The evolution of truth in political discourse from fact to feeling and its implications for democracy

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Abstract

People's subjective conceptions of truth and honesty have undergone significant changes in recent decades. Parts of society increasingly favour the sincere expression of personal belief, however inaccurate, over verifiable facts. This trend has been accompanied by increasing norm violations by political elites which have been identified as a significant contributor to democratic backsliding. Those two trends highlight the need for a thorough examination of the nexus between norm violations and conceptions of honesty. We present a series of preregistered studies that examined the conditions under which people acquiesce to democratic norm violations and politicians' dishonesty. We find that when participants are asked to take a perspective of honesty that emphasises sincerity over accuracy, which we call "belief-speaking", they are more willing to accept norm violations by politicians than if participants take a perspective that emphasizes accuracy as a criterion for honesty, which we call "fact-speaking". When a fictitious politician is presented as telling untruths, tolerance of norm violations is reduced compared to when the politician is presented as truthful. The findings highlight the need to develop a better understanding of how individuals interpret and respond to political leaders' behaviours, especially within the evolving landscape of perception and the ensuing threats to democratic stability.

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Introduction

Democratic governance is a balancing act between respecting the will of the majority while also protecting minority views. No one is born as a good citizen and no state is born as a democracy—both people and society are in constant flux and democracy cannot be taken for granted. Threats against democracy are manifold, and many countries are currently experiencing democratic backsliding (e.g. Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Nord et al., 2024). The global rise of autocracy and the extreme right under the banner of "populism" is well-documented (e.g. Bauer & Becker, 2020; Levitsky & Way, 2002) and poses significant challenges to democratic governance and societal stability.

A defining attribute of right-wing populism is that it considers society to be divided into two implacably opposed camps, namely "the people", who are virtuous and whose will must prevail, and "the elites", who are corrupt and seek to obstruct the will of the people (Bang & Marsh, 2018). By rejecting the idea of a plurality of legitimate opinions and, in most cases, concentrating power in the hands of a single leader, right-wing populism erodes the foundations of democracy (Bang & Marsh, 2018; Juon & Bochsler, 2020).[1]

Right-wing populists present themselves as the true champion of the people, the outsider-on-the-inside, who dares to take on the "elite". The mythical "elite" is redefined as needed for the populist leader to retain their claim to be on the side of the "people" — even when they hold power and *are* the elite, populist leaders will conjure up a shadowy "deep state", intellectuals, public-health officials, the judiciary, or any other presumed or actual opponent as the elite or "enemies of the people" (Bos et al., 2020).

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[1] Some (e.g. Tormey, 2018) argue that there is also left-wing populism which can have beneficial consequences for society through e.g., increased political participation, but this debate is not pertinent to the current paper. Here we focus exclusively on right-wing extremism under the banner of populism, which has been identified as the greatest risk to democracy, at least in Europe (Svolik et al., 2023).

This stance has two major consequences. First, the violation of institutional norms, such as those of mutual tolerance, institutional forbearance (i.e., not merely assessing the legality of an action but also its normative acceptability), or judicial independence, becomes a sign of distinction rather than a stigma (Bellolio, 2022; Bucy et al., 2020; Juon & Bochsler, 2020; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). For example, when British Prime Minister Boris Johnson suspended the U.K. Parliament for five weeks in 2019, thus eliminating Parliament's ability to scrutinise the government's Brexit policy, he was cheered on by much of the tabloid media as taking on the "elite" (e.g. Schleiter & Fleming, 2020).

Second, right-wing populists often appeal to the "common sense" of "the people" as a source of truth, rejecting "elitist" notions such as evidence and expertise (Young et al., 2023). The right-wing populist leader dares to do what others do not (Sorensen, 2023). For them, truth-telling based on facts and expertise constitutes a form of control and they instead consider truth as a political endeavor necessitating loyalty to leaders and causes (Waisbord, 2018).

Democratic norm violations and widespread dishonesty are nearly inescapable consequences of right-wing populism and have been well-documented in the literature (e.g. Farkas, 2018; Kingzette et al., 2021). Less is known, however, about why the public would tolerate such assaults on democratic governance. For example, while one might expect that politicians who are pervasive purveyors of misinformation suffer reputational costs, those costs are often not observed in experiments (Swire et al., 2017; Swire-Thompson et al., 2020) or indeed at the ballot box (De Figueiredo et al., 2023; Graham & Svolik, 2020).

To date, one stream of research that seeks to understand public acquiescence to dishonesty and norm violations has focused on the role of people's disgruntlement or disenfranchisement, two principal drivers of endorsement of populist parties (Drache & Froese, 2023; Fahey et al., 2022; Obradović et al., 2020). In one experiment, lying politicians were found to gather support when at least one constituency saw the political system as flawed or felt excluded by it. By contrast, when the system was perceived to be

80 fair, lying politicians were not tolerated (Hahl et al., 2018). Politicians who lie pervasively

81 may thus be perceived as strong leaders by their supporters; that is, as someone who can

82 solve or win a perceived inter-group conflict (Laustsen & Petersen, 2020; Petersen, 2020).

83 Similarly, violation of the norm of civility has been found to be tolerated by people with

84 populist attitudes (Vargiu et al., 2024). Politicians who violate norms are seen as more

85 dominant and prestigious in situations of competition and are rewarded with more support

86 from citizens (Homan et al., 2023; Stamkou et al., 2019; van Kleef et al., 2021).

87 Given the threats that norm violations by political elites pose to democratic

88 stability, understanding public reactions to them is crucial (e.g. Druckman, 2023). Previous

89 research has discovered that neither partisanship nor policy agreement with a politician are

90 sufficient in explaining tolerance of undemocratic behaviour (Frederiksen, 2022). While

91 partisanship plays a role in explaining such tolerance, it does not fully explain it and it is

92 unknown which types of norm violations are more tolerated than others and whether there

93 are specific preconditions that make norm violations by politicians more tolerable.

