase in welfare spending. Meanwhile, the alternative governing coalition would both renew the nuclear arsenal and cut welfare spending to do so. A number of commentators claim such circumstances require successful politicians to be hypocrites, and so be less than sincere (Shklar, 1984: 77; Tillyris, 2016: 12–15). At best, politicians may have to promise more than they genuinely believe or know they can deliver in order to have a chance of attaining office (in this case, by using the commitment to nuclear disarmament to garner additional votes, while knowing they would have to jettison the policy post-election to attain office); at worst, they may need to support policies they consider morally wrong (such as retaining a nuclear deterrent) to join a governing coalition that will enable them to implement at least some of their programme. Either way, on this account, the price of sincerity is political impotence, which may entail a greater moral loss overall.

We dispute that view. As we argued above and will develop below, the need for compromise reflects a world characterised by the 'fact of pluralism', in which we must act for and with others who disagree with us about what our moral and political priorities should be (Bellamy, 1999, Part 2). We shall contend that a democrat must acknowledge the existence of such disagreements and the need to address them in ways that are fair and treat those with whom they disagree with equal concern and respect – not least by debating the merits of different collective choices in ways that are truthful (Bellamy, 2012: 452–453, 456–461). Not to do so – to hypocritically suggest that difficult choices can be avoided – risks undermining trust not only in those individual politicians who act in this way but also in democracy itself, with voters coming to regard all political promises as 'cheap talk' (Dovi, 2001: 29). Meanwhile, such hypocrisy is likely to prove an electoral liability rather than an advantage. As Beerbohm (2016: 393 and see note 39 for references) notes, 'there is considerable evidence that citizens are willing to punish candidates for breaking promises and pledges'.

The second issue concerns whether the democratic objections against lying also apply to 'spin' and indeed all forms of rhetoric (Edyvane, 2015: 317–319). And, if so, does that not go too far? Again, historically, democrats have valued plain speaking as conducive to transparent and public reasoning, distrusting oratory as a way of dressing up privilege and hiding self-interest. Yet, when a number of not entirely congruent and even conflicting considerations are in play, as the fact of pluralism and the associated reasonable disagreements make likely, then it will be necessary to attempt to make as persuasive a case as possible for giving weight to certain features at the expense of the others. For example, prosecution and defence lawyers in common law jurisdictions make their respective cases for the guilt or innocence of the accused in this fashion (Bellamy, 2022: 27–28). Of course, as with political spinning, such legal advocacy carries with it the temptation to be economical with the truth and tell misleading half-truths, even if telling straightforward lies or ignoring the truth, in the manner of bullshit (Frankfurt, 2005) and post-truth, are less likely. The crucial factors in keeping both sides truthful are the independent testimony of witnesses sworn to uphold sincerity and accuracy, on the one hand, and above all the possibilities for mutual contestation from both sides of the argument within the context of a setting governed by impartial rules and a judge committed to fairness, on the other. While, like all human institutions, the judicial process is an imperfect procedure, it nevertheless offers a context apt to uncover lying and deception. We consider that the

processes associated with representative democracy have similar qualities that are deformed by both populism and technocracy. The 'fact of pluralism' renders a degree of rhetoric and spin an inevitable aspect of the reasonable disagreements at the heart of political debate. However, as with advocacy in a court, they can be compatible with the virtues of accuracy and sincerity associated with truthfulness. Only then are they legitimate means for persuading others of the merits of one's view.

Finally, the third issue relates to lies and deceptions that might be justified to protect the security of the state (Edyvane, 2015: 312–313; Mearsheimer, 2011: 11; Williams, 2005: 157). These departures from truthfulness, so the argument runs, are neither selfish nor self-serving but arise for strategic reasons and serve the public good. There is a large literature on this topic which we do not have space to engage with here. However, such cases are generally regarded as the exception rather than the rule, with democrats traditionally regarding them with suspicion as offering a potential cover for tyranny. Indeed, some scholars have argued (e.g. Bok, 1980 [1978]: 172, 181; Thompson, 1989 [1987]: 22–23, 25–26) – albeit not entirely convincingly (Bellamy, 2022: 33; Edyvane, 2015: 313–315) – that democratic mechanisms can be put in place to ensure such cases are justifiable. Most pertinently, it is standardly contended that, to the extent that such strategic lies or deception are necessary, then they are best committed by someone who has the highest regard for truthfulness and does so reluctantly (Walzer, 1973: 168, 179–180). In Williams' words, we have reason to want politicians who acknowledge the 'uncancelled moral disagreeableness' of certain acts even when they are 'politically justified', for 'only those who are reluctant or disinclined to do the morally disagreeable when it is really necessary have much chance of not doing it when it is not necessary' (Williams, 1978: 64). As we shall argue below, democracy can be distinguished from populism and technocracy in offering credible incentives for politicians to possess the requisite integrity to manifest such reluctance.

