Beyond Post-Truth: Towards a renewed understanding of the legitimacy of post-truth politics within liberal democracies

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Abstract

We live in a post-truth era. Truth is no longer relevant in matters of political deliberation and objective facts are subordinated to emotive appeals and spurious opinions. This is crippling the political legitimacy of western liberal democracies, as these rely strongly on Enlightenment ideals of rationality, science and truth-based solutionism. At least, that is the common view. This thesis builds on a radically different conception of post-truth politics, one that sees it as an attack on the current knowledge game of established elites. It argues that post-truth politics is epistemically different from lies and bullshit. Fundamentally, it is a strategy that attacks the epistemic authoritarianism pervading our liberal democracies. This strategy wishes to uncover the game-like nature of truth in politics that is intimately linked to power and authority. Consequently, it seeks to level the playing field of the truth game. By doing so, I ultimately argue for the claim that this conception of post-truth politics is in line within the framework of political legitimacy as expounded by Rawls and Habermas.

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Introduction

Since 2016 the word post-truth has seen a 2000 percentage increase in usage compared to the year before.[1] In that light, Oxford Dictionaries (OD) declared it the word of the year in 2016. They substantiated their choice by referring to two politically canonical events taking place that year, namely the election of Donald Trump as US president and the Brexit campaign. Therefore, post-truth is most commonly referred to in the phrase 'post-truth *politics*'.[2] OD define post-truth as an adjective 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'.[3] The term was not invented in 2016,[4] but widespread public and academic debate only took off after these events happened.

Although it is well-documented that truth and politics have a complex, vexed relationship,[5] journalists and academics generally tend to believe that the epistemic problems pertaining to the 'post-truth era' are unlike those of the past.[6] Thus, there has been an enormous bulk of literature in diverse fields ranging from political science, sociology, philosophy to law trying to explain the distinctive feature of post-truth politics and consequently trying to assess whether post-truth politics is problematic for Western liberal democracies. The common view in this regard is that post-truth politics is indeed incompatible with the values of a liberal democracy.[7] If facts are subordinated to emotions and beliefs, and if truth is no longer relevant, journalists and academics fear that this is a recipe for political domination.[8] Some even go so far as to label post-truth politics a threat to our humanity.[9] Underlying that conception is a form of truth-based solutionism, a specific democratic strand in which trying to construct evidence based policy is of prime importance.[10]

Assessing this vast bulk of literature, I deem the general diagnosis of post-truth politics and its consequences implausible for two reasons. Firstly, the analyses of the distinctive feature of post-truth politics depart from more well-known epistemic problems within politics such as the lie and bullshit. In post-truth politics, as for example McIntyre and d'Ancona argue, what is new is not that politicians lie, but the public's indifferent response to it.[11] Yet when we look at the classical examples of post-truth politicians, we get the impression that it is something that *they* do that is unique from earlier politicians. It seems to be *their* blatant disregard for the current true-false game that is new, not the public's response to it. Secondly, post-truth politics is, in line with the common analyses, often deemed bad for liberal democracy. Democracy is

[1] Harsin 2018, p. 5.
[2] https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Keyes wrote a book about it in 2004, anticipating the trend, and the term itself seems to go back to the early '90s, see Harsin 2018, p. 5.
[5] See e.g. Arendt's truth and politics.
[6] McIntyre 2019, p. 23.
[7] d'Ancona 2017, p. 24.
[8] McIntyre 2019, p. 23.
[9] Sher 2023, p. 6.
[10] Farkas & Schou 2020, p. 6-7.
[11] McIntyre 2018, p. 21; d'Ancona 2017, p. 30.

founded upon Enlightenment ideals of reason, rationality and respect for truth.[12] Since we are post the relevance of truth, we are post the relevance of these ideas, so it is thought. As a consequence, the normative foundations of liberal democracy collapse, and we are set up for political domination, since politicians persuade us with rampant lies, bullshit and propaganda. Working from the intuition that the distinctive feature of post-truth politics is not explained in the above manner, I am also more reserved with labelling post-truth politics undesirable in liberal democracies. It is unsatisfactory to explain away the victories of Trump, Brexit and many other anti-establishment parties by deeming the public to be deeply irrational. Rather, if the mismatch between our current conceptions of truth and rationality and the political climate is so large, perhaps that is because we rely on a rather specific, contingent conception of these phenomena.

In this thesis I intend to provide for a better explanation of the post-truth phenomenon. One that captures its distinctive feature and signals the difference between post-truth, lies and bullshit. Furthermore, I wish to assess this distinctive post-truth feature in light of the normative framework of two of the most well-known accounts of political legitimacy for liberal democracies, namely that of Rawls and Habermas. This will provide insight into the nature of post-truth politics, as I will thoroughly examine whether it is actually the case that post-truth politics means the end of western liberal democracies as we know them. The question that guides my research is the following: to what extent does post-truth politics undermine the political legitimacy of western liberal democracies? I will answer this question by dividing it into three parts. In Chapter 1 I will assess to what extent truth is a necessary criterion for political legitimacy in the accounts of Rawls and Habermas. I will argue that Habermas' account offers us the most developed account of the relationship between truth and political legitimacy. Rawls' theory is a good steppingstone in explicating the complex nature of the relationship between truth and politics, but in later discussion I will limit myself mostly to Habermas' account, as his theory is the more elaborated and sophisticated one. In chapter 2 I will then build on a specific element within Habermas' theory, namely that of the aim to reach a rational consensus in discourse. I will do this because Habermas believes that rational consensus must be presupposed in a deliberative democracy if speakers want to aim at a genuine understanding, but also because a rational consensus forms a criterion for truth. In this way, Habermas connects truth to political legitimacy. Although this account does prevent lying and bullshitting from entering discourse, it remains to be seen whether post-truth politics can be the subject of a rational consensus. In Chapter 3 I will provide what I believe to be the most accurate account of post-truth politics, namely that of the sociologist Steve Fuller. He conceives of post-truth politics as a way of practicing politics that wants to 'level the playing field' and uncovers how truth in politics is intimately related to power. Ultimately, post-truth politicians wish to broaden the current truth-game by including their perspective on facts, truth and rationality. I will argue that that the Fullerian conception of post-truth politics is compatible with Habermas' account of political legitimacy, thus offering a novel perspective by arguing that post-truth politics does not fly in the face of good liberal democratic politics.

[12] d'Ancona 2017, p. 24.

Chapter one

In this chapter I will assess whether and to what extent truth forms a necessary criterion in the accounts of political legitimacy offered by Rawls and Habermas. In doing so, I wish to show that the relationship between truth and legitimate politics does indeed exist, but is not as straightforward as critics who lament that we live in a post-truth era believe it to be. I entertain a mainstream view on political legitimacy, explaining legitimacy as a normative concept that assesses whether someone has the right to rule.[13] Political legitimacy thus forms my normative framework against which I assess whether post-truth politics is (un)desirable within a liberal democracy.

We will come to see that Rawls thinks that truth is too weak a force to resolve our reasonable disputes. We must accept a plurality of incompatible truths as being part of comprehensive doctrine, but in our political conception of justice, truth should be replaced by reasonableness. Habermas entertains a more complex relationship between truth and politics, differentiating between how truth functions in the lifeworld and in discourse. As this account offers the most elaborate and sophisticated theory of truth and political legitimacy, we will take it to be the account that explains the relationship between truth and political legitimacy the best. Consequently, we will map out the details of that theory in chapter 2.

Paragraph 1: Rawls and truth

In *Political Liberalism* (PL), Rawls argues for a liberal principle of legitimacy, which reads: 'Our exercise of political power is fully proper only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which citizens as free and equal may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason'.[14] This definition poses, in light of Rawls' social ontology, a *prima facie* tension. On the one hand, Rawls believes that a vast diversity of comprehensive doctrines is a permanent feature of liberal democratic culture.[15] Comprehensive doctrines are 'thick' moral doctrines in that they pertain to all aspects of a person's life, both personal and political. Rawls mentions utilitarianism as an example.[16] Yet on the other hand we must abide by principles that are acceptable to all. Rawls solves this tension by an appeal to reasonable pluralism. The idea of reasonable pluralism holds that while different comprehensive doctrines about the good life will always exist, reasonable citizens will come to an overlapping consensus on societies' basic laws and norms.[17] Since the norms of each comprehensive doctrine are in conflict and too broad to form a consensus on, we must look to a more minimal, *political*, conception of societal justice to base our basic laws and ideas on. The latter are therefore drawn from societies' *shared* public political culture.[18] This culture consists in for example fundamental norms enshrined in our constitutions, earlier case

[13] Raz 2006, p. 1012.
[14] Rawls 2005, p. 137.
[15] Rawls 2005, p. 36.
[16] Rawls 2005, p. 11.
[17] Rawls 2005, p. 38-39.
[18] Rawls 2005, p. 100-101.

law and influential historical texts.[19] What is thus important is that Rawls is offering a political conception of justice. This means that the norms and ideas that are shared by reasonable citizens pertain not to the good life as such – this is the domain of comprehensive doctrines – but rather to the basic structure of society, which is a much more modest foundation.[20] The basic structure 'merely' consists of societies' main political, cultural and economic institutions.[21]

Given this short characterization of Rawls account of political legitimacy we can now ask whether and to what extent truth is a necessary criterion in reasonable pluralism. A basic intuition might be the following: Although reasonable citizens will hold mutually exclusive comprehensive doctrines, it is possible for the concept of truth to function as an impartial arbiter to solve our reasonable disagreements. But Rawls disagrees. For him, the concept of truth belongs to the realm of comprehensive doctrine.[22] He says explicitly: 'The zeal to embody the whole truth in politics is incompatible with an idea of public reason that belongs with democratic citizenship'.[23] And further he states even more strongly: 'Political liberalism views this insistence on the whole truth in politics as incompatible with democratic citizenship and the idea of legitimate law'.[24] Of course it is important to mention that when Rawls talks about the 'whole truth', he is referring to a comprehensive doctrine of the truth. The justification for reasonable pluralism lies precisely in the thought that the truth is plural, diverse and does not speak in one voice. This is because the tolerance undergirding reasonable pluralism is based on the acceptance of the burdens of judgement.[25] These burdens relate to complexities in using our rational faculties, such as weighing complex evidence, the fact that we interpret the same evidence differently in line with our biographical background, or the fact that we assign different importance to them.[26] These factors make it acceptable that the same citizens hold different truths about the same world.

