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A 'post-truth' politics? How far do facts still exist and matter for citizens?

Bartle, John | University of Essex

In both the Brexit referendum and the US Presidential election, campaigners were widely accused of making false claims. Despite abundant fact-checking, there is evidence that many were widely believed, leading to fears of post-truth politics. The drivers of this are well-known: research reveals citizens prone to accept as fact those claims that confirm their prior beliefs and attitudes, and dismiss claims that challenge them. But how far does that tendency stretch, and can it create 'post-truth citizens'? We ask three questions about citizens confronted with evidence that challenges prior beliefs: How far will they maintain their beliefs? How far will they discredit reputable (and credit disreputable) sources in order to do so? And do they show any signs of a post-truth mindset, accepting 'alternative facts' or designating factual claims as matters of opinion? We address these questions using a representative-sample survey experiment concerning common misperceptions about immigration.

1. Eligibility

Primary Subject
Please indicate the subject most relevant to your research:

Politics

Primary Subject Detail - Politics
Please select the detail(s) of your primary subject:

Electoral Studies

Government

Political Ideologies

Secondary Subject
If your application is more interdisciplinary, you may choose to indicate a secondary subject to which your application might also be relevant:

Time Period
Please indicate if your application is relevant to a specific time period:

Contemporary

Audiences
Please indicate if your application will be of particular interest to any particular audience:

Policymakers at national level (e.g. working with Government departments, participating in public in

Regional Interests
Please indicate if your application is relevant to a specific region of the world:

England

Employing Organisation
Please select the employing Organisation:

University of Essex

University

01206873717 (Work)

jbartl@essex.ac.uk (Work)

Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, CO4 3SQ,
United Kingdom (Work)

If you are an Independent Scholar please choose 'Independent Scholar' from the drop down list.

Names of Co-Applicants on this application
Please state the names of any co-applicants on this application:

2. Lead Applicant Details

Lead Applicant Contact Details

Dr John Bartle

University of Essex

Primary Applicant

01206 873717 (Work)

jbartl@essex.ac.uk (Work)

Department of Government, University of
Essex, Wivenhoe Park, COLCHESTER, C04
3SQ, United Kingdom (Work)

Jason Reifler

Contributor

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Kingdom (Work)

REO Pre Award Team

University of Essex

Contributor

+44(0)1206 874087 (Work)

reopre@essex.ac.uk (Work)

Wivenhoe Park, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester,
Essex, CO4 3SQ, United Kingdom (Work)

3. Lead Applicant Career Summary

Statement of Qualifications and Career
Please give dates of your academic qualifications and career.

Qualification:	Date:
PhD	01/07/1997
Law Society Finals	02/11/1992
MA British Government and Politics	12/07/1991
BA Economics and Politics	01/07/1989

Present Appointment
Please state your present appointment.

Professor

Present Employing Institution
Please state the institution at which you are currently employed.

University of Essex

If you are an 'Independent Scholar' please state none.

Present Department
Please indicate the Department or Faculty (or equivalent) in which you are based.

Government

If you are an 'Independent Scholar' please state none.

PhD Confirmation
Applicants working towards a PhD, or awaiting the outcome of their viva/submission of corrections are not eligible to apply.
Please therefore confirm that you have a PhD by answering yes.
If you are an established scholar with relevant equivalent experience, but no doctorate, please select 'no' and indicate under 'personal statement' below why you should be eligible for consideration:

Yes

Personal Statement
Please enter your personal statement:

N/A

Applicants are invited to include any information relating to their professional career which they may wish to be taken into account in assessing this application. For example, details of a career break, or the effect of working on a part-time contract may be relevant. This is an optional field.

Publications

Please list your principal and/or relevant publications in reverse chronological order, to a maximum of six:

(with Mariana Skirmuntt and Sarah Birch) 'The local roots of the participation gap: Inequality and voter turnout', Electoral Studies 48 (2017), 30-44

(with Nicholas Allen and Judith Bara) 'Finding a niche? Challenger parties and issue emphasis in the 2015 televised leaders' debates" British Journal of Politics and International Relations, (2017),

(with Samantha Laycock) 'Telling more than they can know? Does the most important issue really reveal what is most important to voters?', Electoral Studies 31 (2012), 679-88.