Representative democracy and truthfulness

Surveys regularly suggest that although citizens of established democracies favour democracy as an ideal, they have become increasingly dissatisfied with the performance of existing democratic systems (Ferrin and Kriesi, 2016), where institutional mechanisms of accountability are perceived not to function satisfactorily. This dissatisfaction goes hand in hand with increased criticism of the conduct of politicians (Mudde, 2004). They are perceived as less responsive to citizens' preferences than to party preferences, leading to an ever-looser link between citizens and parties (Mair, 2013; Rosanvallon, 2015). As a result, party and union membership has declined, as has turnout at elections, with lower social classes particularly poorly represented. Likewise, the levels of trust in representative institutions and actors have decreased, with one effect being an increase in the electoral success of populists (Mudde, 2004).

Representation theory has standardly concerned itself with formalistic, substantive and descriptive representation (Pitkin, 1967). *Formalistic* representation looks at the institutional mechanisms that regulate the representative relationship, such as election to Parliament. *Substantive* representation is interested in the ways the representative represents the represented, such as whether the representative acts as a trustee or a delegate. *Descriptive* representation explores whether the representative must share some social characteristic (gender, colour, religion, etc.) with the representative to represent them well. These qualities of representation can all be important for ensuring the representative

process operates in a manner sufficient to grant the represented equal status in decision-making. However, they need supplementing with an examination of the *ethics* of democratic representatives (Beerbohm, 2016; Dovi, 2007).

As scholars within the constructivist turn in representation theory (Disch, 2011; Saward, 2010) insist, representatives do not simply mirror or seek to satisfy the preferences of those they seek to represent. Rather, representation results from an ongoing interaction between representatives and represented, which dynamically constitutes them both. Representation is not a one-way street, in which representatives make present those they represent. Instead, they themselves actively intervene and influence the representative relationship by choosing some claims over others, highlighting certain facts rather than others, suggesting specific policies rather than others, and so on, thereby influencing their constituents' ways of looking at the world (Disch, 2011: 107–108; Saward, 2010). In other words, representatives exert political power by influencing what the represented see and how they think.

This constructivist account can be related to Beerbohm's (2016) normative 'relational model' of democratic representation. According to this model, 'candidates in elections make "testimonial" and "promissory" speech claims, whereby they solicit the support and trust of the electorate and challenge the claims of rival candidates' (Beerbohm, 2016: 390–391). As Beerbohm observes, the democratic process of authorisation depends on voters being able to trust these claims to be sufficiently committed to and well-founded that they can count on them being carried over into government should their preferred candidates get elected. He regards election campaigns as operating as filtering devices, whereby the trustworthiness of the claims of different candidates can be weighed. We consider a fruitful way of understanding Beerbohm's relational model to be in terms of Williams' notion of truthfulness. On the one hand, politicians' testimonial claims must be taken as sincere – voters need to know that they will reliably abide by certain convictions. On the other hand, voters want their promissory claims to be accurate so that there is a credible chance of them being implemented. It is this link to truthfulness that explains why the relationship forged between candidates and voters at election time will be undermined if politicians employ lies and bullshit (Beerbohm, 2016: 400–401). Absent truthfulness, candidates will lack democratic authorisation and, as a result, accountability for what they do. Their campaign assertions and promises will just be 'empty talk'.

In what follows, we seek to develop this relational model further by indicating how truthfulness proves integral to the ethical qualities needed for political representatives to deliberate, collaborate and decide in the democratic manner required by a pluralist society. As we saw, 'politics emerges in response to the intersubjective irreconcilability of multiple conflicting perspectives, values and interests' (Coleman, 2018: 161). In any democratic political community, the only way of pacifying these different values and interests is through negotiation and compromise (Bellamy, 1999: ch 4). These collective political judgements and agreements depend upon the 'communicability' of the diverse 'perspectives' in play (Coleman, 2018: 158). Such communication calls for truthfulness on the part of those involved (Chambers, 2020). Represented and representatives need to acknowledge and understand perspectives other than their own so that they can see the fuller picture of a given problem and make a judgement in light of all existing arguments. Disagreements might well not disappear. However, so long as all those holding these different views are attempting to grasp the truth, each side has a reason to compromise with the other (Bellamy, 2012: 451–452).