Against this background, Vogelmann argues that Rawls views the relationship between truth and politics such that truth is too weak a factor to resolve our reasonable disputes.[27] There will always exist an irreducible reasonable pluralism. Since different comprehensive doctrines might at the same time have both reasonable yet conflicting views about reality, we could insist that Rawls's theory implies a 'necessary pluralism of truths'.[28] This pluralism is intelligible as Rawls holds that citizens must act rationally when they pursue their own conception of the good, they must act rationally. Rationality is the moral power to pursue and devise this conception of the good.[29] In light of this, Rawls acknowledges that some standard of truth has to be in place if citizens want to make sense of their lives.[30] There must be rules of 'inference,

[19] Rawls 2005, p. 14.
[20] Rawls 2005, p. 11.
[21] Rawls 2005, p. 11.
[22] Rawls 2005, p. 441.
[23] Rawls 2005, p. 442.
[24] Rawls 2005, p. 447.
[25] Rawls 2005, p. 56.
[26] Rawls 2005, p. 56-57.
[27] Vogelmann 2018, p. 23.
[28] Vogelmann 2018, p. 24.
[29] Rawls 2001, p. 18-19.
[30] Rawls 2001, p. 92.

and evidence, and [they must] include standards of correctness and criteria of truth'.[31] However, different procedures and methods are appropriate depending on which conception a subject endorses.[32] Therefore it is indeed justified to say that Rawls' conception of political legitimacy implies a pluralism of truths. In this light, the concept of truth is not a necessary condition for political legitimacy. Even more, we could say that the idea of truth rather complicates resolving our disputes than that it helps settling them.[33] Thus, the criterion of truth should be replaced by reasonableness.[34]

Whilst it has become clear that truth cannot function as an impartial arbiter to solve our reasonable disagreement, it is still unclear to what extent the concept of truth helps us to decide what can be the subject of a rational consensus. Since even the burdens of judgement – such as weighing evidence differently – seem to refer to evidence as something to decide our conflicts. So what is the function of the concept of truth on an everyday basis within Rawls' framework? To bridge the gap from our hypothetical rational consensus to everyday politics, let us briefly look at how Rawls might respond to a classical post-truth statement.

An example that is often mentioned when referring to post-truth politics is the tweet of Donald Trump that he believes that climate change is a hoax invented by the Chinese.[35] How would such a statement be assessed within Rawls' framework? A Rawlsian might respond that this claim is not part of the 'constitutional essentials'[36] that make up for the shared public culture, falls within the ambit of comprehensive doctrine and is thus to be excluded from reasonable pluralism. However, the delineation between constitutional essentials and normal 'legislative questions' is not easy to draw.[37] This raises a pressing difficulty associated with the way in which Rawls' concept of truth figures in his theory. How are we in practice to distinguish between a shared public culture on which we could reach a consensus, and beliefs pertaining to the realm of comprehensive doctrine? This seems especially difficult in matters such as climate change, Brexit and Covid, in which factual matters and normative positions are inextricably bound up. Some will deem the problems associated with climate change so fundamental as belonging to 'constitutional essentials'[38], where others consider it a side issue or not a problem at all. It is precisely on these matters that post-truth politics is perceived to be harmful. Yet, whether climate policy pertains to constitutional essentials depends on a large extent to whether one deems the problems stemming from climate change to be real, and thus: true.

The conclusion reached in the former paragraph – that truth is entirely replaced by reasonableness – might therefore strike some as undesirable. Although 'the whole truth' might be impotent within a liberal democracy, it seems unsatisfactory that the distinction between true and false information is not relevant in an ambiguous amount of politically relevant cases.

[31] Ibid.
[32] Rawls 2001, p. 93.
[33] Vogelmann 2018, p. 22.
[34] Bufacchi 2021, p. 352.
[35] Bufacchi 2021, p. 349.
[36] Rawls 2001, p. 91.
[37] Greenawalt 1994, p. 686 mentions abortion as a penumbral case.
[38] The movement of climate justice for example, think of Urgenda in the Netherlands and Extinction Rebellion globally.

When we envision practical political deliberation, it seems unlikely that we can resolve our issues without relying at least in part on a shared truth concept. Thus, the reader might still entertain the thesis that although Rawls does not think the concept of truth capable of solving our reasonable disagreement, a shared concept of truth is still a necessary criterion for political legitimacy. Habermas embeds precisely this intuition in his theory on truth, justification and political legitimacy. Let us therefore now engage with his account of political legitimacy and the relationship it entertains with the truth, so as to get a more complete understanding of the balance between practical political deliberation and truth.

Paragraph 2: Habermas, political legitimacy and truth

Habermas' theory of political legitimacy is a so called justificationist account. These accounts claim that political legitimacy derives from the justification of political decisions.[39] To examine which political decisions must be made, citizens must first deliberate about it, weigh evidence and come to a reasoned conclusion.[40] It is Habermas who has stressed the importance of political deliberation in deliberative democracy more than anyone else. Although his work is complex, we will limit our scope by assessing to what extent the truth plays a necessary role in his conception of political deliberation. This will give us a more complete understanding of the relation between truth and politics.

In Between Facts and Norms (BFN) Habermas introduces his principle of democracy as the source of normative political legitimacy, it holds: 'the democratic principle states that only those statutes may claim legitimacy that can meet with the assent (*Zustimmung*) of all citizens in a discursive process of legislation that in turn has been legally constituted'.[41] In order to understand this account of political legitimacy, we must examine the meaning of the 'discursive process of legislation' that generates political legitimacy.[42] A discursive process of legislation is a discourse-theoretical approach in which individuals rationally debate to come to a understanding on political topics. What makes this discourse rational, rather than, say, rhetoric, is that its participants aim at a genuine understanding and try to reach a consensus trough reasoned debate.[43] Within discourse there exists a background of three validity claims. Validity claims are normative claims that pertain to speech acts.[44] The first validity claim pertains to the speech act of assertion and is called truth, the second pertains to the speech act of avowal and is called sincerity and the third pertains to the imperative mood and is called rightness.[45]

For our purposes, we will focus on truth as a validity claim. To get a fuller understanding on the role truth plays in discourse, and thus in the legitimacy of political authority, we must examine in what way a discursive assertion figures as a truth claim, and how truth claims can be justified. Firstly, it is important to notice that validity claims are only explicitly raised within

[39] Peter 2021, p. 396.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Habermas 1996, p. 110.
[42] Chambers 2019, p. 95.
[43] Melo 2019, p. 101.
[44] Heath 2019, p. 262; Fultner 1996, p. 236.
[45] Heath 2019, p. 462.

discursive disagreement. When we make assertions in the lifeworld, these are accompanied by truth claims. However, these truth claims remain implicit as long as they are not questioned or do not founder when coming in contact with objective reality.[46] When they are rendered explicit, truth claims must be discursively justified by all speakers. In the words of Fultner: 'it is in metalinguistic assertions (*Feststellungen*) that the truth claim that is *implicit* in all assertions (*Behauptungen*) is rendered *explicit*.[47] Since only these justified truth claims can aspire to be politically legitimate, we see the importance of discourse in Habermas' theory.