94 A second stream of research has focused on the role of different ontologies or

95 subjective conceptions of truth and honesty (e.g., Cooper et al., 2023; Lewandowsky, 2021).

96 In a right-wing populist logic, the honesty of communication is established more in an

97 actor-based instead of a claim-based framework; there is a greater focus on the authenticity

98 and sincerity of the person making a claim ("he says it how it is") than there is on the

99 truthfulness of the claim itself. The two end points of a continuum from an emphasis on

100 accuracy to reliance on sincerity as markers of honesty have been labeled, respectively,

101 fact-speaking and belief-speaking (Lasser et al., 2023; Lewandowsky et al., 2020, 2024).

102 Fact-speaking focuses on accuracy of claims and tends to make explicit reference to

103 evidence. Belief-speaking, by contrast, focuses on the sincerity and authenticity of the

104 speaker without references to external reality. An exclusive focus on sincerity of the

105 speaker can contribute to the acceptance and further spread of misinformation (Hahl et al.,

106 2018; Lasser et al., 2023; Lewandowsky, 2021; Vargiu & Nai, 2022).

107 We present a series of studies that examined the conditions under which people

108 acquiesce to democratic norm violations and politicians' dishonesty. We approached the

109 problem from the perspective of the different notions of honesty just introduced. We

110 examine the role of personal attributes, such as people's subjective views of what

111 constitutes honesty, as well as the effects of an experimental intervention that encourages

112 people to take a fact-speaking or belief-speaking perspective on honesty.

Results

114 We conducted three preregistered studies that involved the same three fully-crossed

115 experimental variables in a between-participants design. We instructed participants to take

116 either a fact-speaking or belief-speaking perspective during the experiment, by presenting a

117 vignette from Vargiu and Nai (2022) describing the perspective of "Sam" (belief-speaking)

118 or "Taylor" (fact-speaking) (see Appendix A for full vignettes). In Experiment 1, to

119 measure participants' preference for sincerity or accuracy, they were asked to respond to

120 the epistemic-preferences section of the Evidence-Intuition Scale (EIS; Abels &

121 Lewandowsky, 2024) at the beginning of the experiment. Participants were then allocated

122 to the perspective that aligned most with their epistemic preferences, i.e. belief-speaking

123 (sincerity) or fact-speaking (accuracy). In Experiments 2 and 3, the allocation into

124 belief-speaking or fact-speaking was randomized. Utilising the epistemic-preferences items

125 from the EIS allowed us to understand participants' pre-existing views on honesty, which

126 were then reinforced with the presentation of the vignettes. In Experiment 2, these scores

127 were acquired from earlier research that participants had participated in Abels and

128 Lewandowsky (2024), and in Experiment 3 the EIS was administered at the end of the

129 experiment to avoid carry-over effects. (Which inevitably entailed the trade-off that the

130 experimental intervention might be altering people's response pattern.)

131 After participants read the vignette that assigned or confirmed their perspective, we

132 presented participants with synthetic scenarios that described the actions of a hypothetical

133 politician ("Mr. Smith"). Depending on the experimental condition, the scenarios either

134 presented Mr. Smith as norm abiding or in violation of three democratic norms (by seeking

135 an expansion of his parliamentary power, by being systematically dishonest, and by

136 inciting protests in support of his agenda). Orthogonally, the scenarios presented Mr.

137 Smith either as lying or as not lying in specific cases such as the statistical evidence he

138 used to support his agenda. See the online supplementary material for the full scenarios.

139 Figure 1 illustrates the common elements of the procedure for all experiments.

140   After presentation of the scenario, participants judged the acceptability of the three

141 norm violations (see online supplement for items) and then rated the perceived honesty

142 and likeability of Mr. Smith by responding to questions about 11 different (Experiment 1)

143 personal attributes; accuracy, authenticity, competence, genuineness, sincerity, honesty,

144 truthfulness, prestige, considerateness, warmth, and likeability. In Experiment 1 an

145 Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was carried out to examine the associations among the

146 11 judged attributes of Mr. Smith. Attributes were then aggregated into two composite

147 scores representing the two factors "perceived honesty" (consisting of seven items of

148 accuracy, authenticity, competence, genuineness, sincerity, honesty, and truthfulness) and

149 "likeability" (consisting of two items of likeability and warmth). The items for prestige and

150 considerateness were dropped from analyses because of low factor loadings. Those item

151 were not included as items in Experiments 2 and 3 (see "Methods" for full description of

152 EFA).

153   Figure 2 summarizes the results of all three experiments, with the main effects of

154 each experimental factor shown in their respective columns for all measures across

155 experiments. Significant two-way interactions (labeled a through d) are indicated by the

156 arrows connecting the experimental variables involved and are shown in Figure 3. No

157 further higher-order interactions were observed. Complete two-way ANOVA tables and the

158 underlying cell means for all dependent variables are available in the online supplement.