Democratic deliberation and decision-making, therefore, require representatives to possess certain qualities that are consistent with and promotive of truthfulness. In developing an account of these qualities, we draw on Suzanne Dovi's (2007) argument that democratic representatives should possess the three critical virtues of fair-mindedness, critical trust and good gatekeeping. While Dovi does not discuss truthfulness, we will suggest that sincerity and accuracy are essential to all three of these virtues and to the integrity of democratic representation more generally.

Dovi (2007: 101) relates 'fair-mindedness' to the acknowledgement of civic equality as central to democracy, whereby all citizens are conceived as having equal standing. We contend that an aspect of 'fair-mindedness' in this context is to recognise the reasonableness of disagreements and the need to debate alternative views. After all, as we saw, the circumstances that make democratic politics necessary stem from the 'fact of pluralism'. Therefore, a representative democracy should allow and legitimise free and equal political competition. To do so, political arguments should avoid demonising or ridiculing the perspectives or interests of others in ways that misrepresent these alternatives and unduly marginalise them. If rival political positions become portrayed as conflicts between truth and falsehood, then the need to be fair-minded will recede and with it the ability to compromise.

Truthfulness plays an important role in meeting this requirement. As Rawls has argued, to be compatible with the 'fact of pluralism' political debate must involve a form of public reason consistent with what he calls a political conception of liberalism. On this account, the norms governing public debate and decision-making cannot be based on what he calls a 'comprehensive' doctrine – one that assumes a monopoly of truth about the nature of the good society. Rather, they must rest on and be consistent with an acceptance of the rights to liberty and equality required for individuals to hold and pursue their different conceptions of the good. Such rights reflect a mutual respect among reasonable views. The standards of truthfulness, whereby political views must rest on publicly ascertainable facts and reasoning, and be held in a consistent and non-hypocritical manner, provide support for such mutually respectful public reasoning. On the one hand, they involve politicians putting forward arguments that are accessible to, and capable of being accepted by, all citizens. Religious views, for example, do not meet these criteria (at least *per se*[1]). The existence of God cannot be regarded as either logically or factually demonstrable but rests on faith alone. As such, religious believers have no warrant in public reason for subjecting non-believers to the tenets of their faith. On the other hand, there are unreasonable views that fly in the face of logic and facts that involve denigrating one's fellow citizens and denying their equality – such as racist bigotry. It might be argued that such views could meet the criterion of consistency and sincerity. Maybe someone genuinely considers people of colour to be inferior. However, that mistakenly separates the criteria by suggesting that one could reasonably (and hence consistently and sincerely) hold a view that flies in the face of all logic and facts. Such views cannot be regarded as being held in good faith.

Fair-mindedness informed by the virtue of truthfulness thereby offers the basis for representatives to seek inclusive agreements among different perspectives (Bellamy, 1999: 101–102). If one's political opponents are putting forward reasonable views, then one has a reason to attempt to find collective policies that do at a minimum include them as members of equal standing in the political community – a goal Dovi equates with what she calls 'democratic efficacy'.

These considerations are also relevant to Dovi's second virtue, critical trust, which she sees as crucial for the representative relationship. She sees such trust as reflecting a degree

of integrity on the part of representatives. However, to count as a moral social and political virtue, integrity needs to be distinguished from arrogance or stubbornness (Calhoun, 1995; Hampshire, 1983: 159). Individuals must be able to defend their attachment to certain values as not only important for them personally but also for others, so that to betray these values would be wrong. Integrity in this sense is best understood as offering a way of bolstering one's commitment to certain publicly justifiable principles and policies (Nili, 2018). We understand democratic politicians to possess political integrity in the requisite sense when they provide specific and well-founded policy proposals, on the one hand, that realise certain publicly stated moral principles and political goals to which they are genuinely committed, on the other. So conceived, integrity both entails and reinforces the virtues of accuracy and sincerity we associated with truthfulness above.