Let us consider an example of how this works. When I encounter, say, a flat-earther, and he questions my assertion that the earth is round, I come to see clearly that I actually make a validity claim on the truth of my statement.[48] In discourse, a truth-claim is open to contestation and justification.[49] A truth-claim is justified if and only if it can be redeemed within discourse.[50] A truth claim is redeemed or justified when speakers have reached a rational consensus on it, which forms the goal of communicative action.[51] This consensus is related to truth in the sense that in Habermas' early work, consensus seemed to be constitutive of truth. This 'consensus theory of truth' equates truth with that which is justified in discourse.[52] This theory holds that a proposition is true if it is accepted by rational agents within an ideal speech situation.[53] In thus situation speakers reach an 'ideal limit of inquiry' freed from practical limitations.[54] The consensus theory of truth is different from a classical correspondence theory of truth, which asserts that a proposition is true if and only if it corresponds to reality.[55] Rather, the theory is more close to a coherence theory of truth, in which it is said that a proposition is true if and only if it coheres with other propositions.[56]

However, there is some ambiguity relating whether consensus is in fact constitutive of truth. Fultner is keen to notice that the consensus theory of truth is not so much a theory of *truth* as of *justification*.[57] This means that whether an assertion *is* true does not seem to be dependent on the fact that this truth is established by consensus, but rather that justified consensus figures as a criterion of truth. Levine observes this feature of the consensus theory as well. He holds that truth can never be 'identified' with rational consensus since even within the consensus theory it is acknowledged that truth transcends rational acceptability.[58]

It seems thus incorrect to interpret the consensus theory of truth as what we could call a constitutive theory of truth. Within that theory, consensus about a certain proposition would constitute the truth of that proposition. Rather, we could say that the consensus theory of truth

[46] Fultner 1996, p. 235; The concept of objectivity will be discussed below.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Buchwalter 2019, p. 459.
[49] Fultner 1996, p. 236.
[50] Fultner 1996, p. 237.
[51] Bufacchi 2021, p. 352.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid
[55] See e.g. Burgess & Burgess 2011, p. 3.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Fultner 1996, p. 237.
[58] Levine 2010, p. 684.

is a criterion-theory of truth in that consensus functions as a criterion for truth. This latter theory always comes with the caution that even our rationally and consensually accepted truths might turn out to be false.[59] In this light, the criterion of truth is (in Peircean terms) 'the ideal limit of inquiry'[60] or, in Habermas' terms 'warranted assertability'.[61] As we will see in chapter 2, it is important that Habermas aims at a *rational* consensus, which is a normative epistemological construct that fundamentally differs from an empirically attainable consensus.[62]

It is important to stress this criterion feature of consensus, as recent authors writing about post-truth have adopted the consensus theory of truth and argued for a consensus theory of post-truth.[63] Buffachi for example argues that post-truth politics is a deliberate strategy that comes from the political top, and relies upon a mechanism of consensus.[64] Since post-truth politics demand consensus – Bufacchi argues – post-truth politics can be legitimate within a liberal democracy.[65] Although I will in Chapter 3 argue that post-truth politics can be discursively redeemed, I wish to stress that my argumentation differs from Bufacchi's in two crucial ways. Firstly, Bufacchi seems to mistakenly assume that the consensus theory of truth is a constitutive theory of truth, thereby neglecting later improvements Habermas himself made in his work on truth and political legitimacy.[66] In doing so, Bufacchi's account is incomplete and outdated. He does not discuss the unconditionality of truth claims operative in the lifeworld that must be addressed if we want to successfully argue that post-truth politics can still be legitimate.[67]

Secondly, Bufacchi relies on a mechanism of empirical consensus,[68] but a mere convergence in thinking is irrelevant for political legitimacy, as the normative aspect of *rationality* is what confers legitimacy on consensus. My argument will however rely on rational consensus, taking seriously the normative and idealized feature that consensus has in Habermas' theory. In chapter 2 I will expound more fully on consensus and rationality. For now, I will address how Habermas has accommodated the ambiguity that plagued his consensus theory of truth.

Paragraph 3: Criticism of the consensus theory of truth and a pragmatic response

Habermas' consensus theory of truth gave rise to a lot of criticism. Among the most prominent was that this theory does not sit well with our conviction that truth is something non-epistemic, real and unchangeable, regardless of whether we reach a consensus about it.[69] Habermas himself noticed this problem too when he said 'a proposition is agreed to by all rational subjects because it is true; it is not true because it could be the content of a consensus attained under

[59] Ibid.
[60] Bufacchi 2021, p. 352.
[61] Fultner 1996, p. 238; Fultner 2019, p. 447.
[62] Rasmussen 2019, p. 182.
[63] Bufacchi 2021.
[64] Bufacchi 2021, p. 354.
[65] Ibid.
[66] See Bufacchi 2021, p. 352.
[67] I will discuss this aspect in paragraph 3 of this chapter.
[68] See Bufacchi 2021, p. 354.
[69] Fultner 2019, p. 447.

ideal conditions'.[70] When we make a truth claim and assert that something is true, we refer to the objective world outside us.[71] But when we view warranted assertability reached within the ideal speech situation as the sole criterion for truth, we neglect this non-epistemic intuition of truth since our justification is always temporary and defeasible.[72] In light of this criticism, Habermas developed a more non-epistemic and realist account of truth, which is called the pragmatic theory of truth.[73] As we will see, Habermas posits that truth claims refer to the objective world, but he also thinks that truth is something in principle undefinable.[74] The quest for a definition of truth is abandoned, instead Habermas explains the functioning that the truth predicate 'is true' has in practice and discourse.[75] Habermas maintains that the relationship between truth and justification is epistemically necessary for our coming to know the truth, but he now also acknowledges that truth cannot conceptually be defined in terms of consensus.[76] To substantiate this separation of knowing the truth and the truth itself, Habermas draws a distinction between how truth figures in practice and in discourse.[77] Although they are in both conceived as a regulative ideal,[78] the function of truth differs depending on the dimension in which it is situated.[79] In practice, truth has an action-guiding function. In everyday life, the truth claims we make remain implicit and are only reflected in our actions. These truth claims are unconditional in the sense that we do not make them with any proviso holding that we might be mistaken. We think that some things are true unconditionally and act on them accordingly. For example, I believe without proviso that I will not sink into the concrete sidewalk when walking on it. Precisely these unconditional truth claims are always already operative in action.

In *Truth and Justification*, Habermas explains in more detail how the truth predicate functions in everyday life and holds that it is necessarily related to objectivity.[80] For Habermas, assertions bear with them a validity claim of truth, and truth in turn is always related to the objective state of affairs outside us.[81] When our assertions clash with the factuality of the lifeworld, we experience a world that is the same for us all.[82] This view is at work in practice, and Habermas even states that the lifeworld 'operates with strong, Platonist concepts of truth and knowledge that refer to practical certainties'.[83] Against this background, the fact that we hold certain statements to be true unconditionally means that these statements refer to something factual and objective, something that is the same for all.[84] For Habermas, this move is necessary to resist the contextualism that plagued his earlier consensus theory of truth. In his new theory he answers that weakness by maintaining that it is the unconditionality of truth claims operative in

[70] Fultner 2019, p. 447 with reference from Habermas there.
[71] Fultner 2019, p. 448.
[72] Fultner 1996, p. 238.
[73] Fultner 2019, p. 447.
[74] Fultner 1996, p. 249.
[75] Fultner 2019, p. 449.
[76] Levine 2010, p. 689.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Fultner 1996, p. 247.
[79] Levine 2010, p. 688.
[80] Habermas 2003, p. 254.
[81] Habermas 2003, p. 255; Levine 2010, p. 691.
[82] Fultner 2019, p. 448.
[83] Habermas 2003, p. 254.
[84] Levine 2010, p. 691.

the lifeworld that informs discourse, so whilst in discourse we only have access to truth through the lens of consensus, truth will transcend idealized warranted assertability and refers back to the unconditionality of truth claims made in the lifeworld. Habermas thinks that although in discourse 'it is possible for as many worlds to vie with one another as there are interpretations', speakers still orient themselves toward 'a single correct answer' because of the truth- and objectivity-concepts of the life world.[85] To link truth and objectivity this way surely is a sophisticated rebuttal of the charge of contextualism that plagued his earlier consensus theory of truth. However, critics have argued that Habermas integrates a correspondence theory of truth through the back door. Ferrara for example argues that it would be more transparent if Habermas had more explicitly argued that consensus is a criterion for truth where the constitutive feature of truth would be a correspondence of a statement to reality.[86] In this way, the subject matter on which a consensus could be reached would be substantively limited to statements that correspond with reality. This would prevent the possibility of reaching a consensus about something other than the truth. In chapter 2 I will however argue that a substantive epistemic norm is inconsistent within Habermas' theory, and thus that his theory still leaves room for a consensus theory of post-truth.

Habermas embeds these unconditional truth claims in his pragmatic theory to accommodate our intuition that the truth predicate refers to something non-epistemic, objective and outside us. As said, Habermas does not provide a further definition of truth here, but he seeks to explain the function of these unconditional truth claims.[87] To explicate this function, we must examine how these claims inform the discursive process of justification. If the assertions we make in the lifeworld founder, their accompanying validity claim to truth becomes apparent. If there is for example a debate about whether some assertion 'p' is correct, individuals come to see that their assertion 'p' or 'not p' is linked to a validity claim of truth. Suppose that A holds 'p' to be unconditionally true in practice, and B holds 'not p' to be unconditionally true in practice. These individuals must now engage into discourse and try to redeem their validity claims through rational debate. Their unconditional validity claims to truth are rendered explicit in discourse, and they function as the background against which they hope to achieve a discursively reached consensus. In this way their truth claims form a regulative ideal since they keep in mind that their truth claims refer to something objectively existing outside them. Although they both believe that their assertion is unconditionally true, they must treat their truth claims in discourse with what Fultner calls a 'fallibilist proviso', in other words: they have to acknowledge that they might be mistaken in their practical belief.[88]

Although they might in the end come to an agreement, truth will always transcend idealized warranted assertability, but it is precisely this feature of truth talk that allows us to obtain ever more refined knowledge.[89] Truth as a regulative ideal in discourse has a 'fallibilistic' function in that the presence of truth gives us the possibility to falsify our claims. It provides a possibility

[85] Habermas 2003, p. 256.
[86] Ferrara 1987, p. 54-55.
[87] Levine 2010, p. 689.
[88] Fultner 2019, p. 448.
[89] Ibid.

that renders our knowledge and judgements defeasible and subject to ever more refinement. For Fultner the notion of truth has precisely the 'cash value' without which our discourses would be unproductive. With this function of truth, that seems close to a transcendental condition of possibility, speakers must treat their assertions under the fallibilist proviso, in that they must be aware that their practical certainties could always transform into tentative assumptions if they are shaken by new evidence, arguments or findings.[90] It is in this sense that truth-talk allows us to critically examine even our most steadfast convictions.