Effects of perspective

When participants took a belief-speaking perspective, they generally became more tolerant of norm violations than when they adopted a fact-speaking perspective. Turning first to incitement, Experiments 2 and 3 (but not 1) showed a small and medium effect of perspective, ($F(1, 286) = 12.650, p < 0.001, \eta_{\mathrm{p}}^2 = .04$, and $F(1, 441) = 21.576, p < 0.001, \eta_{\mathrm{p}}^2 = 0.05$, respectively. In both cases, belief-speaking raised tolerance for incitement. Similarly, belief-speaking increased tolerance for dishonesty across all three studies. In Experiments 1 and 2, the effect was medium-sized, $F(1, 230) = 21.120, p < .001, \eta_{\mathrm{p}}^2 = .08$ and $F(1, 286) = 14.033, p < 0.001, \eta_{\mathrm{p}}^2 = .05$, respectively. In Experiment 3, there was a small main effect of perspective $F(1, 441) = 11.898, p < 0.001, \eta_{\mathrm{p}}^2 = 0.03$. Finally, belief-speaking also made people more accepting of an expansion of power in all three experiments. In Experiments 1 and 2, the main effect of perspective had a medium effect size; $F(1, 230) = 20.099, p < .001, \eta_{\mathrm{p}}^2 = .08$ and $F(1, 286) = 16.022, p < 0.001, \eta_{\mathrm{p}}^2 = .05$, respectively. In Experiment 3, the effect was small $F(1, 441) = 21.750, p < 0.001, \eta_{\mathrm{p}}^2 = 0.05$.

In addition, in Experiment 2, perspective interacted with normativity, $F(1, 286) = 4.745, p = 0.03, \eta_{\mathrm{p}}^2 = .02$, reflecting the fact that when Mr. Smith was violating norms and participant's perspective was that of belief-speaking, they were more tolerant of expansion of power than when the behaviour was norm abiding. This interaction is illustrated in panel **a** of Figure 3.

Perspective had a small, significant impact on perceived honesty — a factor score consisting of ratings for accuracy, authenticity, competence, genuineness, sincerity, honesty, and truthfulness — in Experiments 1 $F(1, 230) = 7.814, p = 0.00562, \eta_{\mathrm{p}}^2 = 0.03$ and 3 $F(1, 441) = 4.850, p = 0.0282, \eta_{\mathrm{p}}^2 = 0.01$ indicating that when participants had the perspective of fact-speaking, they viewed Mr. Smith as more honest.

Effects of normativity

Normativity had no significant effects on incitement, dishonesty, or expansion of power. However, perceived honesty of Mr. Smith was affected by normativity in all studies.

In Experiment 1 there was a large main effect, $F(1, 230) = 36.194, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.14$, in Experiment 2 there was a small effect $F(1, 286) = 8.812, p = 0.00325, \eta_p^2 = .03$, and in Experiment 3 it was medium-sized $F(1, 441) = 44.669, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.09$. This indicates that when Mr. Smith was norm abiding, he was perceived as more honest than when he was violating norms. Further to this, as illustrated in panel **b** of Figure 3, in Experiment 1 there was an interaction between perspective and normativity $F(1, 230) = 5.637, p = 0.018, \eta_p^2 = 0.00811$, as well as between normativity and truthfulness $F(1, 230) = 4.982, p = 0.0266, \eta_p^2 = 0.02$, which is illustrated in panel **c**. These interactions indicate that when a participant's perspective was that of fact-speaking and Mr. Smith was violating norms, his attempts at expanding his power were less tolerated than if a participants' perspective was that of belief-speaking. Further, when Mr. Smith was lying and violating norms, he was perceived as less honest than when he was not lying and behaved normatively.

In all three experiments there was a medium-sized main effect of normativity on the factor score of likeability, which consisted of attributes likeability and warmth; Experiment 1 $F(1, 230) = 18.689, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.08$, Experiment 2 $F(1, 286) = 20.722, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.07$ and Experiment 3 $F(1, 441) = 25.486, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.05$. When Mr. Smith was violating the norms of incitement, dishonesty, and expansion of power, he was viewed as less likeable than when his behaviour was normative. Further, as illustrated in Figure 3 panel d, in Experiment 3 there was a small interaction between norm violation and perspective $F(1, 441) = 4.648, p = 0.0316, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$, which indicated that when Mr. Smith was violating norms and participants were asked to adopt the perspective of fact-speaking, they perceived Mr. Smith as less likeable than participants who had adopted the perspective of belief-speaking.

Effects of truthfulness

Turning to truthfulness, there was a small main effect of lies on tolerance of incitement in all three experiments; Experiment 1 $F(1, 230) = 8.923, p = 0.00312, \eta_p^2 = 0.04$, Experiment 2 $F(1, 286) = 15.729, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.05$ and Experiment 3 $F(1, 441) = 6.598, p = 0.0105, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$. This consistently shows that when Mr. Smith is lying, participants are less tolerant of his attempts to incite the public. For dishonesty, there were no significant main effects of truthfulness in Experiments 1 or 3 but there was a small main effect in Experiment 2 $F(1, 286) = 3.965, p = 0.047, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$, which showed that when Mr. Smith was lying, there was a lower tolerance for his dishonesty than when he was not lying. Truthfulness had a significant, small, main effect on expansion of power in Experiment 2 $F(1, 286) = 4.091, p = 0.044, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$ and Experiment 3 $F(1, 441) = 5.341, p = 0.0213, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$, indicating that when Mr. Smith was not lying, his attempts at expansion of power were more tolerable.

Truthfulness also had a significant, medium-sized, effect on the perceived honesty factor; Experiment 1 $F(1, 230) = 20.487, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.08$, Experiment 2 $F(1, 286) = 22.490, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.07$, and Experiment 3 $F(1, 441) = 27.682, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.06$. This consistently shows that when Mr. Smith was lying, he was perceived as less honest. For the likeability factor in Experiment 2, there was a small main effect of lies $F(1, 286) = 9.503, p = 0.00225, \eta_p^2 = 0.03$, indicating that when Mr. Smith was lying, he was perceived as less likeable.

Exploratory analyses

To examine the impact of a participants' pre-existing preference for evidence versus intuition, we repeated the preceding analyses using ANCOVAs with the Evidence-Intuition Scale (EIS; Abels & Lewandowsky, 2024) scores as covariates. Here we only report results that differ statistically from those without the covariate. Full results of the two-way ANCOVAs can be found in the online supplement.