From the point of view of democratic theory, citizens have good reasons to want their representatives to possess integrity of this kind. It enables them to trust politicians to try their best to act as they said they would if they were elected to office (Beerbohm, 2016: 393–395). Given that representatives also shape citizens' political preferences (Saward, 2010), thereby exerting political power, such integrity is particularly important. As we saw, the represented require truthfulness from their representatives for the process of authorisation and accountability to work. Unless politicians have a genuine commitment to their professed goals they cannot be counted on to stick by them and do their best to implement them. Unless they have coherent and evidence-based policy proposals for realising them that have a real possibility of being implemented and achieving the promised results, then politicians are effectively misleading their voters. Consequently, they cannot be reliably authorised to enact certain policies or held accountable for not doing so. Without such integrity, therefore, mutual trust between representatives and represented will suffer, as will trust in the system of representation more broadly.

Finally, what Dovi calls 'good gate-keeping' can be seen as an implication of the previous two virtues. This virtue consists of keeping 'good company' by avoiding those who would undermine both the fairness and trustworthiness of the democratic process while including those who might be excluded by such attempts. Again, truthfulness offers criteria for the type of company representatives should seek to keep. Ways of undermining the fairness of the political system include attempts to gerrymander political constituencies and various forms of disenfranchisement of marginalised groups – such as requiring types of ID such groups are unlikely to possess. These and other measures designed to gain a partisan advantage are typically justified in ways that are inconsistent with truthfulness. For example, their advocates often make insincere allegations of widespread electoral fraud for which there is no evidence. Or they involve demonising one's opponents and denying both the 'fact of pluralism' and their entitlement to an equal status. Or they entail discourses that deny truth altogether, such as climate change denial – be it to attract funding from fossil fuel companies or as part of a spurious culture war whereby environmentalism is treated as the 'fake news' of a 'woke' minority. Yet, in many representative democracies, the gates are increasingly open to politicians willing to promote such falsehoods. It is to this crisis of representative democracy that we now turn.

Truth, truthfulness and the crisis of representative democracy: Between technocracy and populism

As we remarked above, representative democracies have been in profound crisis for several decades. Common symptoms are the decline in party membership and ever-lower

electoral turnout. Both are linked to the hollowing-out of mainstream parties as mechanisms for meaningful citizen engagement and representation (Mair, 2013), leading to a broader loss of confidence in the democratic institutions of politics. This growing disaffection has been accompanied by the decay of the legacy media and its replacement by multiple, divided 'public spheres' without authoritative information, which are open to mis- and dis-information from both national and foreign actors (Bennett and Livingston, 2018: 126–127).

The increased resort to non-majoritarian technocratic agencies (Zürn, 2022), on the one hand, and the rise of anti-system populist parties (Hopkin, 2020), on the other, have been seen as the most significant manifestations of the estrangement from, and related disfigurement of, representative democracy (Urbinati, 2014). As a number of commentators have noted, the shift to technocracy associated with the first trend drove, and has been driven by, the rise of populism associated with the second trend (e.g. Bickerton and Accetti, 2017; Mair, 2013). What has been less commented on, however, is a commonality between the two that underlies the tendency of each to distort representative democracy: namely, a shared rejection of pluralism and with it the undermining of truthfulness. In both cases, this disregard for pluralism and truthfulness leads to a lack of 'good gatekeeping' that ultimately undermines both fair-mindedness and critical trust, thereby contributing to the crisis in representative democracy.

Technocracy

A number of commentators have observed how, from the 1970s onwards, there has been a steady decline in the linkage and responsiveness of parties and politicians to the views and interests of those they claim to represent. Indeed, the representative role of parties and politicians has gradually given way to a governing role (Mair, 2013). This development has been accompanied and partly driven by the cartelization of parties within the apparatus of the state, on the one hand, and the increasing shift of important governmental tasks to non-majoritarian institutions – such as central banks, international organisations, private agencies and constitutional courts – on the other. As Michael Zürn (2022) has remarked, both these changes over time decreased the responsiveness of political representatives and pushed the narrative of a permanent, discreet and isolated silent majority that has been increasingly marginalised by unrepresentative elites.