In this chapter I have tried to show how truth and political legitimacy are related for Habermas. The discursive redemption of validity claims confers legitimacy on political deliberation. Truth claims are one of the three validity claims and must also be redeemed. On this account, truth is necessary for political legitimacy in that the justification of truth claims is a crucial feature of the principle of democracy. Furthermore, I have explicated in detail how truth claims operate both in the lifeworld and in discourse, and how they come to be discursively justified. As we have seen, a rational consensus is an epistemically important criterion for truth. However, it remains unclear in what way the attainment of a rational consensus says something meaningful about 'the' truth, and whether merely one consensus can be reached rationally. These questions will inform our discussion in Chapter two. In paragraph 2.1 I will map out in more detail what the requirements of a rational consensus are for Habermas, in paragraph 2. 2 I will discuss two complications with this account and in paragraph 2.3 I will argue how these complications offer us room for arguing that post-truth politics can be discursively redeemed.

[90] Fultner 2019, p. 448.

Chapter 2

In paragraph 1, I will first map out the requirements for consensus within Habermas' theory. What is his conception of consensus, what is the nature of consensus, how broad must it be, and which conditions must be in place in order for a consensus to form at all? Paragraph 2 will subsequently examine two interrelated problems with the way in which Habermas conceives of consensus. In paragraph 3 I will show how these complications leave room for post-truth politics to be discursively redeemed.

Paragraph 1: The presuppositions for reaching a consensus: the Ideal Speech Situation

Although it has become clear that consensus is neither constitutive of nor conceptually necessary for truth in Habermas' theory of truth, consensus remains an epistemically crucial feature within his theory, since it is the only way in which rational agents can come to know what is true.[91] As such, although consensus does not make a proposition true, it remains the only important epistemic criterion for what we can hold true in discourse. This is not only the case in the earlier explicated consensus theory of truth, but also holds for Habermas' updated pragmatic realist account. The fact that Habermas introduced a non-epistemic realist aspect of truth in everyday practice – the idea of holding something true unconditionally – merely informs discourse in which the presupposition of reaching a rational consensus through argumentation is still paramount.[92] Since consensus figures so prominently in Habermas' theory of truth, it is helpful to examine what the requirements for consensus are. I will firstly map out what the necessary conditions for discourse are, after which I will examine how broad the consensus must be.

A starting point in the examination of consensus is the fact that consensus must be rational. By rational, Habermas means that it must be discursively achieved. Within the context of discourse, it is important that all rational speakers aim at a genuine understanding and do not abandon the hope for resolving their conflicts through argumentation.[93] More fully explicated, discourse is only possible when the presuppositions that define the Ideal Speech Situation (ISS) are observed.[94] The ISS is a normative epistemological construct that idealizes from empirical reality in order to shed light on the conditions that have to be in place for a rational consensus to emerge.[95] In *On the Pragmatics of Communication* we find a more precise elaboration of the specific conditions.[96] When rational agents engage in discourse they 'assume – normally in a counterfactual way – a speech situation that satisfies improbable conditions: openness to the public, inclusiveness, equal right to participation, immunization against external or internal compulsion, as well as the participants' orientation toward reaching understanding'.[97]

[91] Fultner 2019, p. 447.
[92] Melo 2019, p. 101.
[93] Ingram 2019, p. 60.
[94] Rasmussen 2019, p. 182.
[95] Rasmussen 2019, p. 182.
[96] Habermas 1998.
[97] Habermas 1998, p. 369; see also Levine 2010, p. 685.

Although the above characteristics are generally thought of as features pertaining to the ISS, this passage actually shows that the assumptions of rational discourse pertain rather to the individuals themselves, who bring them in and subsequently create the ISS. It is important to note that Habermas understands that these presuppositions are assumed in a counterfactual way. Counterfactual presuppositions are conditions that the speakers must accept in order to obtain a genuine consensus.[98] This 'must' has a Wittgensteinian character in the sense that it is inevitable that speakers accept these conditions, or else they would not aim at genuine understanding and a consensus would never be reached.[99]

Whilst these features seem to be empirically attainable, it is important to note that Habermas is aiming at a normative rational consensus. For Habermas, a *de facto*, empirical consensus is not the end goal, but the concept of consensus rather functions as a regulative ideal.[100] Again, we could say that consensus functions as a Wittgensteinian imperative in the sense that consensus must be presupposed, or else we would not be engaged in rational debate at all. In this sense, the requirements of the ISS are idealizations from empirical reality. Therefore, consensus is not reached when every person actually accepts a certain proposition, but rather when 'every other rational person *would* also accept p if placed in the same epistemic circumstances'.[101] If we would merely state 'every other person' we would fall back into stubborn empirical reality and if we omit the hypothetical clause we neglect the plausible idea that multiple consensuses could be reached even by perfectly rational people. However, three complications for Habermas' theory associated with the relationship between consensus and truth that are worth mentioning arise. I will map these out in this paragraph. In paragraph 2 I will then explain how these complications form a possibility for us to argue that consensus does not solely have to be about the truth.

Paragraph 2: two complications with rationality and consensus

The first complication with relating consensus to rationality in this way is that it tends to a *petitio principii*. Resscher notes that on the one hand, we obtain a consensus by adherence to the rational principles of the ISS, but on the other hand the same rational principles are such that they demand -at least in theory- a consensus.[102] Bufacchi thematizes this objection and calls it the Circularity Objection.[103] Rasmussen notices this too when he says that the ISS is both a presupposition and a criterion of consensus being rational.[104] Any consensus that is formed with consideration of the presuppositions of the ISS can be seen as rational.[105] In his later work however, Habermas puts more emphasis on the empirical aspect of the presuppositions of the ISS, more akin to 'rules of argumentation'.[106] Although this alleviates the problem of circular reasoning to some extent, the question now becomes whether consensus is any viable criterion

[98] Gregoratto 2019, p. 79.
[99] Levine 2010, p. 682.
[100] Resscher 1993, p. 26.
[101] Resscher 1993, p. 50.
[102] Resscher 1993, p. 13-14.
[103] Bufacchi 2021, p. 353.
[104] Rasmussen 2019, p. 183.
[105] Rasmussen 2019, p. 183.
[106] Rasmussen 2019, p. 184.

for truth at all. As Resscher notes, factual consensus on controversial topics is almost never reached, and thus factual consensus would be an over-demanding criterion.[107] The only plausible connection between truth and consensus indeed seems to be on the level of the ISS. Only when we presuppose abstract idealizations can we maintain that consensus figures as a criterion of what actually *is* true. In paragraph 3 we will see how this objection bears on the relationship between consensus and truth.

For now, let us turn to the second complication. Critics of consensus have argued that even within the rational confines of the ISS, it is possible to reach multiple consensuses.[108] Although Habermas is silent on the material outcomes of consensus, it indeed seems by no means to follow that the procedural presuppositions that rational agents bring to discourse demand a singular outcome on a certain topic. This is not surprising, since the presuppositions of the ISS are wholly procedural in nature. In paragraph 3 we will see how Habermas' presentation of the consensus-criterium opens up the way for a consensus on something other than what is actually true.