In Experiment 2, inclusion of the covariate led to the emergence of a small

238 interaction between truthfulness and perspective on dishonesty

239 $F(1, 259) = 4.331, p = 0.0384, \eta_{\mathrm{p}}^2 = 0.02$, and an interaction between truthfulness and

240 expansion of power $F(1, 259) = 4.502, p = 0.0348, \eta_{\mathrm{p}}^2 = 0.02$. Figure 4 illustrates the

241 interactions.

242   In Experiments 2 and 3, EIS was a significant covariate for expansion of power,

243 $F(1, 259) = 7.656, p = 0.00607, \eta_{\mathrm{p}}^2 = 0.03$, $F(1, 440) = 21.961, p < 0.001, \eta_{\mathrm{p}}^2 = 0.01$. In

244 Experiment 3, EIS was also a significant covariate for perceived honesty

245 $F(1, 440) = 4.255, p = 0.04, \eta_{\mathrm{p}}^2 = 0.01$. Higher scores on the EIS indicated preference for

246 evidence over intuition. Participants who scored higher on the EIS were less likely to

247 tolerate expansion of power or perceive Mr. Smith as honest than those who scored lower

248 and preferred intuition over evidence.

Discussion

250   In all three experiments, we consistently found that when participants were asked to

251 take a belief-speaking perspective—that is, when they were asked to view sincerity and

252 authenticity as central components of honesty—people were more likely to tolerate norm

253 violations by political elites. We also found that norm violations have a significant impact

254 on the perceived honesty and likeability of a fictitious political leader; when he is violating

255 norms, he is seen as less honest and likeable. In addition, the identification of specific lies

256 in the scenarios resulted in the politician being viewed as less honest.

257   While a participant's EIS score was a significant covariate for the analyses involving

258 expansion of power and perceived honesty in Experiments 2 and 3, across the other

259 dependent variables there was no significant impact of the EIS. This suggests that although

260 pre-existing conceptions of honesty can influence people's assessment of a political leader's

261 behaviour, in our data this impact was small in comparison to the impact of

262 perspective-taking. Thus, our results show that honesty conceptions can be experimentally

263 manipulated, resulting in people being more (or less) tolerant of norm violations by

264 political elites.

265   With previous research having identified belief-speaking (e.g., Lasser et al., 2023;

266 Sorensen & Krämer, 2024) and norm violations (e.g. Ruth-Lovell & Grahn, 2023) as central

267 aspects of right-wing populism, our research makes important contributions to this.

268 Right-wing populists' regular appeals to people's "common sense" (e.g., Young et al., 2023)

269 can be very powerful when people prefer sincerity over accuracy. Indeed, populist

270 politicians have been characterised as displaying a particular set of behaviours, which

271 ultimately makes them more charismatic (Nai & Martínez i Coma, 2019). Young et al.

272 (2023) has shown that various populist attitudes, such as valuing intuition over evidence

273 and belief in misinformation, occur concurrently and can be mutually reinforcing. Thus,

274 one could argue that it is simply a populist attitude cluster being activated when

275 participants are asked to take a belief-speaking perspective. This would then prime a

276 person to tolerate norm violations as it is a part of the same attitude cluster. However, this

277 relationship is likely to be more complex given the disconnect between political leaders'

278 willingness to break democratic norms and citizens explicit acceptance of these. People in

279 general still value and support democratic norms (Holliday et al., 2024). Moreover, the

280 mechanism of how exactly people become tolerant of norm violations is not particularly

281 relevant from a pragmatic point of view — what matters is the activation of such attitudes

282 itself and the consequences of that. Our data shows for the first time that this preference

283 for belief-speaking can be experimentally manipulated and has drastic flow-on

284 consequences for the acceptance of democratic norm violations. This finding supports the

285 notion that belief-speaking is a fundamental aspect of right-wing populist communication.

286   The propensity for belief-speaking to lead to greater tolerance of norm violations

287 has significant implications. Recent analyses of democratic backsliding have identified elite

288 norm violations to be a crucial contributor (Abels et al., 2024; Druckman, 2023). Elite

289 norm violations can occur on a variety of levels, ranging from persistent dishonesty (such

290 as Donald Trump making over 30,000 false or misleading claims during his tenure as

291 president [Kessler et al. (2021)] or political elites sharing misinformation online), to

292   political maneuverings that breach convention or represent a grab for power. Even though

293   there are institutional mechanisms that can address elite norm violations, these often work

294   retroactively and can be slow. For instance, when the suspension of the British parliament

295   by Boris Johnson was ultimately found to be unlawful by the U.K. Supreme Court, it had

296   no notable political consequences for Johnson and most of the media continued to support

297   him (Schleiter & Fleming, 2020). Our results show increased tolerance for such behaviours

298   in people who prefer (or are asked to prefer) belief-speaking over fact-speaking, which can

299   have concerning consequences.

300   People who prioritise belief-speaking over fact-speaking (and vice versa) can start to

301   seek the company of those with similar views of the world, leading to formation of echo

302   chambers or even epistemic bubbles that reinforce subjective truths (Young et al., 2023).

303   Echo chambers have been found to decrease ambivalence towards political parties, which

304   means that members are likely to have decreased negative views towards their party

305   (Justwan et al., 2018). Although there is some dispute about the existence of echo

306   chambers, recent work has shown high ideological segregation between liberal and

307   conservative audiences on Facebook and other social media platforms (Cinelli et al., 2021;

308   González-Bailón et al., 2023). Partisans in echo chambers are less likely to encounter

309   criticisms about their party as well as balanced reporting about other parties, which

310   threatens deliberative processes crucial for democracy (Garimella et al., 2018; Hobolt &

311   Tilley, 2023). These effects of echo chambers illustrate the need to be exposed to a variety

312   of views and opinions, which can be difficult to achieve in a polarized society (Axelrod

313   et al., 2021).