The resulting transformation and depoliticisation of representative democracy have been given a justification and legitimisation of a technocratic kind by some scholars (e.g. Majone, 1996; Pettit, 2004; Rosanvallon, 2012). These technocratic accounts consider democratic deliberation not as part of a fair process that seeks the mutual recognition of the equal status of different views within society, but rather as an epistemological method for discovering truth (Estlund, 2007). However, the view that the good of a given political community can be determined by an expert consensus denies both the 'burdens of judgment' and the resulting 'fact of pluralism' which, as we saw, define the very circumstances of democratic politics. As a result, this technocratic view is apt to consider disagreements as 'unreasonable' – the product of faulty reasoning or imperfect knowledge.

To achieve the desired epistemic qualities, technocrats contend in a neo-Platonic manner that decision-making must be depoliticised, with unelected experts replacing elected representatives in a number of key policy areas (e.g. Brennan, 2016; Rosanvallon, 2012). Such experts are supposedly free not only from prejudices, ignorance or partisanship but

also from the electoral incentives that lead politicians to pay undue attention to such partial and flawed views among voters. As a result, they can engage in a 'pure' form of democratic deliberation among themselves, untainted by the flaws of the electoral process. For example, this logic governs handing over the setting of interest rates to the policy committees of central banks (Tucker, 2018). Such forms of 'unpolitical democracy' (Urbinati, 2014: ch. 2) call into question the legitimacy of ensuring political contestation, equal votes and majority rule. Yet, in seeking to avoid paying attention to the 'false positives' emanating from those who shout the loudest rather than those who are most informed (Pettit, 2004: 60), they risk registering 'false negatives' by failing to respond to those adversely affected by the policies they advocate (Bellamy, 2010b: 8; Christiano, 2021: 117–118; Mair, 2006: 29).

In what follows, we shall suggest that such technocratic depoliticisation of representative democracy rests on faulty assumptions. As such, it constitutes a form of *bad* gatekeeping that undermines fair-mindedness among representatives and their capacity to inspire critical trust. Along the way, the elusive pursuit of a single truth paradoxically imperils the virtues of accuracy and sincerity associated with truthfulness.

Technocrats justify the depoliticisation of democratic processes by making two main criticisms of representative democracy: over-responsiveness and partisanship (see Bickerton and Accetti, 2017; Caramani, 2017; Mair, 2006: 26–28). As regards the former, technocrats consider that politicians over-rely on popular support and thus privilege short-termism. As regards the latter, the criticism is that the ideology that parties carry prevents them from looking for and achieving the best outcome for society as a whole.

Yet such depoliticisation rests on dubious foundations. First, it assumes that what is right and good can objectively be determined by means of scientific investigation and reasoning, thereby suggesting the existence of one truth for society as a whole (Bertsou and Caramani, 2022: 7; Radaelli, 1999). Second, technocrats are assumed to be inclined to pursue the public interest in a disinterested fashion, which leads them to be moved by the better argument.

We contend that neither assumption holds. As regards the first, if – as we argued above – the 'burdens of judgment' mean no scientific consensus can exist on the normative dimensions of what counts as the best policy in any area, then any such expert consensus risks being characterised as 'group think'. Moreover, if decision-making is depoliticised it becomes more open to capture by actors with privileged access to the decision-makers – typically those influential in the knowledge or business and finance communities with whom the technocrats most interact, and often need to regulate (Coen and Thatcher, 2005). As a result, they may neglect the views and interests of those outside their intellectual and social circle, who may be those most adversely affected by their proposals. Without the linkage to citizens and the necessity to respond to them, there is a danger that they will fail to consider the full range of policies. Consequently, their claims to serve the public interest will be inaccurate, yet they will have no incentive to correct their mistakes (Bickerton and Accetti, 2017: 139; Christiano, 2021: 118–119).

Likewise, there is no need to suppose that those who are good at scientific reasoning are also good or impartial people (Dahl, 1989: 76, 1998: 69–74). Scientific expertise may be neutral within its domain of logic and facts but that does not make experts value-free and free of ideology with regard to defining the most equitable or appropriate policy for a society (Kröger and Loughran, 2022: 7–8). Ideological and value bias are particularly likely in the social sciences, where – as Charles Taylor (1967) argued – there is a value slope underlying the questions scholars ask and the methods they use. As a result, even

though technocracy likes to think of itself as being unpolitical and value-free, this is not the case. Instead, 'technocracy constitutes politics by different means, rather than the absence of politics' (Farrand and Carrapico, 2021: 152). Indeed, there is no such thing as neutral knowledge or 'genuine technical knowledge' (Foucault and Gordon, 1980: 131). Rather, the existence of one single truth that can be identified by the right methods and experts is an illusion that the wider public is being sold by way of a narrative of continuity, stability and progress (Moffitt, 2016: 46), which does away with any concerns that do not fit the majority views of those involved in technocratic governance. Hence the sincerity as well as accuracy of technocrats may become questionable.