Paragraph 3: implications of the two complications

Let us now turn to the first complication discussed in paragraph 1, which I called – after Bufacchi – the Circularity Objection. For our purposes, this complication serves as a possibility to argue that Habermas' theory leaves room for consensus to be about something other than the truth. This is because nothing in the way in which Habermas conceptualizes rationality compels us to reach a consensus about 'the' truth. If we look closely at the counterfactual presuppositions that speakers must bring with them if they are to engage in discourse, we see a strong emphasis on procedural aspects of communication. Speakers must be open to all arguments, inclusive, respect equality and be immune to persuasion not based on reasoning. There is no truth-apt criterion to be found here. It is important to note that Habermas did not simply omit such a criterion, and neither could a critic rebut my argument by just adding a substantive norm of epistemic deliberation. A short investigation of the compatibility of substantive and procedural norms of political deliberation within Habermas' framework clarifies this point. I will firstly argue in line with Peter that substantive norms are undesirable in deliberative democracies, after which I will show that only procedural norms are consistent within deliberative democracies. As Peter argues in her article about the desirable candidate norms for political deliberation, substantive epistemic truth norms are not to be preferred because of two reasons.[109] In order to understand her argument, let us briefly look at an example Peter offers of a substantive truth norm that falls prey to these objections. We could modify the ISS such as that speakers must observe the following truth-norm when deliberating: 'Everything else equal, your contribution to political deliberation involving a politically relevant proposition p as a premise is valid iff[110] p is true'.[111] This norm might seem attractive for a variety of reasons. For one, it is in line with

[107] Resscher 1993, p. 54.
[108] Ferrara 1987, p. 54-55.
[109] Peter 2021.
[110] If and only if.
[111] Peter 2021, p. 399.

the moral virtue of truthfulness such as Williams describes,[112] and for another it can help 'speaking truth to power' in the sense that free access to true information helps prevent a nation to backslide into tyranny. However, there are some serious problems with these types of norms. Firstly, they entail as Peter discusses an over-demanding criterion. In times of crises such as that of the climate crisis, the Covid-pandemic or a national emergence it is necessary to act quickly. Information at that time is often incomplete and might not be so well verified as is usually the case. Yet it is of course desirable to be able to act, albeit on incomplete information.[113] This argument holds in a somewhat less strong way for every topic on which speakers deliberate. There is always the possibility that even eminent research and standing practices might turn out to be wrong, incomplete or misleading, and that more analysis yields a more complete understanding of some problem. If we would actually adopt this substantive truth norm, it will lead into the well-known problem of paralysis by analysis. Secondly, as this rule filters out too much possibly relevant contributions, the resulting epistemic scarcity can also lead to what Peter calls 'political recklessness', in the sense that if we are overly critical on which contributions we allow, we will end up with too little information to make sound policy.[114] Although some sophisticated revisions of substantive truth-norms fall less pray to these clear problems,[115] they still do to some extent, and if we for example modify truth norms to a justified true belief norm, or a negative norm (such as: your contribution 'is not valid if it is obviously and demonstrably false')[116], there are risks of *who* is going to decide when the criteria are fulfilled. In this light, substantive truth norms are not compatible with deliberative democracy.

Procedural norms of political deliberation *are* in line with deliberative democracy. Let us look at the example Peter offers us: the 'Responsiveness Norm of Political Deliberation: Everything else equal, your contribution to political deliberation involving a politically relevant proposition p as a premise is valid if you have appropriately adjusted your original confidence in p in response to political disagreements concerning p'.[117] This norm does not run into the problems of over-demandingness or recklessness. More so, it allows all sorts of epistemic contributions, whether they in the end turn out to be wrong or not. When speakers adopt a critical reflective attitude and filter out the relevant information, there is also no risk of epistemic scarcity and thus for the recklessness problem to emerge. Although this norm does of course pose a lot of questions, such as: 'how do I know when it is appropriate to adjust my argument?', or: 'what is the scope of arguments I must consider to live up to this norm?', we do not need to discuss them in more detail here. For our purposes it is not necessary to work out a perfect norm, but rather to show that the type of epistemic norm that is most in line with deliberative democracy is procedural in nature. The exclusion of a truth-criterion as a presupposition for the ISS is thus no contingency or simple omission, but necessary for a functional deliberative democracy.

[112] Williams 2002, p. 7.
[113] Peter 2021, p. 399.
[114] Peter 2021 p. 400.
[115] These subtleties are outside the scope of this thesis, but interesting nonetheless. See for further discussion: Peter 2021, p. 399-402.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Peter 2021, p. 403.

This gives us the first argument that a consensus can be rational and not about the truth. As we have seen, the criterion for whether a consensus is rational is that the norms of rationality are presupposed and upheld. I have interpreted these norms as the criteria pertaining to individuals who communicate in the ISS and have shown that these criteria only relate to procedural norms and not to substantive truth-norms. Statements and beliefs that are not true are not filtered out because of rationality,[118] so when a consensus is reached, we do not necessarily have a criterion of what counts as true, rather a rational consensus simply signals that the norms of the ISS have been respected.

The second complication for Habermas' theory discussed in paragraph 1 is that multiple consensuses could be reached within the ISS. In the former section I have already tried to show that substantive epistemic norms are incompatible with deliberative democracy. I will now assess whether the way in which Habermas interlinks truth and objectivity as discussed in chapter 1 prevents a consensus to be on something other than the truth. I will argue that the formation of a rational consensus is not limited by the way in which truth claims function in the life world. Even if we grant Habermas that truth claims in the lifeworld operate with a strong Platonist concept of truth, it does not guarantee that a rational consensus will be about 'actual' truths according to that theory. Rather, this statement refers to *the attitude* people take in the lifeworld when they act. Their actions and assertions are backed by implicit claims to truth, and they *take* these claims to be true unconditionally.[119] What speakers take to be true that informs discourse, but the truth claims that are there rendered explicit do not actually have to be true. Put differently: The empirical claim of people's disposition towards the lifeworld does not guarantee in any sense that they will accept the same truths or hold the same things to be objective. Habermas believes that when statements, actions or thoughts fail 'the world stops cooperating as expected. Through failure, we experience in practice that the world revokes its readiness to cooperate, and this refusal gives rise to the concept of objectivity.'[120] This objective, univocal world is the same for all, and forms the background against which discourse takes place. However, speakers will disagree precisely on whether and when their theories or statements fail. An antivaxxer, a flat-earther and a climate denialist might subscribe to a correspondence theory of truth and hold that their worldview is strongly supported by what they take to be convincing evidence for their claims. Their claims that vaccines are ineffective, the earth is flat and that climate change does not exist are backed by what they *take* to be evidence that corresponds to reality. In this, their truth-concept does not differ from the professors who claim the opposite and say that it is their evidence that corresponds to reality.

Although a lot of these people might not live up to the demands of the ISS when engaging in debate, this is for now not the point. Rather, what I try to show here is that linking truth to objectivity does not prevent falsehoods or untruths from reaching discourse. If this would be the case, the pragmatic theory of truth would be self-defeating, since consensus as a criterion

[118] Of course, they can be discarded because of good reasons, but the 'unforced force of the better argument' does not *necessarily* lead us towards the truth.
[119] Fultner 2019, p. 447: 'we orient our actions by what we take to be true and, in acting, we take our validity claims to be unconditional.'.
[120] Habermas 2003, p. 256.

for truth would be redundant. The anti-vaxxer and the professor of immunology both subscribe to the same truth-concept and think that the other is severely delusional. The professor furthermore thinks the anti-vaxxer to hold obviously and demonstrably false believes about vaccines, but this in and of itself does not prevent the spiraling upwards of both statements into discourse. For as we have seen, there is no valid substantive epistemic norm that filters out any contribution to the ISS *ex ante*, as long as speakers are open, inclusive and respect the other procedural demands. Although it might strike the reader as relatively more unlikely that a consensus on anti-vax viewpoints will be formed, this again is not the point. Recall that the main function of consensus was that it must be presupposed for a discourse to be rational. The *possibility* of consensus signals that discourse is rational. But since rationality is purely procedural in nature, consensus no longer figures exhaustively as a criterion for truth. As long as the procedural requirements of the ISS are observed and consensus as a regulative ideal is presupposed, any substantive claim that does not contradict the procedural requirements can be the topic of consensus. Against the background of these two complications, I will now argue for the possibility that post-truth politics can be the subject of a discursive redemption and thus be politically legitimate.

Chapter 3

In chapter one I have established the relationship between truth and liberal democracy by assessing how truth relates to political legitimacy in the work of Rawls and Habermas. For Rawls, truth is no necessary criterion for political legitimacy, since truth is replaced by reasonableness. Habermas entertains a more complex account of the relationship between truth and democracy. For Habermas, discursive justification of validity claims is at the heart of his account of political legitimacy, which is embodied in the principle of democracy. Since truth is one of the three validity claims, truth claims must also be redeemed in discourse. Truth claims are non-epistemic in so far speakers use them to refer to the objective world. These truth claims form the background that speakers keep in sight when entering the ISS. They will then aim at a genuine understanding and try to reach a rational consensus. This rational consensus must be presupposed as a regulative ideal, so that when consensus is formed, it simultaneously forms a criterion for whether that consensus is rational. On this account, it seems that Habermas conceives of a much stronger relationship between truth and justification, and thus also between truth and political legitimacy. In chapter 2 I have argued on the basis of two objections to his theory of truth that even within his most updated account of truth – the pragmatic theory of truth – a consensus can be both rational without that consensus being a criterion for truth. Of course, this does not *a contrario* mean that a rational consensus can be formed on post-truth, and thus that post-truth is in line with a legitimate liberal democracy. In order to argue for that claim, we must first get a proper account of what post-truth politics is. It is also important to stress how post-truth politics differs from more traditional epistemic defects in politics such as the lie and bullshit, since these practices seem in outright contradiction to democratic politics. In this paragraph I will first establish what I take to be the best account of post truth politics, and then I will argue that this account is in line with legitimate liberal democracy by showing that post-truth discourse can be discursively redeemed. In paragraph 1 I will begin along the lines of a *via negativa*, establishing what post-truth politics is *not*. This is helpful since there exists a plethora of views about the nature of post-truth in the academic literature. Then, by discarding most views as not explaining post-truth politics accurately, I will in paragraph 2 show what is distinctive of post-truth politics and hence what I take to be the best account of it. In paragraph 3 I will consequently show that this account of post-truth politics can be the subject of a rational consensus.