(with Sebastian Dellepiane-Avalleneda and James A. Stimson) 'The moving centre: preferences for government activity in Britain, 1950-2005', British Journal of Political Science, 41 (2011), 259-85.

'Political Awareness, Opinion Constraint and the Stability of Ideological Positions', Political Studies, 48 (2000), 467-484

'Left-Right Matters, But Does Social Class? Causal Models for the 1992 General Election', The British Journal of Political Science, 28 (1998), 501-29.

Unpublished Research

Please list any extant unpublished projects funded by the Academy or any other agency, and their expected publication date (or other explanation):

The following outputs from my BA Mid-Career Fellowship are:

Book manuscript: The British Macro-Polity: Ideology and economics, 1945-2015 (target Cambridge University Press).

My paper 'Policy accommodation versus electoral turnover: Policy representation in Britain, 1945-2015' is being revised and resubmitted for the Journal of Public Policy.

A chapter incorporating my research (How the Conservative party lost their majority but still won the election' will be published in None past the post: Britain at the Polls 2017 (edited by Nicholas Allen and John Bartle) (Manchester University Press, forthcoming).

Previous Support Dates
Please give details of any research application submitted to the British Academy within the last five years:
Please note that only one British Academy research grant may be held, or applied for, at any one time.

I held a mid-career fellowship, 2014-15.

Previous Support Description
Please give the title of any previous research application submitted to the British Academy within the last five years, and the amount awarded (if any):

Title	Amount Awarded
The British macro polity	£117,047.00

Where did you hear of this scheme?
Please indicate where you heard about this scheme:

5. Co-Applicant Career Summary

Co-Applicant Statement of Qualifications and Career
Please give dates of your academic qualifications and career.

Qualification:	Date:

Co-Applicant Present Appointment
Please state your present employment.

Present Employing Institution
Please state the institution at which you are currently employed.

Co-Applicant Present Department
Please indicate the Department or Faculty (or equivalent) in which you are based.

Co-Applicant Personal Statement
Applicants are invited to include any information relating to their professional career which they may wish to be taken into account in assessing this application.
For example, details of a career break, or the effect of working on a part-time contract may be relevant. This is an optional field.

Co-Applicant Previous Support
Please give the dates and title of any previous research application submitted to the British Academy within the last five years, and the amount awarded (if any):

Title of Research:	Date:	Amount Awarded:

6. Research Proposal

Subject Area
Please select the subject most relevant to your research:

Politics

Subject Area Detail - Politics
Please select the detail(s) of your Subject Area:

Electoral Studies

Government

Political Ideologies

Political Parties

Title of Research Proposal
Please state the title of your proposed research:

A 'post-truth' politics? How far do facts still exist and matter for citizens?

Abstract
Please provide a short abstract summarising your proposed research in terms suitable for an informed general audience, not one specialised in your field:

In both the Brexit referendum and the US Presidential election, campaigners were widely accused of making false claims. Despite abundant fact-checking, there is evidence that many were widely believed, leading to fears of post-truth politics. The drivers of this are well-known: research reveals citizens prone to accept as fact those claims that confirm their prior beliefs and attitudes, and dismiss claims that challenge them. But how far does that tendency stretch, and can it create 'post-truth citizens'? We ask three questions about citizens confronted with evidence that challenges prior beliefs: How far will they maintain their beliefs? How far will they discredit reputable (and credit disreputable) sources in order to do so? And do they show any signs of a post-truth mindset, accepting 'alternative facts' or designating factual claims as matters of opinion? We address these questions using a representative-sample survey experiment concerning common misperceptions about immigration.

Project Start Date
Please state the start date of the proposed research:

01/06/2018

Please note the earliest start date is 1st April 2018 and the latest start date is 31st August 2018

Project End Date
Please state the end date of the proposed research:

30/11/2019

Please ensure the end date is no more than 24 months after the start date

Project Duration (months):
The number must not exceed the limit for the scheme.

18

Please note the maximum duration is 24 months

Proposed Programme
Please give a detailed description of the research programme, including methodology.
Applicants should be aware of the importance that assessors place on the viability, specificity and originality of the research programme and of its achievability within the timescale, which should be specified in the Plan of Action.