314   As to why we found no effect of Mr. Smith's normativity on tolerance of norm

315   violations, it is possible that the type of norm violations themselves are not important but

316   the combined societal effects of them are (e.g. Holliday et al., 2024). People's attitudes

317   towards democratic norms may transcend the specifics of their experiences; people will

318   tolerate hypothetical future violations as much or as little as any actual violations they

have already witnessed. In our experiments, participants may have perceived the specific norm violations to be acceptable since the overall societal situation appeared stable. Further, it has been discovered that nondemocratic actions can be perceived to be democratic if committed by actors who have risen to power through democratic means (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2022). In our experiments, the politician's rise to power was not questioned, which may have given him legitimacy. Further, the norm violations perhaps were not seen as destabilising the democratic system as a whole, since the politician explained that the changes would be for a greater good.

The impact of truthfulness on tolerance of norm violations on the other hand may be related to the saliency and value of honesty. Although dishonesty is not uncommon in modern societies and can be beneficial for political success(Ceron & Carrara, 2023; Kurvers et al., 2021), tolerance for them is context dependent (Aycinena et al., 2022; Eriksson et al., 2021). Particularly when honesty is made a salient value, it influences people's assessment of political leaders and makes lies less tolerable (Croco et al., 2021). Thus, it is likely that in our experiment participants were paying more attention to the honesty of a politician and when they were exposed to have lied, tolerance for norm violations was decreased.

Our results indicate a consistent link between preference for belief-speaking over fact-speaking and tolerance for norm violations. While pre-existing perceptions of honesty can influence people's assessment of a political leader's behaviour, in our data this impact was small in comparison to the impact of perspective-taking. Importantly, our data shows belief-speaking to be a fundamental aspect of tolerance for norm violations — when people's perspectives of honesty are manipulated, their tolerance changes. Taking a belief-speaking perspective made people more tolerant of various norm violations, despite the politician being viewed as less honest in most cases. This finding has significant implications for modern democracies. It suggests that politicians' appeals for authenticity over accuracy can be successful in making people more willing to accept various norm violations and thereby tolerate democratic backsliding. This understanding can help

scientists and societies to better understand the success of right-wing populist leaders and how their democratic norm violations tend to go unpunished. Ultimately, through the knowledge of belief-speaking being fundamental to right-wing populism, this can help societies develop interventions to protect against democratic backsliding.

Methods

Participants

The studies received ethical approval from the University of Bristol School of Psychological Science Research Ethics Committee (project IDs 15550, 16111 and 17717). All participant recruitment was done through Prolific. Protocols and hypotheses were pre-registered on AsPredicted. In Experiment 1, a representative UK sample of 280 participants were recruited. As per the pre-registered protocol (AsPredicted ID: 137872), participants who reported that they did not adapt the assigned perspective on honesty were excluded from the analyses leaving a final sample of $n = 238$. In Experiment 2 (AsPredicted ID: 146309) we invited US based participants who had already participated in a previous study (Abels & Lewandowsky, 2024) that measured people's epistemic preferences. A total of 365 participants completed the study, and after removing the participants who indicated that they had not adapted the assigned perspective, the final sample was $n = 294$. For Experiment 3 (AsPredicted ID: 157986), a representative UK sample of 480 participants was recruited, and after the exclusion of those who did not adapt the assigned perspective, the final sample was $n = 449$.

Materials and procedure

All participants were presented with a vignette from Vargiu and Nai (2022) describing the perspective of "Sam" (for belief-speaking) or "Taylor" (fact-speaking). Participants were asked to adapt this perspective for the duration of the experiment. In Experiment 1, the assignment was congruent with the participants' pre-existing perspective as measured with the "sincerity" and "accuracy" items from the EIS (Abels & Lewandowsky, 2024). In the other studies, assignment to perspective was random.

373   Following this, participants were presented with a scenario developed for this study

374   describing the actions of a hypothetical politician, Mr. Smith, who was always presented as

375   matching participants' perspective of belief-speaking or fact-speaking. In addition, the

376   scenario instantiated two fully-crossed experimental factors, normativity and truthfulness.

377   Mr Smith was presented to be either norm abiding or in violation of three democratic

378   norms (dishonesty, incitement, and expansion of power), and orthogonally, as telling the

379   truth or lying. Participants were randomly assigned to a cell of the normativity $\times$

380   truthfulness design. Full scenarios are available in the online supplementary material.

381   Participants could spend an unlimited amount of time reading the scenario. After

382   reading the scenario, participants responded to 9 questions about their tolerance for norm

383   violations, with three items for each norm violation (dishonesty, incitement, and expansion

384   of power). All items are available in the online supplement. Participants then responded to

385   9 questions about the attributes of Mr. Smith (in Experiment 1 there were 11 attributes,

386   which were reduced to 9 items through an exploratory factor analysis).

Data processing

388   In Experiment 1, a mean of the epistemic belief section ("sincerity" and "accuracy")

389   from Abels and Lewandowsky (2024) was calculated within Qualtrics to assign a

390   participant to the appropriate perspective, either belief-speaking or fact-speaking.

391   In Experiment 1, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with maximum likelihood

392   extraction and direct oblimin rotation was carried out to examine the associations among

393   the 11 judged attributes of Mr. Smith. The Kaiser-Olkin Measure of Sampling adequacy

394   (.620) and Bartlett's test of sphericity $[x^2(3) = 379.19, p < .001]$ indicated that the 11

395   items had adequate common variance for EFA. The analysis revealed that the data had a

396   two-factor structure consisting of factors "Perceived honesty" which explained 74.4% of

397   variance (factor loadings of the six items were 0.61 to 0.98), and "Likeability", which

398   explained 25.6%(factor loadings of the two items were 0.61 and 0.87). Two items were

399   dropped as they did not significantly contribute to either factor. A two-factor structure

was accepted for the remainder of the analyses. Perceived honesty scores were calculated by multiplying the ratings of accuracy, authenticity, competence, genuineness, sincerity, honesty, and truthfulness by their loadings and dividing by the sum of the loadings. The likeability scores were computed analogously by considering warmth and likeability.

