Donald Trump is our first post-truth president. And he may well be the first of many.

The Oxford Dictionaries website chose “post-truth” as its 2016 word of the year, in large part due to Trump’s success in the presidential election. It defined post-truth as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” (Incidentally, the 2015 word of the year wasn’t a word at all but the “face with tears of joy” emoji.)

Trump’s political methods ultimately rely on the appeal to emotions, such as fear and anxiety, and to personal beliefs over objective truth. Moreover, his victory was secured with blatant lies and misleading rhetoric, along with a doubling down on deceptions when called on them. Glenn Kessler’s highly reputable “Fact Checker” column in the Washington Post evaluated statements made by Trump during the campaign and assigned 54 percent of them with “Four Pinocchios” (the worst rating). By contrast, statements by other politicians get Four Pinocchios 10 to 20 percent of the time.

Trump’s deceit has only continued post-election. “In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally,” Trump tweeted on November 27, 2016, a claim he continued to support. “Serious voter fraud in Virginia, New Hampshire, and California,” Trump continued, “so why isn’t the media reporting on this? Serious bias—big problem!” Investigations found nothing to back up his claim, yet this didn’t stop the majority of Trump voters from believing him, as reflected in a survey of 1,011 Americans conducted by Qualtrics in December.

Trump’s subordinates have had no problem following his lead. Senior adviser Kellyanne Conway infamously presented the Trump administration’s false claims as “alternative facts” in a January 22, 2017, interview on NBC’s Meet The Press. She was defending the lies told by White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer regarding Trump’s inauguration ceremony. Spicer insisted that Trump drew “the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration,” despite the clear evidence of aerial photos showing that Barack Obama’s inauguration drew a significantly bigger crowd.

Some wonder if it’s worth focusing on such absurd claims when there are major policy changes afoot with the new administration. However, one must consider that other politicians are highly likely to adopt Trump’s successful methods. If enough of them win by doing so, we’re headed for a downward spiral of deceit in our political system. Without a serious intervention to clean up the pollution of truth in politics, this spiral will lead to the end of our political order as we know it. Trump supporters will say this is the kind of disruption we need and what they sought in electing him. I would argue that our survival depends on moving from the post-truth, alternative-facts present into a post-lies future.
EXAMINING OUR VULNERABILITY

Getting to this future requires understanding why our political system was so vulnerable to Trump. While politicians have always accused each other of lies, the mainstream media has traditionally served as mediator and fact-checker to their statements. In the past, lying parties generally didn’t go against the media consensus, and either toned down or withdrew their claims. To function, this system for determining political truths has required an intangible but invaluable resource: the public’s trust. And it’s well documented that public trust in the media has been eroding for the last decade.

To a significant extent, such trust stemmed from the public’s inability to get information from sources other than mainstream media, along with the media projecting an appearance of objectivity. However, today more and more people are getting their news from social media (from 49 percent in 2012 to 62 percent in 2016, according to a Pew Research Center poll.) Likewise, the projection of objectivity left mainstream media unable to deal effectively with a politician who lies openly and frequently.

While other politicians on the extreme Right and the extreme Left have taken advantage of these vulnerabilities to promote their agendas, they’ve mostly been confined to the fringes of our political system. Trump’s genius rests in being the first mainstream political figure to exploit thoroughly these systemic vulnerabilities using personal magnetism and disruption.

Besides a magnetism that appealed to a certain segment of the citizenry, Trump mastered the use of social media. He bypassed the mainstream media to tweet his messages directly to voters and targeted them with sponsored advertisements on Facebook.

In a late October interview with Bloomberg Businessweek, a senior campaign official said, “we have three major voter suppression operations under way,” which he described as aimed at idealistic white liberals, young women, and African Americans. In one such operation, they used Hillary Clinton’s 1996 reference to certain gang members as “superpredators” who “we need to bring to heel” to create a South Park-style animation that was delivered to black voters through what Facebook terms “dark posts”—nonpublic posts whose viewership was targeted by the Trump campaign.

Such ads are very effective. A study from Stanford University found that over 80 percent of participants couldn’t distinguish a news story shared by a friend from a sponsored advertisement. Moreover, many made basic mistakes in evaluating the credibility of a news story. For instance, they rated a story on Facebook as more credible if it had a larger image, rather than evaluating the reputation of the story’s source. Likewise, most couldn’t distinguish between the real Facebook page of a news organization and a fake page, despite the blue checkmark Facebook uses to distinguish real from fake pages. The participants were students, an age group of generally savvy social media users. Older adults are even more likely to make such mistakes.

Likewise, the Trump campaign’s Republican allies created fake news stories that got millions of shares on social media. The Russian propaganda machine has also used social media to manufacture fake news stories favorable to Trump and critical of Clinton.