Paragraph 1: what post-truth politics is not

A good starting point in the investigation into what post-truth politics is, is the influential work *Post-Truth* by McIntyre. His book gives voice to the idea that post-truth politics is distinct from more traditional epistemic problems within politics, such as the lie and bullshit. McIntyre is ambiguous in the delineation of the concept of post-truth, since he first defines it as the denial of the existence of reality,[121] although he later softens that to the view that post-truth politics is a subordination of beliefs to facts.[122] What is unique on this account, is that the public itself

[121] McIntyre 2018, p. 22.
[122] McIntyre 2018, p. 23.

plays the key role in what constitutes post-truth politics: 'In its purest form, post-truth is when one thinks that the crowd's reaction actually does change the facts about a lie'.[123] Post-truth politicians thus make use of classical epistemic vices such as willful ignorance, the lie and bullshitting, but what is new, is the way in which these vices operate. In the past, politicians surely lied, but as Bufacchi noted they honoured the truth by dying it.[124] They accepted that there was a truth different from the lie they told but chose to tell it anyway for whatever benefit they thought it would bring. The current political climate is different, since politicians now lie more openly and think that the crowd's reaction is constitutive of what is called true. We could say that for McIntyre 'post-truth' is a new constitutive theory of truth in which earlier criteria of scientific evidence, rationality and the like are replaced by a mere consensus of the crowd.

What is thus new within post-truth politics, is that an attitudinal shift occurs in the reaction that the public at large has to the falsehoods, lies and bullshit of politicians. d'Ancona offers a similar explanation of post-truth politics, as he holds that 'political lies, spin and falsehood are emphatically not the same as Post-Truth. What is new is not the mendacity of politicians but the public's response to it.'[125] The prefix 'post' is not best characterized as a temporal or chronological statement, indicating that we are now in a world 'after' truth, rather it indicates that we do not deem the truth important or essential any longer.[126] The tools post-truth politicians have at their disposal are at heart the same as their predecessors had, but the indifferent response of the public at large increases their striking power. For McIntyre, this is undesirable in a liberal democracy, because when people are compelled without evidence, this could lead to political domination.[127] Similarly, d'Ancona believes that post-truth politicians now have the ability to rip the Enlightenment foundations of democracy apart, replacing rationality and honesty by lies and deception.[128]

The above account can be seen as the 'classical' one regarding post-truth politics. These are the views most prominently shared by journalists the public at large. There are however three problems with the classical account of post-truth. Firstly, the plausibility of this account of post-truth politics depends on its empirical verification. It must be established that the indifference to lies, bullshit and the like indeed differs in a statistically relevant way from the past. But neither McIntyre nor d'Ancona offer us this kind of research. d'Ancona does assert that the breakdown of social trust is the most important factor in the success of post-truth politics, but fails to explain how this translates to the indifferent attitude of the public at large.[129] Hannon argues that whilst the post-truth condition is often described by this lack of trust, or 'motivational post-factualism', we lack research that actually shows that we have entered in such an era.[130] As Hannon shows, it is actually more likely the case that voters do assert what they genuinely belief, and that they are 'naïve realists' by believing that everyone would think

[123] McIntyre 2018, p. 21.
[124] Bufacchi 2021, p. 349.
[125] d'Ancona 2017, p. 30.
[126] Bufacchi 2021, p. 348; see also Vogelmann 2018, p. 20.
[127] McIntyre 2018, p. 23.
[128] d'Ancona 2017, p. 24.
[129] d'Ancona 2017, p. 40.
[130] Hannon 2023, p. 48.

the same if presented with the same 'facts'.[131] Secondly, these theories do not cater into our intuition that post-truth politics is something post-truth politicians *do*, rather than locating its distinctive feature in the response of the public at large. The theories of McIntyre and d'Ancona explicate the distinctive feature of post-truth politics as something that pertains to the audience, namely their indifference towards the true/false-distinction. But when one thinks of post-truth politics and its telling examples, the actions of specific politicians (such as Trump) come to mind. Thirdly, these accounts mistakenly assume that the relationship between truth and politics is beyond contestation. They hold that truth is a necessary feature in a legitimate liberal democracy, because without it we would get politically dominated. Thus, politics must respect truth and the way in which we come to these truths are through science.[132] In this sense truth has an authoritarian, Arendtian aspect, in that the truth is an external force of its own that imposes limits on the acceptability of policy and debate.[133] This normative position is called 'truth-based solutionism', referring to the idea that evidence based politics leads to better and more legitimate results.[134] This position is not in line with the accounts of political legitimacy that Rawls and Habermas offer. For Rawls, truth is no necessary criterion for political legitimacy since truth is too weak a force to be able to resolve our reasonable disagreements. For Habermas, whilst truth plays a role in the redemption of validity claims, what ultimately confers legitimacy upon political decisions is the discursive justificatory process itself rather than an appeal to any substantive notion of 'the' truth. From the perspective of a procedural notion of political legitimacy, lamenting that we live in a post-truth era where the sole task is to reinstate trust boils down to a call for being less critical. For critics of post-truth politics assume to know precisely which sources to trust and that their scientific evidence is the best to solve all disputes.[135] This leads to an additional problem.

A lot of authors have noted that this demand leads to the problem of claiming epistemic authority over others.[136] The critics of post-truth politics assume that they know what is true and good, and dismiss radically critical perspectives as irrational, naïve and stupid. The argument for post-truth politics often builds on just a few well known examples. Think of Trump's inauguration claim,[137] the claim that Brexit would save Britain 350 million pounds per week,[138] or Trump's statement that global warming was invented by the Chinese.[139] While it is of course in the spirit of democracy to criticize these statements, it is much less in line with for example the demands of the ISS to pre-emptively exclude all people who believe these claims. But the rhetoric of post-truth politics precisely delegitimizes perspectives that also hold true these assertions. I explicitly say 'also hold true' because it is part of the post-truth rhetoric to see the fact that people hold these beliefs as a sufficient criterion for exclusion. But this is

[131] Ibid.
[132] McIntyre 2018, p. 24; Vogelmann 2018, p. 27.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Farkas & Schou 2020, p. 6-7.
[135] Vogelmann 2018, p. 21.
[136] Hannon 2023, p. 50.
[137] Vogelmann 2018, p. 19.
[138] McIntyre 2018, p. 18.
[139] Bufacchi 2021, p. 349.

problematic since it filters out a whole range of more nuanced positions one could take in discussions about for example policy in matters of climate change, covid and immigration.

In this sense the post-truth rhetoric itself can be seen to be elitist and anti-democratic, by monopolizing the way in which truth is uncovered and deciding who can participate in deliberation.[140] It is certainly possible that those who are critical of post-truth politics feel that their way of dealing with political issues is no longer accepted by a vast majority of people. As Habgood-Coote argues, critics often argue for a 'return to norms narrative' in which they wish that politics could strengthen its relationship with truth, rationality, science and evidence once again.[141] This is in itself not problematic, for one could argue that truth-based solutionism is a necessary feature of a legitimate liberal democracy. What is problematic however, is a contingent, particular view is presented as the universally true account of truth and politics, as is evidenced by discarding opposing positions as irrational, or saying that people have lost their minds.[142] But if we take the accounts of Rawls and Habermas seriously, we see that truth does not have this function within politics. Democracy fundamentally consists in the rule of the people, and not in the rule of truth.[143]

Because of these three reasons, post-truth politics is not best captured as a phenomenon that describes a breakdown of trust in the general public. Not only is the lack of empirical evidence for this claim wanting, more importantly it relies on a specific relationship between truth and democracy, one that cannot be sustained in light of the accounts of political legitimacy that Rawls and Habermas offer us. These mainstream modern views of political legitimacy do not rely upon a substantive truth notion to resolve our political issues.

However, there is a strand in the literature that wishes to conclude that since post-truth politics has no stable meaning, we should abandon the usage of the term all together. This is the position Habgood-Coote takes when he says that the term is linguistically defective and unnecessary.[144] It is indeed true that post-truth politics has as of yet no precise and stable meaning, and that reference often is made to existing epistemic defects, which leaves us wondering what the distinctive feature of the phenomenon is. However, I wish to see this problem as an incentive to rigorously investigate the true nature of the concept. This is relevant because the current intuition is that we *do* face a new phenomenon, one that is not captured by mere reference to lies and bullshit.[145]

[140] Hannon 2023, p. 53.
[141] Habgood-Coote, p. 1056.
[142] Hannon 2023, p. 50.
[143] Hannon 2023, p. 55.
[144] Habgood-Coote 2019, p. 1034.
[145] Hannon 2023, p. 47.

Paragraph 2: towards a renewed understanding of post-truth

In what now comes, I will develop an account of post-truth politics that does not fall prey to the problems of the theories of McIntyre and d'Ancona. It relies on the conception of post-truth politics as expounded by the sociologist Steve Fuller.