For Experiments 2 and 3 a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (available in the online supplement) was carried out to ascertain the correct factor loadings for computation of the the factor scores. Because 2 items were dropped after the first study, Experiments 2 and 3 only used 9 items to probe attributes of Mr. Smith.

In all experiments, tolerance of norm violations was calculated by forming the mean across items separately for dishonesty, incitement and expansion of power. All raw data and analysis scripts are available at https://osf.io/tkr56/.

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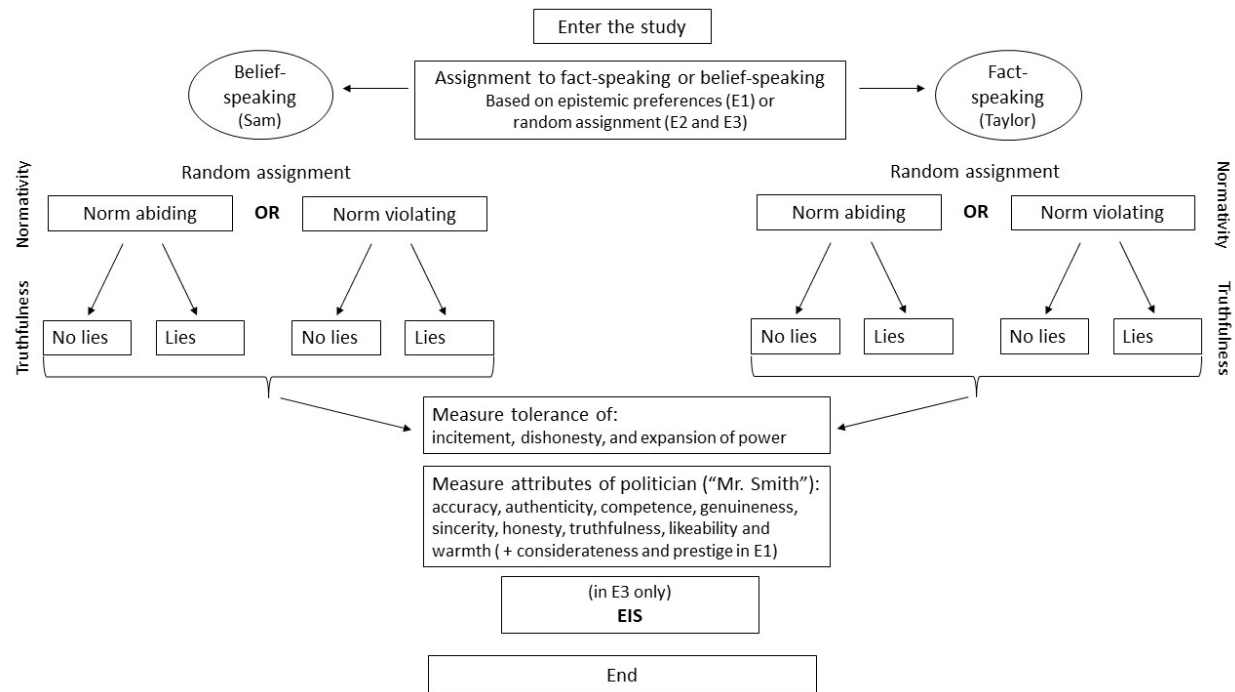
Figure 1