Exploiting systemic weaknesses based on trust is a particular skill set for our 45th president, and explains a significant degree of his previous economic success. For instance, the Trump Foundation relied on the trust society vests into the nonprofit sector to make illegal contributions advancing his political career and to settle legal disputes, while trust in the system of higher education was fraudulently exploited by Trump University. Other areas where he exploited systemic vulnerabilities based on trust include real estate projects, tax avoidance, and many more. Simply put, Donald Trump is highly skilled at hacking our societal structures, abusing trust in a classical use of the psychology of persuasion.

IS POST-TRUTH POLITICS REALLY SO BAD?

It’s no exaggeration to say that relying on emotions and personal opinions over facts will very likely destroy our political system. Since ancient Greece, truth in politics has been vital for a democracy to function properly. Citizens need to care about and know the reality of political affairs, at least in broad terms, to make wise decisions regarding which politicians and policies to support. Otherwise, what reason do politicians have to care about serving the true interests of the citizenry? They can simply use emotional manipulation and lies to procure and stay in power, paving the way for corruption and authoritarianism.

Indeed, rhetoric that appeals to emotions and popular beliefs is a foundational feature of authoritarianism. It’s what helped Vladimir Putin transform Russia’s fledgling post-Soviet democracy into an authoritarian state, and resulted in Putin’s consistently high popularity rating, something Trump praised in a televised forum with The Today Show’s Matt Lauer.

Trump also positively depicted Putin’s “strong control over a country.” And when asked by former GOP congressman and MSNBC host Joe Scarborough what he thought of Putin killing journalists who don’t agree with him, Trump sidestepped the question, saying, “I think that our country does plenty of killing, too, Joe.” Given that Putin began his path to authoritarian rule by undermining the Russian media, and that Trump promised to do the same in the United States if elected (and is indeed carrying out this promise), the parallel is clear.
While American political institutions are more stable than Russian ones, we should be very worried about the truth falling victim to the tragedy of the commons. As described in Bonnie McCay and James Acheson's 1987 *The Question of the Commons: The Culture and Ecology of Communal Resources*, the tragedy occurs when a commonly shared resource is destroyed by individuals acting in their own self-interest and against the collective interest. In our case, the commonly shared good isn't a tangible resource like a forest or lake, it's a political environment that is based on appealing to objective facts. Plenty of research shows the crucial role of political trust in maintaining a stable polity (for instance, 2011's *Political Trust: Why Context Matters*, edited by Marc Hooghe and Sonja Zmerli). This intangible yet invaluable resource is being polluted and destroyed by Trump's post-truth politics.

Indeed, truth in politics is a common good just like clean air and water, and the pollution of truth will devastate our political system just as environmental pollution devastates our planet and our physical health. Fortunately, we can learn from the successes of the environmental movement. It started with small groups of motivated and informed people engaging in sustained education and advocacy. As a result: of these efforts, regular citizens increasingly changed their everyday behavior through recycling, repurposing, and composting, while politicians passed pro-environmental legislation such as the Clean Air Act.

Similarly, activists for truth in politics—the pro-truth movement if you will—need to undertake educational and advocacy efforts to motivate regular citizens and politicians alike to address the pollution of truth in the political arena. Authors such as Bryan Caplan (*The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*) dismiss the possibility of the electorate growing more oriented toward the truth, yet recent research shows that people can train themselves to evaluate reality accurately and thus make wise decisions. This research has focused on decision making in various areas of finances, relationships, business, and elsewhere, as described in *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work* (2013) by Chip Heath and Dan Heath, and Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011).

Similar strategies apply to politics: it involves developing new mental habits such as systematically fact-checking political information and welcoming a revision of one's beliefs based on new evidence. Fortunately, once educated about the risks associated with the pollution of truth, most people easily recognize that accurate perception of reality by voters is beneficial to everyone except a few small interest groups that are devoted to deceiving the public.

**RATIONAL POLITICS: A CASE STUDY**

As a scholar and commentator on decision making and emotions in politics, I set out to study how to reach those who don't have an intuitive concern with the truth. Based on research in political psychology, I hypothesized that the surest way is to discover what such people care about and show them how post-truth politics will undermine what they value. The most promising avenue in my investigation has proven to be demonstrating how "alternative facts" undermine what people actually care about.

For instance, I went on a radio show last fall with prominent conservative talk show host Scott Sloan. He's well known in conservative circles and had Donald Trump on his show shortly before me. Sloan is also known in the secular movement from his debate with Aron Ra over the Ark Encounter, a Christian fundamentalist theme park that opened last summer in Kentucky. In my interview with Sloan, we discussed the Ohio State University terrorist attack in November 2016 by a Muslim who rammed his car into a crowd of students and then knifed several people before being shot dead by a university policeman.