Fuller wants to put the post-truth condition in a larger political perspective and suggests that it is at heart an attack on how traditional epistemic authorities come to decide upon what truth is.[146] For decades, the prime distributors of truth were experts, be it in science, the church or government. With their policies, research and advice they have tried to cope with the uncertainty pertaining to the lifeworld. These experts have enjoyed a certain 'cognitive authoritarianism' in that the state through funding licensed them to conduct research and distribute knowledge.[147] This insight is important, as we see that knowledge and truth do not operate in a vacuum. Truth is connected to the political domain and they influence each other reciprocally. This monopoly on intellectualism fits closely into the narrative of truth-based solutionism, in which truth is attributed a central role in resolving political disputes. Fuller would call truth-based solutionism the dominant paradigm that constitutes the 'truth-condition'. The truth-condition consists of a first order system in which it is clear how the true/false-distinction works. Uncertainties may arise, but when they do, we have standard procedures for how to mitigate them.[148] Truth can be seen as a game, in which there are certain rules to play by. In the classical truth-condition in the views of McIntyre and d'Ancona, we could say that truth is defined (although not explicitly) as a correspondence theory, in which statements are true if and only if they correspond to reality. The rules of the game are laid out by science, practiced by scientists that supply recommendations to policy experts who adopt them into politics.

What marks the decisive shift towards a post-truth condition is firstly that the truth-game and its accompanying rules are seen as just one of many possible contingent power structures. Secondly, the post-truth condition comes with the proposal of a set of alternative rules to play the truth-game. Thus, what matters in the post-truth condition is not whether something is true or false, but how we come to decide it.[149] Fuller is keen to dispel some myths pertaining to this post-truth condition. For one, the post-truther does not deny the existence of objective facts. These are still acknowledged, but the post-truther merely wants to state that these facts are created and manufactured according to a specific set of scientific rules.[150] Secondly, a post-truther is not 'post-truth' all the time, since he holds a kind of double-truth doctrine, as he operates both inside and outside the current knowledge game.[151] Post-truthers might make use of facts but at the same time be critical about how these are produced.

[146] Fuller 2020, p. 13.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Fuller 2018, p. 42.
[149] Fuller 2020, p. 11.
[150] Fuller 2018, p. 41.
[151] Fuller 2018, p. 47.

So far we have explicated the post-truth condition, but it is also interesting to see how we could characterize post-truth politicians within Fuller's framework. For Fuller, the post-truth condition is metaphorically explicated by two types of elites, lions and foxes.[152] A citation may serve as a welcome introduction to these two types:

> The lions treat the status quo's understanding of the past as a reliable basis for moving into the future, whereas the foxes regard the status quo as possessing a corrupt understanding of the past that inhibits movement into a still better future[153]

Thus, the lions can be seen as defending the dominant truth-game. These would be Clinton and Biden in the presidential elections in the US and the evidence based remain-camp in Brexit. Closer at home we could see classical parties such as the center-liberals (*VVD*), Christian democrats (*CDA*), and the progressive left-wingers (*Groenlinks-PvdA*) as classical establishment parties that – whilst ideologically different – all fundamentally play by the same truth game. The foxes are characterized by their wish to break open the current truth game, which they see as contingent and undesirable. This is precisely what Trump did in 2016, Farage wanted to achieve with Brexit and what conservative Dutch politicians as Geert Wilders (PVV) and Thierry Baudet (FvD) want to realize. These foxes are not *ipso facto* irrational, although their claims would often be labelled 'false' under the existing truth-game. More importantly, *by* making their claims, they want to attack the current political order, and shape the rules to their advantage.[154] Take a recent example that journalists and academics would probably deem 'post-truth'. In a recent debate in parliament, the controversial right-wing conservative politician Thierry Baudet made the claim that the moon landing didn't take place.[155] Although we could interpret this either as (willful) ignorance, a falsehood, a deliberate falsehood (lie), or a total indifference towards the truth (bullshit), what is more likely is that Baudet – as is characteristic of his political style – wanted to radically baffle his political opponents and 'trust-bust' their truth-game.[156] He is basically saying: I know that according to *your* truth-game, this fact is beyond reasonable doubt, and simply regarded as true, but *I* do not acknowledge it. In this way, he delegitimizes the truth-game of the establishment, which relies strongly upon scientific evidence and expert-knowledge. Baudet uses a similar strategy when he attacks the scientific consensus on climate change and denies the efficacy of any covid-measure ever implemented.[157] For him, the leonine 'facts' always exist in relation to their political agenda, which is aimed at suppressing the people.

As becomes clear from the above paragraph, what is fundamentally at stake in the post-truth condition is what Fuller calls 'modal power'.[158] Modal power refers to *how* power exists, rather than *what* power is. The lions in the above metaphor traditionally have modal power, in that

[152] Fuller 2018, p. 2.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Fuller 2018, p. 3.
[155] https://www.ad.nl/video/productie/baudet-ontkent-maanlanding-en-9-11-na-vragen-wilders-399825.
[156] Fuller 2020, p. 14.
[157] These claims are present in his party's recent election program: https://fvd.nl/FVD_het_programma_van_hoop_optimisme_en_herstel_2023-2027.pdf.
[158] Fuller 2018, p. 33-34.

they decide how the truth game is played. They not merely want to conserve the current truth-game, but they also want to present that game as being something virtually necessary.[159] This is a deliberate strategy founded on the believe that the masses in society must believe that the current political order is necessary and thus stable. According to Fuller, these strategies where already clearly present in the work of Plato and Machiavelli, and thus these philosophers could interestingly be seen as post-truth politicians *avant la lettre*.[160] The foxes precisely want to break through this arbitrary concept of political order and by breaking the rules of the game want to show that the order is contingent. They want to democratize modal power in that the masses also have a say in how politics relates to truth.

Fuller's account of post-truth politics is superior to the classical account of McIntyre and d'Ancona. Firstly, it does not rely upon the fiction that truth somehow has been 'eclipsed', or that the concept of truth is no longer relevant.[161] As Blackburn rightly notes: 'the concept of truth is a survivor'.[162] Blackburn asserts that in everyday life, we are perfectly able 'practical epistemologists', in that we rely on truth to make sense of our lives.[163] However, this is not sufficient to establish that we could never be post-truth, as Blackburn believes. Rather, Fuller shows that the belief in the existence of facts is perfectly in line with the post-truth condition. Post-truth politicians merely want to broaden and democratize the knowledge game.

Secondly, Fuller's account does not suffer from the charge that it claims to know the relationship politics must have with the truth. To the contrary, it assumes a radical openness towards this relationship, and the post-truth condition precisely seeks to 'level the playing field', making sure not only lions, but also foxes obtain modal power.[164] Therefore, this account can be seen as the most anti-elitist, radically democratic conception of what post-truth politics is. Thirdly, it does not claim epistemic authority over others, but precisely wants to break down any form of cognitive authoritarianism in which expert-knowledge reigns supreme. This does not mean that expert knowledge is no longer valued, but it is valued as just *a* form of knowledge, also historically situated within a certain political system. Furthermore, this account is not dependent on the implausible idea that there is no new epistemic situation, other than a mere increase in lies and bullshit. Although post-truth politics, which takes place in a post-truth condition, is certainly not new, its forms have come more explicitly to the fore with the likes of Trump, Farage, Baudet and many others. This account of post-truth politics decisively rebuts what Hannon calls the rhetoric of post-truth, in which post-truth politics is presented as a mere description of a certain political climate, but in fact contains a hidden, cryptonormative charge towards political opponents.[165] In fact, it is precisely this rhetoric that is itself characteristic of the post-truth condition, in which the establishment actively seeks to hold on to their existing truth-game. Now that we have expounded Fuller's account and presented it over and against

[159] Fuller 2018, p. 33.
[160] Fuller 2018, p. 32.
[161] McIntyre 2018, p. 10.
[162] Blackburn 2018, p. 11.
[163] Blackburn 2021, p. 68.
[164] Fuller 2020, p. 16.
[165] Hannon 2023, p. 49.

the more mainstream views of McIntyre and d'Ancona, we will argue that post-truth politics in the Fullerian sense can be the subject of a rational consensus.

Paragraph 3: the compatibility of post-truth politics with a politically legitimate liberal democracy

In this paragraph I will propose that the Fullerian view of post-truth politics is not contrary to the demands of a politically legitimate liberal democracy as argued for by Habermas. In chapter 1, we saw that political legitimacy derives from the justification of political decisions. This is captured in Habermas' principle of democracy which holds that only those statutes are legitimate that are discursively justified by all citizens. In discourse, the justification of validity claims confers legitimacy on the deliberative process. As truth claims are an important category of validity claims, we see that their discursive redemption is a necessary criterion for political legitimacy. To expound on the justificatory process, we have examined how these truth claims operate in the lifeworld and how they consequently inform discourse. Habermas ingeniously ties the unconditionality of truth claims operating in the lifeworld to the possibility of justification in discourse, in which truth claims are always accompanied by a fallibilist proviso. In this way, he does justice to the intuition that the lifeworld operates with a Platonic truth concept whilst at the same time emphasizing that justification is epistemically paramount for coming to know the truth. In the words of Geuss, the truth 'does not lie on the street waiting for us, but must be actively selected, formed and conveyed by different speakers.[166] Although truth is conceptually independent from discursive justification, this justificatory process is a criterion of the truth.