"In the context of the EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States", Oxford Dictionaries declared 'post-truth' to be its International Word of the Year in 2016. In both cases, the campaigns accused each other of drawing heavily on claims that were not merely misleading but downright untrue. In both cases, there were exhaustive attempts at correcting these false claims but apparently to little avail. Infamously, when the White House Press Secretary's claims about attendance at Trump's inauguration was challenged as a "probable falsehood", a colleague explained that he had given "alternative facts". He later defended himself, saying that "sometimes we can disagree with the facts."

There are numerous dimensions to the phenomena of false facts and 'fake news', many concerning the supply side – political campaigns, partisan media, rogue producers in Macedonia – and its incentives to distort and conceal the truth. But what about the demand side? This project is about the citizen consumers of political claims. We know people tend to reject claims inconsistent with their prior beliefs and attitudes, but how far will that tendency stretch when challenged by factual evidence from reputable sources? How many people infer the accuracy of information based on consistency with their beliefs rather than characteristics of its source – and are prepared to discredit that source in order to do so? Are there signs that citizens deal with inconsistency by invoking the 'alternative facts' doctrine, or claiming that matters

of fact are in fact matters of opinion? Ultimately, we ask how far citizens can and will place limits on 'post-truth' politics.

The theoretical starting-point is motivated reasoning: the long-recognized drive for citizens to deal with information in a way that reinforces rather than challenges their existing views. This tendency was highlighted in early psychological studies of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), examined systematically by Lodge and Taber (2000, 2013; Kraft et al., 2015), and illustrated in a diverse range of public opinion contexts (e.g. Fischle, 2000; Druckman and Bolsen, 2011, Pasek et al., 2015). It is at its strongest when the information challenging one's beliefs is associated with the other side of the partisan or ideological divide (Lewandowsky et al. 2005, Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Flynn et al., 2016).

Yet reasoning is not purely motivated. People have accuracy goals as well as partisan goals (Taber and Lodge, 2006) and the two will sometimes be in tension. As Kunda puts it, "people are not at liberty to conclude what they want simply because they want to"; instead, they "will come to believe what they want only to the extent that reality permits it" (1990, p. 482). Of course, reality is highly contested on questions such as "has immigration led to lower average wages?" But there remain facts on questions such as "do immigrants receive more in benefits than they pay in taxes?", and citizens should have an accuracy incentive to believe them. This makes 'fact polarization' (Kahan, 2016) a particularly troubling variant of motivated reasoning. That two groups of people might hold opposing beliefs about some more or less verifiable fact is not surprising; the resistance of some of them to corrections of their misperceptions is a more vivid sign of the strength of partisan incentives (Kull et al., 2003; Westen et al., 2006; Nyhan and Reifler, 2010, 2017).

If, contra the 'post-truth' thesis, accuracy incentives do still hold some sway, then we would expect them to be triggered by information from sources widely acknowledged to be reputable and neutral. If partisan incentives dominate, then sources will be dismissed as disreputable and biased exactly because they present uncongenial information. In studies of misperception-correction so far, trust has been placed in those sharing the citizen's ideological (Kahan, 2010) or partisan (Berinsky, 2015) world-view. Can more objective measures of expertise also generate trust – and persuade people to accept unpalatable truths? And, crucially given the two-way street of public discourse, will citizens disbelieve facts on one side if they hear more congenial but fact-free arguments on the other side?

To answer these questions, our proposed empirical work concerns a topic, immigration and asylum, on which large proportions of the British electorate – from across the political spectrum – hold misperceptions. The aim is to assess citizens' reactions to facts that challenge their prior beliefs about immigration. The core is a four-stage survey with embedded experiment (outline attached), fielded by a leading survey agency with a politically representative sample of 2,500 British citizens. In Stage 1, we assess factual beliefs about two popular liberal misperceptions and two popular conservative misperceptions about immigration. In Stage 2 we present respondents with facts correcting those misperceptions, liberal or conservative, that Stage 1 revealed them most prone to. These facts are presented via an article in which a putatively expert source, an Oxford Professor of Economics, reports on official