Visual representation of the experimental procedure in the three experiments.
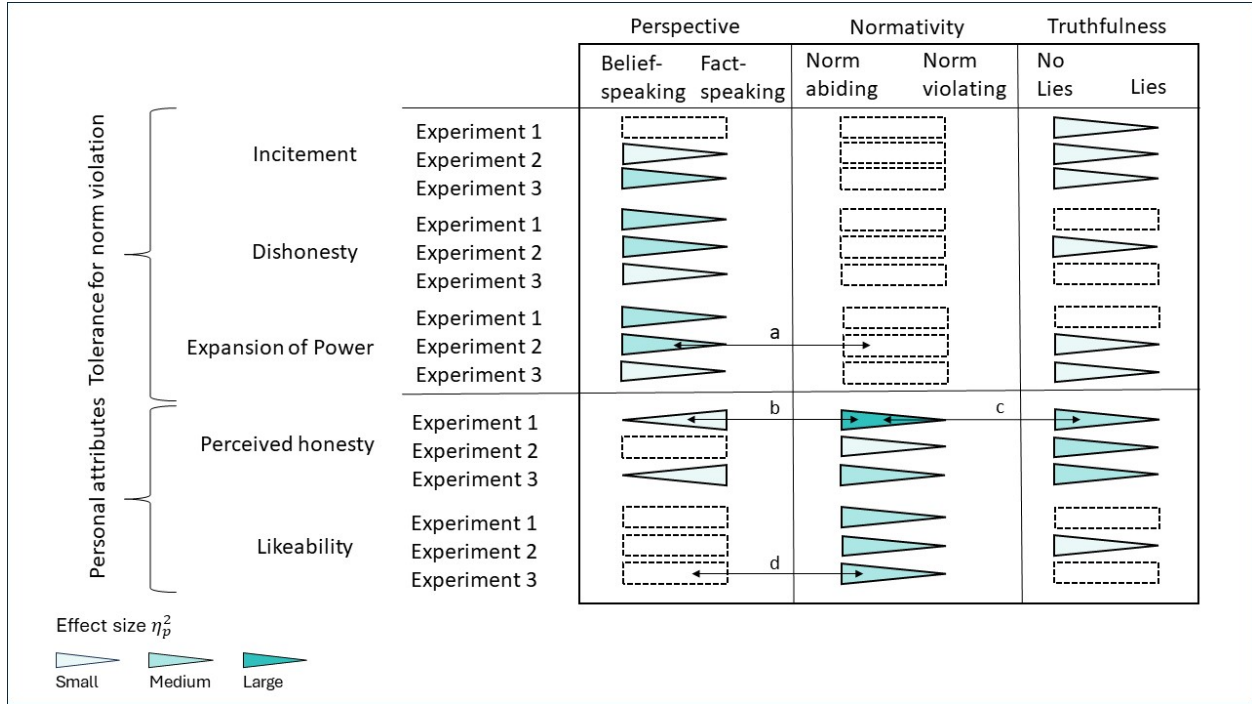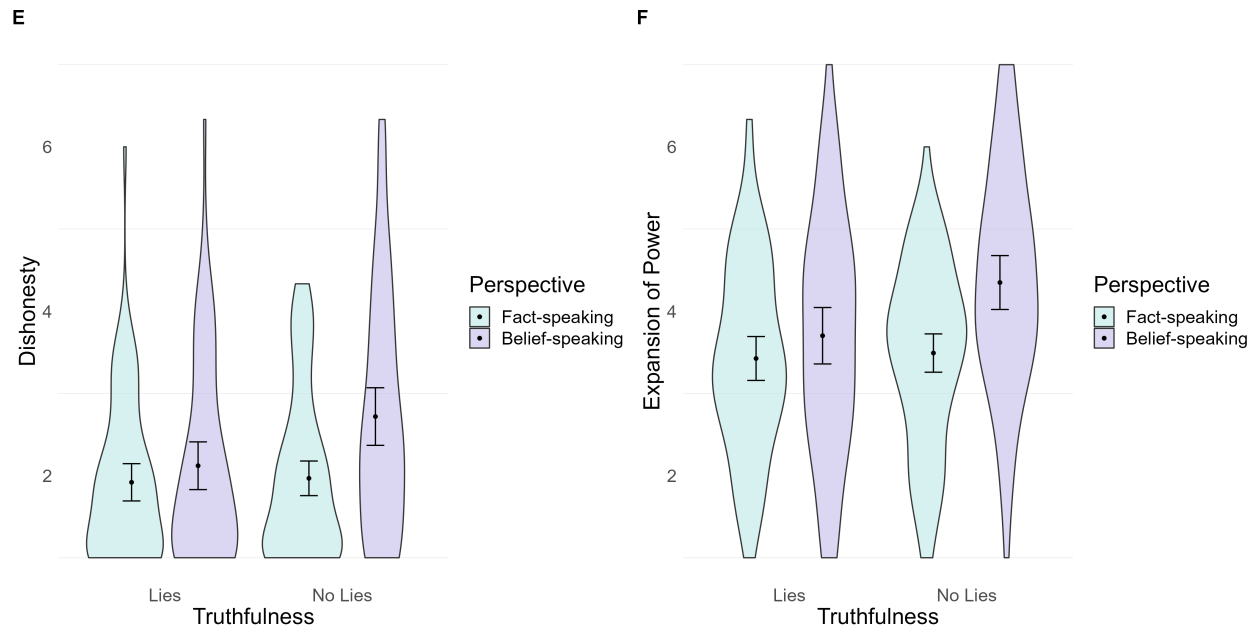
Figure 2

Visualisation of the results of all three experiments and the five dependent variables. For significant main effects, the triangle in the corresponding column is pointing towards the lesser value. For example, in Experiment 1 belief-speaking made participants more tolerant of dishonesty. Empty rectangles represent null effects. Arrows represent significant interactions between variables and are labeled by letters which refer to panels in Figure 3 that present the interactions. Shading represents effect sizes as per η_p^2, with light color indicating small effect size ($\eta_p^2 \leq 0.01$), medium color indicating medium effect size ($0.05 \leq \eta_p^2 < 0.14$), and dark color indicating large effect size ($\eta_p^2 \geq 0.14$). For example, in Experiment 1, the effect of the normativity variable on perceived honesty was large, with people rating honesty significantly higher when the politician ("Mr. Smith") was norm abiding than when he violated norms.
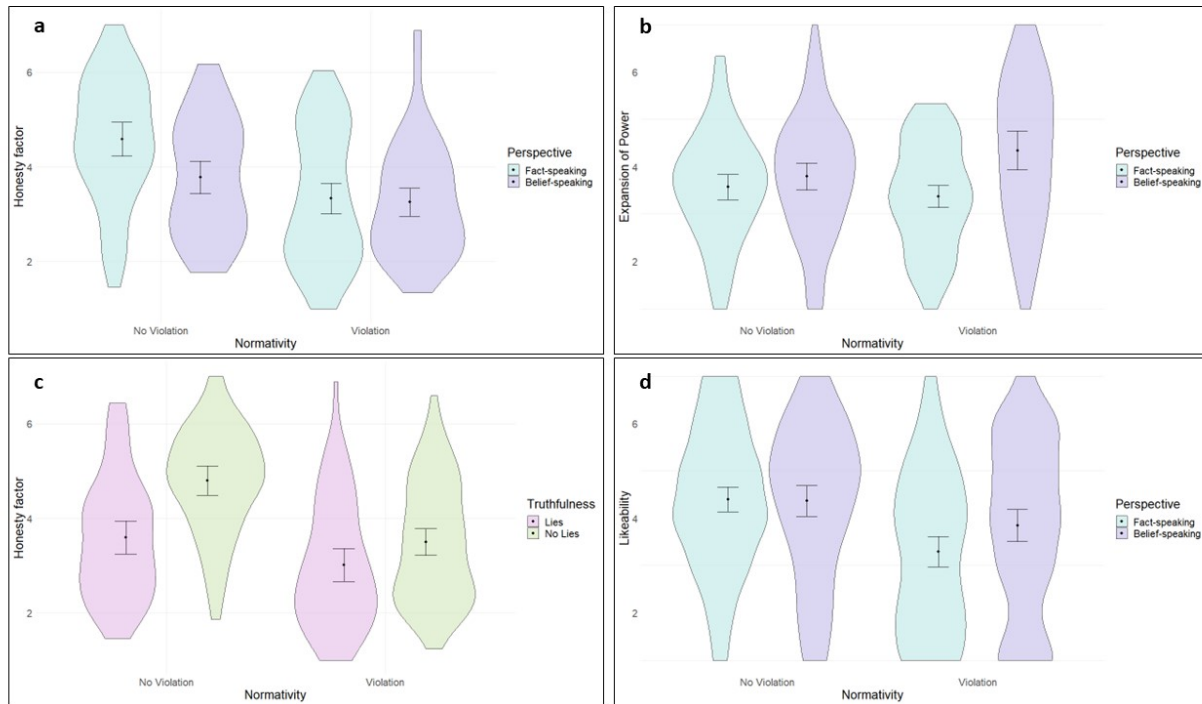
Figure 3