If neither of the assumptions underlying 'unpolitical' forms of technocracy hold true, the risk is that depoliticisation constitutes an inappropriate form of 'bad' gate-keeping, that unfairly excludes many of those with a stake in collective decisions from voicing their views and worries (Christiano, 2021: 125–127). Meanwhile, such exclusions can lead to a loss of critical trust in the political system – particularly if not only reasonable dissenting arguments but also the core interests of various groups get neglected as a result. For example, we know that the views of economic advisors to central banks on whether to raise or lower interest rates and the ways they weigh the risks of higher inflation versus higher unemployment tend to be as much ideological as 'scientific', and often based on little more than best guesses as to the future state of the world economy (McNamara, 2002). As such, their deliberations will be subject to the 'burdens of judgment' and give rise to the sorts of disagreements that characterise the 'circumstances of politics'. However, when these circumstances apply, it ceases to be legitimate for these decisions to be insulated from the need to be democratically authorised by and accountable to the ordinary citizens who are impacted by them. Without such processes, there will be no way of ensuring that the interests of citizens are treated in a fair-minded manner, with equal concern and respect. In the process, critical trust may be eroded and the suspicion arises that the advice advanced as impartial and in the public interest is instead partial and favourable to certain financial and other interests as a result of regulatory capture by those with access to these advisory or regulatory bodies.

This was the very scenario that played out in the wake of the financial crisis of 2007 to 2008. As Peter Mair and, more recently, Jonathan Hopkin have shown, depoliticisation and the pursuit of allegedly 'responsible' rather than 'responsive' policies resulted in the austerity policies adopted by technocrat-led governments and institutions in the aftermath of the sovereign debt crisis. These policies were regarded as unnecessary and damaging by many citizens, producing distrust and disillusionment with representative democracy (Hopkin, 2020; Mair, 2013). Indeed, Zürn (2022) contends that they helped consolidate a new political cleavage between the liberal cosmopolitan elite represented within both non-majoritarian institutions and the cartel running the established centrist parties, on the one hand, and the 'silent' majority who became increasingly attracted to populism, on the other. In this way, technocracy helped drive the rise of populism, to which we now turn.

Populism

While there is no universally agreed definition of populism, scholars and commentators usually concur that at its heart lies an opposition between 'the people' and 'the elite', with the latter being accused of deceiving the former (e.g. de Vreese et al., 2018; Farhall et al., 2019) to gain electoral and other advantages. As Cas Mudde defines it, populism is

an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people (Mudde, 2004: 543).

It has become increasingly common to distinguish 'left-' from 'right-wing' populism (Hopkin, 2020: 64–67; Mansbridge and Macedo, 2019), with the first driven more by socio-economic concerns and the second by a 'cultural' backlash. The former, associated to various degrees with Podemos, Syriza, Bernie Sanders, and Jeremy Corbyn, has tended to be socially inclusive and favourable to minority rights (Hopkin, 2020: 65–66). The second, linked to figures such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni, shares the technocratic disregard for pluralism and rejects the notion that free and equal individuals can and will think and act differently, pursuing distinct and often diverse conceptions of the good (Mudde, 2007; Müller, 2016). It is this right-wing version, which has been more successful politically, that is the focus here. For it is its antipathy to 'the fact of pluralism' that leads to a denial of the need for truthfulness, undermining in the process the possibility for inclusive collective decisions based on fair-mindedness, encouraging 'bad' gate-keeping, and eroding critical trust in the representative relationship.