statistics directly correcting the misperception statement. To measure motivated reasoning bias, we ask respondents to rate the expertise of the professor and the accuracy of the information used. In Stage 3, we test experimentally the resilience of facts against fact-free dispute. The test takes the form of an experiment. While respondents in the control group receive no second opinion (and move to Stage 4), those in the treatment group are shown a response to the Stage 2 report. Crucially, it does not directly contradict the facts in that report, instead encouraging respondents in other ways to return to their original beliefs. This response is experimentally varied in two respects: expertise (whether it comes from a retired professor or a newspaper columnist); and content (whether it disputes the neutrality of the report's author or the relevance of statistics to real-world experience). Finally, in Stage 4, we ask our respondents to do two things: to re-evaluate the validity and relevance of the original misperceptions from Stage 1; and to assess how far these are matters of fact – and, if so, whether it is OK to disbelieve the facts.

This project will make two main advances on previous research. The first is to elaborate on the role of expertise in citizens' judgements. It is clear that sources perceived as expert are more persuasive. Yet we know less about where those perceptions of expertise come from and, in particular, how far they are coloured by what the sources are saying rather than more objective credentials. By treating expertise as a dependent variable, we can answer key questions – including, crucial in a world of 'fake news', whether some citizens attribute expertise even to ostensibly dubious sources that are telling them what they want to hear. Second, we provide the first empirical test of some of the implications of 'post-truth' politics. Phrases like 'disagreeing with the facts' attract mockery from elites but offer one route whereby citizens can reconcile partisan and accuracy incentives.

A wide range of audiences will profit from understanding how often citizens flatly reject unwelcome information, the mechanisms by which they do so, and the means by which they can be persuaded to accept dissonant facts. More generally, public discourse about post-truth politics has had a tendency to portray the mass public as a blank canvas onto which false claims can simply be painted. Our research will assess how fair is this portrayal.

Plan of Action
Please indicate here a clear timetable for your research programme.
Try to be as realistic as possible, but keep in mind that research programmes will develop over time and this plan of action is not something that is expected to account for every minute and is not unchangeable. But your chances of award will be affected by the assessors' perception of how viable and realistic this plan is.

As the survey has already been drafted we are ready to get into the field quickly. Our plan of action is as follows:

Apr-May 2018: Obtain ethical approval and begin tendering process for fieldwork contract.

Jun 2018: Pilot testing. We will use the Prolific Academic site to test public

understanding of our questions and to ensure variability in respondents' beliefs in the false facts about immigration. Following that we will finalise the design of our survey and submit it for scripting to the fieldwork agency.

Jun-Jul 2018: Field the survey. The survey will go into the field in the last week of June, before the summer holiday period erodes response rates. All online survey companies guarantee quick data collection rates and so we will reach our target sample size by the first week of July.

Aug-Sep 2018: Initial analyses, blog post and EPOP conference. Our first priority – exploiting the topical importance of the 'post-truth' phenomenon – is to write up the core results on that issue for a blog post. An expanded version of the analysis will go into a short draft paper to be presented at the Elections, Public Opinion & Parties conference in early September.

Oct-Dec 2018: More detailed analyses. During the autumn term, we will analyse the full results of the survey.

Jan 2019: We will present the results of those more detailed analyses as part of the Department of Government's research seminar series.

Jan-Mar 2019: Write-up Journal Article 1. Drawing on comments obtained to that point, we will draft our first journal article on the limits of motivated reasoning, and circulate it to colleagues for feedback.

Apr 2019: Present and submit Journal Article 1. The Midwest Political Science Association in Chicago will be an opportunity to obtain final comments from an international audience before submitting the article to one of our target journals (see below).

May-Jun 2019: Field survey in the US. If our application to fund the US-based survey has been successful we will pilot and field it during this period.

Jul-Nov 2019: Write-up Journal Article 2; revise Journal Article 1. Our aim is to have comparative data available for a second journal article by this point. If so, we will present this at the Annual Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP) in early July. This conference brings together academics from the UK and the US and is therefore the perfect place to get feedback on a comparative UK/US paper. (Like the US survey, this would be funded from another source.) We would also hope to have reviews back from either our first or second target for Article 1 by this point, and will use this period to revise the article for (re)submission.