In chapter 2 we then examined more specifically how this process of discursive justification works. We have seen that the presupposition of a rational consensus is necessary if we are to aim at a genuine understanding. If we observe the demands of the ISS, and in the end do reach a consensus, this consensus is again a criterion for rationality. Since all procedural obstacles are filtered out, Habermas thinks that the unforced force of the better argument will lead us closer towards the truth, and in that sense consensus is also a criterion for truth. Although consensus is the only criterion for what the truth is, we have seen that the subject matter of a rational consensus is not limited to 'the' truth. For one, the procedural demands of the ISS do not limit contributions because they are not true, so 'untruths' could also inform discourse, and secondly, the unforced force of the better argument is not so strong that the ISS guarantees that merely one rational consensus will arise.

Working from these insights, I hold that Fuller's conception of post-truth politics does not conflict with Habermas' account of political legitimacy. Although we have seen that truth performs an important function in this account, I will argue that post-truth in the Fullerian sense can perform the same function as truth, both in lifeworld as in discourse. Thus, post-truth politics does not conflict with this framework any more than 'truth-politics' does.

[166] Geuss 2014, p. 140.

In order to make the point, it is helpful to assess the process of reaching a rational consensus from the start, beginning with the lifeworld in which assertions with implicit truth claims are made. As Fuller argues, post-truth politicians do not deny the existence of objective facts. They are not 'post' a correspondence conception of truth. They still rely on the objective world and their claims refer to them. Both the 'truther' and the post-truther take their assertions to be true unconditionally. As we have discussed Habermas connects the truth to objectivity. He holds that when our assertions in the lifeworld founder, we experience a world that is the same for us all, rendering us with the concept of objectivity. The post-truther does not wish to deny this connection all together, but she does wish us to realize that it is a specific, contingent truth-game that is linked to objectivity. When Habermas talks about a 'Platonic truth concept', he is talking about a correspondence theory of truth, but the post-truther would argue that the lions generally import a whole set of specific rules on how to play by this concept. These are the rules of Enlightenment rationality, scientific evidence and the knowledge of experts. Furthermore, these rules are presented as universally necessary, and it is precisely this contention that the post-truther wishes to shatter.

The post-truther wants to level the playing field and show that when we assert that the world stops working as expected, we rely on a certain truth-game with its own rules for establishing this failure. Post-truth politicians refuse to play merely by this specific truth-game and want to broaden the way in which we conceive of truth. As said, the post-truther is not concerned with what is true or false but puts emphasis on how this is to be decided. The contention that the way in which Habermas has connected truth to objectivity relies upon a contingent truth-game does not violate the theoretical function the lifeworld has within Habermas' account of political legitimacy. The function of the unconditionality of truth claims is that it informs discourse in the sense that truth there operates as a regulative ideal to form a rational consensus on. In a post-truth world, unconditional truth claims still exist, although the criteria for when these founder are broadened. They still perform the same function, although discourse in this way is enriched with a broader scope of truth claims. Post-truth politics can thus perform the same function as truth in the lifeworld, but is this also the case for discourse? In other words: can post-truth claims be redeemed? I believe that the two problems mentioned in chapter 2 regarding a rational consensus indeed open up the possibility for post-truth politics being the subject matter of a rational consensus.

Firstly, although the rational presuppositions of the ISS may demand a rational consensus, this consensus does not solely have to be a criterion for truth. We have seen that the ISS – with its demands of an openness to all arguments, to include as much speakers as possible, treat everyone equally and to not be compelled by internal or external persuasion – is purely procedural in nature. These norms form the procedural framework within which deliberation takes place, without imposing requirements on the substantive outcome. I have argued that procedural norms of epistemic deliberation are the only ones compatible with a justificationist account. Any substantive truth-norm leads to the problems of over-demandingness and political recklessness. Truth-based solutionists might bite the bullet and argue that these norms nonetheless must be installed, but justificationists such as Habermas surely will not. Post-truth politics in the Fullerian sense is perfectly compatible with the procedural demands of the ISS,

since both notions wish to level the playing field and include as much possible arguments in democratic deliberation. The post-truther wishes to remove the truth-conception of the establishment elites from its pedestal. She wants to uncover that this truth-game is intimately linked to questions of legitimacy and authority, just as her own post-truth claims are.[167]

However, as McIntyre and d'Ancona mistakenly believe, this does not mean that we are post *any* concept of truth or post *any* relevance of truth. Even in a post-truth world the concept of truth remains profoundly important, since we will continue to make unconditional truth-claims that will still inform discourse. In this sense, the procedural framework of Habermas remains intact, whilst at the same time the substantive outcome of a rational consensus might be different from the situation in which just one truth-game is played. Although the reader might think of classical post-truth politicians such as Trump, Farage and Baudet to be highly rhetorical in their dismissal of expert-knowledge and the truth-claims of their opponent, it is good to remember that *their* opponents are equally dismissive of post-truth politicians. As we have seen, the lions try to fight back by delegitimizing their perspective from a standpoint of cognitive authoritarianism. If anything is to prevent a rational consensus to be reached, it is thus not something uniquely pertaining to post-truth politicians, but rather something in the dialectic of politics itself.

Secondly, even within the rational confines of the ISS, the counterfactual normative idealizations do not demand a singular outcome. They do not demand that only 'actual' truths can be redeemed. As argued in chapter 2, to suppose that we could take such a meta-perspective on truth and assess the validity of a rational consensus by arguing that it is in fact a criterion for truth flies in the face of the pragmatic theory of truth. This theory precisely contests that we cannot take such a meta-perspective, hence the need for an epistemic criterion for truth. If we could, the theory would be redundant and we could all yield to 'the' truth. But a legitimate liberal democracy is precisely founded upon the idea that this is impossible, and that discursively justifying our truth claims is all we could do to bring us closer to truth. In this sense, it is possible that both a rational consensus on truth and on post-truth could arise within the confines of the ISS, and thus, ultimately, that post-truth politics can be redeemed within discourse.

In conclusion, when we closely observe the rational limits of the ISS, and make use of the proper account of post-truth politics, we see that these two are not incompatible with each other. Post-truth politics is not at variance with a politically legitimate liberal democracy. By way of closing this chapter, it is interesting to shortly assess a quote from Habermas on post-truth. As early as in 2006 he recognized the problem of post-truth and stated: 'A 'post-truth democracy', such as the New York Times saw on the horizon during the last Presidential elections, would no longer be a democracy.'[168] Although I certainly praise Habermas for is acute sense of awareness of epistemic political problems, I do not believe this quote to be a rebuttal of my argument. It is important to note that Habermas is referring to an opinion piece in the New York

[167] Fuller 2020, p. 28.
[168] Habermas 2006, p. 18.

Times.[169] This specific opinion piece laments that people in the United States increasingly disregard 'respect for evidence' as one of the core Enlightenment values. Unfortunately, Habermas does not expound any further on post-truth politics so it is unclear what is precisely meant by the above quote. However, respect for evidence would seem to be a substantive truth-norm that relies on specific truth game. I have argued that these norms are not in line with the framework of the ISS. Furthermore 'respect to evidence' *tout court* assumes that we now which evidence to trust and which evidence to discard. In our highly complex world, we must not assume to know this in advance. This credo seems to depend heavily on expert knowledge, and thus paradoxically make the public at large less critical.[170] This incessant reliance on expert-knowledge, with its accompanying epistemic authoritarianism is part of the rhetoric of post-truth politics rather than of post-truth politics itself.

[169] See: https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/04/opinion/the-day-the-enlightenment-went-out.html.
[170] Vogelmann 2018, p. 21.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have tried to defend the claim that post-truth politics is compatible with a politically legitimate liberal democracy. The question that allowed me step by step to argue for this claim was: to what extent does post-truth politics undermine the political legitimacy of western liberal democracies? I have answered this question by proposing that post-truth politics does not undermine the political legitimacy of western liberal democracy, at least not any more than a classical truth-discourse. I believe that the existence of a vast bulk of literature on post-truth politics, with its plethora of positions, opinions and definitions made this question acute. Although post-truth politics might word of the year seven years ago, we only now begin to get a proper hold on its philosophical implications. Although it was not the main aim of this thesis, I have tried to create order in the large number of positions, by reviewing a lot of them. I then defended the Fullerian view on post-truth politics over and against the more classical accounts. For one, because it explains post-truth politics as something radically different than mere lies or bullshit, and for another, this position not merely captures the distinctive feature of post-truth politics, but it also does not fly into the face of liberal democracies. In chapter 1 I have argued that the most prominent accounts of political legitimacy that underpin western liberal democracies entertain a rather complex relationship with the truth. Especially Habermas – who distinguishes between the functioning of truth in the lifeworld and in discourse – offers us a sophisticated account of the relationship between truth and political legitimacy. By arguing for a compatibility of post-truth politics with this developed account, I have tried to make my claim as strong as possible. Since Habermas body of work is vast and complex, I have mainly focused on his concept of a rational consensus, which performs a double role as it is both a criterion for legitimate politics as for truth. Although this thesis ends, the discussion on post-truth politics surely will not. As Oscar Wilde famously said ‘the truth is rarely pure and never simple’. This is no less true for the truth about post-truth.

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