The rejection of pluralism for a Manichaen divide between popular 'truth' and elite 'falsehood' undergirds right-wing populism's rejection of the possibility of truthfulness as a common normative horizon in democratic life. As Silvio Waisbord (2018: 25) notes, the 'root of populism's opposition to truth is its binary vision of politics. For populists, "the people" and "the elites" hold their own version of truth'. From this angle, a concern with truthfulness is impossible 'given the essential nature of agonistic, conflict-centred politics'. Dialogue across these differences is deemed illusory and irrelevant. Consequently, no rationale exists for being fair-minded towards those who doubt the populist version of facts. Rather, on the populist account, truth-seeking politics simply entails the reaffirmation of 'popular' 'truths' against 'elite' 'lies'. Facts are not supreme and can be questioned. They are part and parcel of narratives – the dominant one of 'the elite' and the true one of 'the people' (Waisbord, 2018: 25–26). To undermine 'elitist' narratives, populists spread misinformation and produce disinformation. If the former involves cherry-picking facts that confirm their own narratives and discarding those which challenge them, the latter involves the invention and promulgation of outright falsehoods (Freelon and Wells, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2018). Populist ideology is thereby immune to factual corrections and nuances, and fact-producing institutions are rejected as purely ideological (Hameleers and Minihold, 2022). As Eri Bertsou and Daniele Caramani (2022) note, the intention is to undermine democratic public spheres and create an alternative reality, where messengers of inconvenient facts can be portrayed as 'enemies of the people' or agents of foreign powers, whose 'fake' news hides sinister interests.

These tactics of mis- and disinformation inform two prevalent forms of the disregard for truthfulness deployed by populists – bullshit and post-truth – both of which involve a flagrant disregard for accuracy and sincerity. Following Henry Frankfurt's (2005) influential definition, bullshitting means being indifferent to the truth of one's utterances. Bullshitters are not concerned with accuracy and sincerity. As a result, they will say whatever they think will advance their interests, whether or not what they say has any grounding in the truth. Post-truth goes further by denying the very possibility of 'truth' (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). The truthfulness of any statement becomes a matter of 'opinion' that requires no public justification (Lynch, 2011: 88). Therefore, post-truth

sees no point in having scruples about accuracy or sincerity. As these are purely subjective matters, no criteria exist for either of them.

As we argued above, respect for truthfulness not only promotes 'fair-mindedness' and a resulting recognition of a democratic obligation to treat those with whom one disagrees with equal respect and concern, but also provides a criterion for 'good gate-keeping' and the sort of company representatives should seek to associate with – even if they disagree with them. By contrast, a willingness to employ bullshit and post-truth is an invitation to keep company with those who hold unreasonable views, such as racists, homophobes and conspiracy theorists, whose views rest on mere prejudice with no basis in fact or logic.[2] Moreover, if all counter-evidence and arguments contrary to one's opinions can be treated as the 'big lies' of liberal elites, then the duty to engage fairly with others and include them recedes. In other words, bad gate-keeping drives out the keeping of good company.

The new online communication environment makes the move to echo chambers of fellow-minded bad companions particularly easy (Van Aelst et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2018). Social media allows populists to blur fact and fiction and reach increasingly large audiences. It is characterised by confirmation biases and patterns of attitude-consistent selective exposure (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2017) where netizens select and accept information that resonates with their ideological orientations (Van Aelst et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2018). In it, we find platforms with opposing versions of daily reality, reinforcing the initial divides between sections of the population. Rifts between specific parts of the population become wider, and polarisation between groups increases. For example, this polarisation has progressively characterised U.S. politics, with the divide between the Republican and Democratic parties becoming increasingly irreconcilable (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). Something similar has been observable between the Remain and Leave camps in the United Kingdom in the years following the EU membership referendum in 2016 (Hobolt, 2016; Hobolt et al., 2021). In both cases, the bad gate-keeping exercised by populist politicians reinforced the disregard for truthfulness and eroded acceptance of the pluralist conception of the democratic process as a fair means for resolving reasonable disagreements among equals.

These developments also impact critical trust in the representative relationship. Such trust is the 'summary judgement that the system is responsive and will do what is right even in the absence of constant scrutiny' (Miller and Listhaug, 1990: 358). Yet if, as populists aver, one considers one's political opponents to be deliberately spreading 'fake news' and 'big lies' to hide their real, self-interested, agenda, and that their professions of accuracy and sincerity are made in bad faith, then critical trust in the democratic process will be hard to sustain. Unfortunately, we have seen how this weakening of trust by populists has been facilitated and reinforced by the turn to technocracy, increasing disillusionment with democracy more generally (Rainie et al., 2019).