Like many conservatives, Sloan associated Muslims with terrorism and wanted to persecute them harshly. I approached the ensuing discussion by considering his emotions and goals, meeting him where he was as opposed to where I would have liked him to be. I assessed that he

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valued safety and security first and foremost, and that he had negative feelings toward Muslims as he perceived them as a threat to safety and security.

As we began talking, I validated the host's emotions, saying it was natural and intuitive to feel anger and fear toward Muslims, as our brains naturally take shortcuts by stereotyping groups based on the actions of one member of the group. However, such stereotyping often does not serve our actual goals and values.

We discussed how in 2015 (according to johnstonarchive.net), there were seven terrorist acts in the United States, committed by a total of nine terrorists. Six of the nine were motivated, in some part, by Islamic beliefs. A 2011 Pew survey estimated that the United States had 1.8 million Muslim adults. Dividing this number by the six who committed terror acts gives you a one-in-300,000 chance that any Muslim you see would commit a terrorist act in a given year. That's like picking out a terrorist from the number of people in several football stadiums. So using "Muslim" as a filter for "terrorist" actually wastes our precious resources dedicated to safety and security, and lets the real terrorists commit attacks.

I then discussed with Sloan how if we persecute Muslims, for instance through creating a Muslim registry or through heavy policing of Muslim neighborhoods, Muslim communities would be much less likely to help us root out potential terrorists in their midst. So, I concluded, for the sake of making us safer we shouldn't antagonize Muslim communities, which so far have been quite cooperative in addressing terror concerns.

Finally, I discussed how rhetoric critical of Muslims and anti-Muslim policies will prod more Muslims to become terrorists. For instance, BBC reports that terrorist groups have used Trump's rhetoric in their recruitment tapes. This quite clearly makes us less safe and secure, I told Sloan, and so despite any negative feelings we may have toward Muslims, it's unwise to act on them. Just like if we hear criticism from our boss and want to scream in his or her face, it may not be the rational thing to do if we value our jobs. Just like we may want to take a second piece of chocolate cake, it may not be the rational thing to do if we value our health. We shouldn't go with our gut on policies and rhetoric toward Muslims if we value our security.

In the end, Sloan agreed with my points and updated his views on Muslims—not because he felt like being nice and generous and kind toward Muslims, but because he valued his security and safety.

None of this implies that religion isn't a part of the problem. In addition to the six Muslims who committed terrorist acts in the United States in 2015, three terrorists were motivated by radical Christian and right-wing beliefs, especially the November 2015 shooting at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado. Today, there are more radicals in Islam than in other religions, but the focus needs to be on radical behavior as much as religion itself.

Of course, I could have chosen to bring up my conviction that religion itself is an "alternative fact," both as a whole, and in its specific details. However, would this have been a productive use of my time on Sloan's show? It was my third interview with him, and I've had another since that conversation. By building a rapport, and not touching topics that would prevent me from being invited back on his show, I'm able to retain my channel to his conservative audience. Similarly, readers of this article may also want to consider which topics they should discuss with those who don't share their values in order to change hearts and minds—and what topics are better left for later, after more low-hanging fruits are picked.

In order to save our democracy and prevent corruption and authoritarianism, reasonable people on all sides of the political spectrum need to adopt a focus on truth in letter and spirit as the most important component of our political system. We need to work tirelessly to educate everyone about the benefits of orienting toward truth. We need to use emotionally intelligent, empathetic communication in doing so, focusing on the values and emotions of those we communicate with in order to change their hearts and minds.

We also have to create incentives and consequences for politicians to be truthful, as orienting toward truth isn't conducive to winning political battles in the current environment. Such incentives would involve a combination of carrots and sticks. On the one hand, we have to catch lies and punish liars, especially those who share our own ideological perspectives, so as to minimize accusations of political bias in advocacy for truth in politics. On the other, we must praise and reward truth telling, especially when it harms one's ideological position.

Fighting the normalization of post-truth politics and alternative facts requires us to be comfortable leaving aside easy identifications with major political movements. The pro-truth movement will require early advocates to act from the same kind of marginalized political position as early environmental activists, fighting both against the political status quo and the tendency of our brains toward lazy thinking. Yet cleaning up the pollution of truth is arguably the most important action we can take to save our democracy from sliding down into corruption and authoritarianism, and its early advocates will be the heroes of tomorrow.

Gleb Tsipursky is an assistant professor of history at Ohio State University, and he also runs the "Rational Politics" project at Intentional Insights, a nonprofit devoted to promoting rational thinking and wise decision making in politics and other life areas. Tsipursky is the author of the forthcoming book, Solving Post-Truth Politics: Fighting Alternative Facts With Behavioral Science, and is available as a speaker through AHA, SSA, and CFI speakers' bureaus. You can reach him at: gleb@intentionalinsights.org.