

Chapter 2

Science as a Political Battlefield:

How Cultural Values Shape People's Attitudes to Science

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will examine the role of science and factual knowledge in public policymaking in the digital era. The chapter will address why certain scientific issues trigger political controversy and cultural polarization and what psychological mechanisms fuel political tribalism, ideological group thinking, and the rejection of facts and science in collective political decision-making. Furthermore, the digital revolution and its capability of fueling disinformation and false narratives will also be analyzed. According to the main argument, the rejection of science on particular issues is not due to public ignorance, the lack of education, or scientific illiteracy. The emergence of “post-truth politics” and the erosion of science in collective decision-making is largely caused by rising political partisanship, cultural group thinking, motivated reasoning, and identity-protective cognition.

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INTRODUCTION

In January 2018, former US president Barack Obama appeared on David Letterman's Netflix talk show *My Next Guest Needs no Introduction*. During the interview, he diagnosed the American democracy with the following words: "One of the biggest challenges that we have to our democracy is the degree to which we do not share a common baseline of facts" (CNBC, 2018). According to the former president, conflicting views on factual matters is on the rise and has profound implications for the quality of democracy and sound public policy-making. Two years earlier, in 2016, the word "post-truth" was nominated Word of the Year by *Oxford Dictionaries*. The people behind the dictionary defined "post-truth" as a concept "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). That same year, *The Economist* launched a special edition under the headline "Art of the Lie: Post-Truth Politics in the Age of Social Media" (Economist, 2016). Emphasizing that lies, propaganda, dishonesty and deceitful communication has always been part and parcel of politics, the special edition claimed that there is something new to the game and that "the manner in which some politicians now lie, and the havoc they wreak by doing so, are worrying" (Economist, 2016). This theme resembles numerous best-selling books with titles and subtitles such as *Factfulness*, *The War on Science*, *The Death of Truth* and *How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth Era* (Rosling, 2018; Otto, 2016; Kakutani, 2018; Levitin, 2016). In 2017, the *March for Science* movement was launched in the US and has spread across the western world. The movement's goal is to promote "evidence-based policies" and "breaking down barriers between scientists and their communities" (March For Science, 2020).

Contemporary political leaders are frequently associated with this phenomenon. Countless media articles have highlighted and criticized Donald Trump's many controversial claims about everything from climate change (BBC, 2020) to Barack Obama's birth certificate, and Washington Post has a so-called fact checker scrutinizing and testing all the claims put forward by the president. In an article from January 2020, the paper claimed that "President Trump made 16,241 false or misleading claims in his first three years" (Washington Post, 2020). Viral conspiracy theories have fueled new research in the ecosystem of disinformation or "alternative narratives" (Starbird, 2017), and while academics and journalists accuse politicians of exploiting the new digital infrastructure at the expense of enlightened democracy, politicians are firing back. In a tweet from February 2017, the president announced that "the fake news media" such as CNN, NBC and the New York Times "is the enemy of the American people" (Twitter, 2017). While Donald Trump fires at the media, other prominent politicians target the experts. During the Brexit Leave campaign, the leading English politician Michael Gove famously stated that "people in this

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