Conclusion

We have argued that although the 'fact of pluralism' produces 'reasonable disagreement' about which policies are truly in the public interest, it nonetheless requires those who disagree to do so in ways that are truthful. Not to do so makes such disagreements unreasonable. Moreover, it also undermines the integrity of the representative relationship and promotes disillusionment with democracy itself. By contrast, the good representative will acknowledge the equal standing of all parties to a reasonable disagreement, try to treat

them in a fair-minded way, encourage trust in those they represent, and practice good – that is inclusive – gate-keeping. We contend that because they deny pluralism, neither technocracy nor populism either respects truthfulness or practices good representation.

What is to be done? Confronted with the rise of populism it has appeared natural to wish to strengthen constitutional checks against the erosion of political pluralism and with it the undermining of truthfulness and representative democracy (Müller, 2017). However, the deployment of such mechanisms risks confirming and deepening populist resentment against liberal elites and their reliance on non-majoritarian institutions to oppose the will of the people. Moreover, these very mechanisms have been captured by populists to entrench their illiberal positions and further distort the democratic system (Bellamy, 2023; Ginsburg and Huq, 2018: 90–119; Scheppele, 2018). As we have seen, technocratic responses can also involve deformations of the democratic process of their own, which while putatively aimed at securing truth actually place it at risk.

Though there is no easy institutional fix, we need to revitalise those very aspects of representative democracy that not only require but also can promote truthfulness: namely, political competition informed by an acknowledgement of pluralism, on the one side; and procedures of authorisation and accountability that foster the virtues inherent to representative integrity, on the other.

As regards political competition, the recent normative literature on parties and partisanship has stressed how certain aspects of these two mechanisms can support public reasoning and political justification (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2006, 2020; White and Ypi, 2011). This literature stresses how parties provide a crucial, but often neglected element of representative democracy and notes how they should be distinguished from factions. Whereas the latter addresses a partial constituency and appeals to, and seeks to serve, only the particular interests of their members, the former should be conceived as taking a non-partial approach that addresses the common good of the community as a whole. They may have their basis in a part of the society, but they should connect it to the broader political community, transforming and constructing a political vision from disparate social constituencies in the process (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2006: 102–103; Sartori 1990 [1968]: 26). As we have seen, both technocrats and populists operate more like factions. The issue is how can this tendency be avoided. White and Ypi (2011: 385–387) contend that the motivation of partisans to adopt such forms of public reasoning derives from party competition providing the relevant circumstances of political justification. These same circumstances can be regarded as motivating truthfulness. If different views get critically compared in adversarial and public forums, then the probability of lies, deception, bullshit and post-truth being called out will increase.

The role of authorisation and accountability within such an environment comes in here. Representatives engage with the concerns of those they seek to represent just as they seek to frame those concerns in ways that are capable of promoting the common good. Parties achieve this balance through functioning as mechanisms for citizens to participate in politics through membership and influence over the party agenda, on the one hand, while also being electoral machines that engage in general elections, on the other – that is, in elections that address the general public, not just their loyal supporters. Again, these mechanisms foster truthfulness by screening politicians through the process of authorisation for those who are capable of offering political justifications that are credible to both party members and the public at large, and by sanctioning those who prove inaccurate or insincere in the promises they make through the process of accountability.

Of course, the account of representative democracy given above can be regarded as an ideal. Significant changes to the traditional model of representative democracy will be required to make the ideal sufficiently real to overcome broad citizen disillusionment with its operations. While the details of such potential reforms lie beyond the scope of this article (see Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein (2017) for suggestions regarding intra-party democracy), our argument points to the need for them to have the motivation of truthfulness among representatives as a central goal. However, new institutional structures are unlikely to be enough in themselves. After all, institutional reform would have to be initiated by political leaders, many of whom currently lack a suitable representative ethic. To push politicians in this direction, we need a vibrant civil society that challenges unethical behaviour and acknowledges the essential value of pluralism (Herman and Muirhead, 2021). In this regard, the revival of representative democracy ultimately depends on reigniting the commitment to pluralism and truthfulness among citizens and with it a desire for the associated virtues of good representation. Future research, therefore, should also focus on what might support an ethically minded citizenry.

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Notes

1. As Cecile Laborde (2017) notes, one may be able to disaggregate religious claims and render certain of them accessible to non-religious understandings based on public reason.
2. Of course, there are attempts, such as those of Nazi 'anthropologists' to provide empirical evidence for racist and homophobic views. As Williams (1973: 233) notes, such accounts are 'paying, in very poor coin, the homage of irrationality to reason'.

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