Planned Research Outputs
Please indicate here what the expected output(s) from your research programme might be.
As appropriate, please indicate as follows: monograph, journal article(s), book chapter(s), digital resources, other (please specify).
Please outline your plans for publication under Plans for publication/dissemination

below:

> 1. A journal article exploring the limits of motivated reasoning.
>
> 2. Two blog posts with a leading popular-audience outlet describing the extent of post-truth thinking in the British public.
>
> 3. Our surveys will produce a rich and representative-sample dataset containing prior immigration attitudes, reactions to new and conflicting information, and openness to 'post-truth' reasoning as a means of reconciling the two. It will also contain core socio-demographic and personality measures, enabling analysis of who reacts in particular ways to unwelcome facts. The dataset will be archived with the UK Data Service.
>
> 4. We have begun the process of securing funding elsewhere to conduct a parallel survey in the US. If successful, we will write a second journal article comparing demand for post-truth explanations in the two countries.

Plans for Publication and Dissemination
Please state in more detail here what plans you have for publication or other dissemination of your research, including potential publishers, journals, conferences etc that are appropriate for your research subject:

> Journal article 1, a detailed exploration of the limits of motivated reasoning, will first be presented at EPOP at Royal Holloway in September 2018, and at the MPSA in Chicago in April 2019. Our first-choice journal is Public Opinion Quarterly; a good second choice is Political Psychology.
>
> Our second article, a comparative analysis of public acceptance of post-truth politics will be presented at ISPP in Lisbon in July 2019. Our first-choice journal is the American Journal of Political Science; a good second option is, again, Political Psychology.
>
> The questions we investigate are hugely topical, and as such will be of interest to political practitioners and commentators -- as well as journalists more generally, educators and anyone else involved in public communication. We aim to use a blog post to give the project an early public profile, and thereafter to exploit our personal and our university's contacts with press and broadcast journalists.
>
> That first blog post will look at the post-truth mindset. Do citizens believe that there can be alternative facts? How do feelings rate relative to evidence as acceptable means of deciding where the truth lies? And can we identify a subset of citizens among whom things really are 'post-truth'? We will offer a post on this first to The Monkey Cage blog, hosted by the Washington Post, and the leading outlet for the public dissemination of political science research.
>
> A follow-up blog post will concern the role of expertise in public acceptance of facts.

How far can citizens discern expertise, and how far can it persuade citizens to believe something that they are reluctant to accept? Has the link between 'objective' expertise and credibility been broken in an era when – from Brexit to climate change – experts are perceived as having their own axe to grind? This post will be offered to the Conversation and to the LSE's Politics & Policy blog.

Digital Resource
If the primary product of the research will be a digital resource have you obtained guidance on appropriate standards and methods?

○ Yes

○ No

Deposit of Datasets
Please provide details of how and where any electronic or digital data (including datasets) developed during the project will be stored, along with details on the appropriate methods of access.
It is a condition of award that all data be freely accessible during, and beyond, the lifetime of the project.

Our dataset will be archived with the UK Data Service.

Overseas Travel - Country
If your research involves travel abroad, please select the relevant country/countries:

If you wish to select more than one country please use the fields below

Overseas Travel - Country
If your research involves travel abroad, please select the relevant country/countries:

Overseas Travel - Country
If your research involves travel abroad, please select the relevant country/countries:

Overseas Travel Institution
Please indicate if your research involves working in a particular overseas institution, and/or add other countries to which you will travel in connection with this application:

N/A

Research Leave Granted/Permission Obtained
Please indicate if you will need to be absent from your employing institution in order to undertake the proposed research, and if so, whether the necessary permission

has been obtained:

N/A

Support of British International Research Institute Required/Granted
Will you require the (non-cash) support of a British International Research Institute abroad?
If your research will take you to a country or region in which one of the British International Research Institutes operates, you are strongly encouraged to make contact with it before completing this form so that you can take account of any relevant expertise, facilities and logistical advice: Details can be found on the Academy's website at http://www.britac.ac.uk/british-international-research-institutes.