*Interactions from the three experiments, means and 95% CIs are illustrated. **Panel a** represents the interaction between perspective and normativity on perceived honesty from Experiment 2. **Panel b** illustrates the interaction between perspective and normativity on expansion of power, whereas **panel c** shows the interaction between normativity and truthfulness on perceived honesty, both from Experiment 1. **Panel d** represents the small interaction between perspective and normativity on likeability from Experiment 3.*

Figure 4

Additional interactions from Experiment 2 when EIS scores are included as a covariate.

Panel e *represents the interaction between perspective and truthfulness on dishonesty.*

Panel f *illustrates the interaction between perspective and truthfulness on expansion of power.*

Appendix A

Vignettes

⁶¹¹ To elicit belief-speaking attitudes and understanding of honesty, participants were

⁶¹² presented the following. "Please take the perspective of Sam when answering the question

⁶¹³ that will be shown on the next page. This is what Sam has to say about what truth is:

⁶¹⁴ People often disagree about what truth is. Personally, I think that being truthful

⁶¹⁵ means always saying what you think, no matter the consequences. There is no other

⁶¹⁶ "truth" than being sincere and expressing yourself the way you feel is right. Only when

⁶¹⁷ people are sincere, can they really be trusted. And being sincere means genuinely

⁶¹⁸ expressing your beliefs, even when you don't have enough evidence to support them."

⁶¹⁹ Alternatively, to elicit fact-speaking understanding of honesty, participants were

⁶²⁰ shown the following.

⁶²¹ "Please take the perspective of Taylor when answering the question that will be

⁶²² shown on the next page. This is what Taylor has to say about what truth is:

⁶²³ People often disagree about what truth is. Personally, I think that being truthful

⁶²⁴ means sticking to the facts, regardless of your personal opinions. Opinions, no matter how

⁶²⁵ honestly held, can be far from the truth. Only an argument that is informed by evidence

⁶²⁶ can be trusted. One should be accurate in what one says and refrain from expressing

⁶²⁷ unfounded beliefs."

Appendix B

Descriptive statistics

Table B1

Experiment 1 descriptive statistics

	N	M	SD
Age	238	45.929	15.796
Authenticity		3.790	1.635
Competence		4.084	1.332
Prestige		4.357	1.257
Genuineness		3.782	1.530
Sincerity		3.714	1.610
Considerateness		3.496	1.422
Warmth		3.723	1.381
Likeability		4.248	1.659
Honesty		3.466	1.732
Truthfulness		3.588	1.691
Accuracy		3.546	1.558
Conspiracist Mentality Questionnaire		4.762	1.226
Non-normative political engagement		1.521	0.912
Incitement		4.437	0.763
Dishonesty		3.737	0.833
Expansion		3.930	1.189
Perceived honesty		3.681	1.389
Likeability factor		3.949	1.361

Note. This table presents descriptive statistics from Experiment 1.

Table B2

Experiment 2 descriptive statistics

	N	M	SD
Age	294	41.895	12.424
Authentic		4.235	1.672
Competence		4.735	1.369
Genuineness		4.092	1.678
Sincerity		4.122	1.685
Warmth		3.959	1.459
Likeability		4.313	1.610
Honesty		3.952	1.912
Truthfulness		3.946	1.828
Accuracy		4.112	1.433
Expansion		3.712	1.297
Dishonesty		2.155	1.190
Incitement		3.637	1.127
Perceived honesty		4.127	1.494
Likeability factor		4.158	1.393

Note. This table presents descriptive statistics from Experiment 2.

Table B3

Experiment 2 descriptive statistics

	N	M	SD
Age	449	46.227	15.693
Authentic		3.880	1.784

Table B3

Experiment 2 descriptive statistics (continued)

	N	M	SD
Competence		4.272	1.504
Genuineness		3.800	1.772
Sincerity		3.702	1.800
Warmth		3.581	1.566
Likeability		3.993	1.721
Honesty		3.644	1.907
Truthfulness		3.644	1.915
Accuracy		3.641	1.599
Expansion		3.790	1.278
Dishonesty		2.138	1.248
Incitement		3.625	1.114
Perceived honesty		3.767	1.565
Likeability		3.813	1.530

Note. This table presents descriptive statistics from Experiment 3.