No

Language Competence
Please indicate here, if relevant, your level of language competence, or otherwise explain how the objectives of the research will be met:

N/A

Other Participants
Please give the names, appointments and institutional affiliation of any other participants in the proposed research. If detail is not known yet, please indicate numbers and status of people who might be involved:

N/A

Role of Other Participants
Please describe the contribution to the project to be made by other participants, citing any particular specialisms and expertise:

N/A

Added Value of Collaboration
Please provide any comments you wish to make on the particular relevance, timeliness or other aspects of the collaboration, and the benefits envisaged:

N/A

Endangered or Emerging Subject Area
Applicants should be intending to pursue original, independent research in any field of study within the humanities or social sciences. There are no quotas for individual subject areas and no thematic priorities. The primary factor in assessing applications will remain the excellence of the proposal. The Academy will, however, where appropriate, take into account the aim of providing particular support for certain important fields, either emerging areas of scholarship or areas of research that are endangered or under threat.

N/A

Ethical Issues

Are there any special ethical issues arising from your proposal that are not covered by the relevant professional Code of Practice? You must answer yes or no:

○ No

Have you obtained, or will you obtain ethical approval from your employing institution or other relevant authority? You must answer yes or no:

◉ Yes

If the answers are yes to special ethical issues and no to having obtained prior approval, please describe here the non-standard ethical issues arising from your research and how you will address them:
If the answer is no to special ethical issues please enter N/A

N/A

Source of Funding
Have you/any co-applicants made any other applications in connection with this project? If so, with what results?

None

7. Financial Details

Budget heading		Year 1	Total
Travel Costs:			
Travel Costs	Proposed Cost	£400.00	£400.00
	Latest Proposed Cost	£400.00	£400.00
Accommodation:			
Accomodation	Proposed Cost	£400.00	£400.00
	Latest Proposed Cost	£400.00	£400.00
Consumables:			
Consumables	Proposed Cost	£0.00	£0.00
	Latest Proposed Cost	£0.00	£0.00
Research/Clerical Assistance:			
Research/Clerical Assistance	Proposed Cost	£0.00	£0.00
	Latest Proposed Cost	£0.00	£0.00
Other Costs:			
Other Costs	Proposed Cost	£9,200.00	£9,200.00
	Latest Proposed Cost	£9,200.00	£9,200.00
Total	**Proposed Cost**	**£10,000.00**	**£10,000.00**
	Latest Proposed Cost	**£10,000.00**	**£10,000.00**

Justification
Please refer to the scheme guidance notes for full details of eligible costs.
Please provide details of funding related to the relevant fields set out in the financial details table above.
Applicants should prepare accurate costings for the proposed research expenses, and should be particularly careful not to overestimate the resources required. Costs should be clearly itemised and justified in terms of the research programme for this application.

We are requesting funding to test and run our survey.

1. Pilot Testing.
Piloting is always useful; in our case, it is crucial. First, we need to test a wide range of possible misperceptions in order to guide our choice for the final survey. Second, since we will be designing innovative survey questions aimed at tapping 'post-truth' as displayed in public opinion, we will need to experiment with wordings and reactions to them. £560 will allow us to run an extensive and flexible pilot test using Prolific

Academic, a UK-based, more ethical counterpart to MTURK.

2. The main survey.
Illustrative costs (based on recent tenders on a similar scale from BMG, ICM, Ipsos and YouGov):
Costs – 2,500 respondents x approx. 30 questions
Question costs = £6,000
Management, coding and deliverables: = £1,200
Total cost: £7,200 plus VAT = £8,640

An online survey is a very cost-effective way of collecting data from a large and representative sample. A number of agencies have both the panel of respondents and the technical capacity to handle our experimental designs.

3. Conference funding

Co-funding (shared with departmental allowance) of travel and maintenance for PI at Elections, Public Opinion & Parties conference, Egham, September 2018 = £200

Co-funding (shared with departmental allowance) of travel and maintenance for PI at Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 2019 = £600

Name of Special Fund
If the scheme includes funding from more than one source, please indicate if your application is relevant to a particular special fund - details in scheme guidance notes

N/A

8. Equal Opportunities

Gender
Please indicate your gender:

Male

Age
Please indicate which age group you are in:

40-49

Date of Birth
Please state your date of birth:

17/04/1968

Ethnic Origin
Please state your ethnic origin:

White - British

Disabilities
The Disability Discrimination Act defines disability as *"A physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term effect on the person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities"*. If this applies, please specify the nature of the disability:

N/A