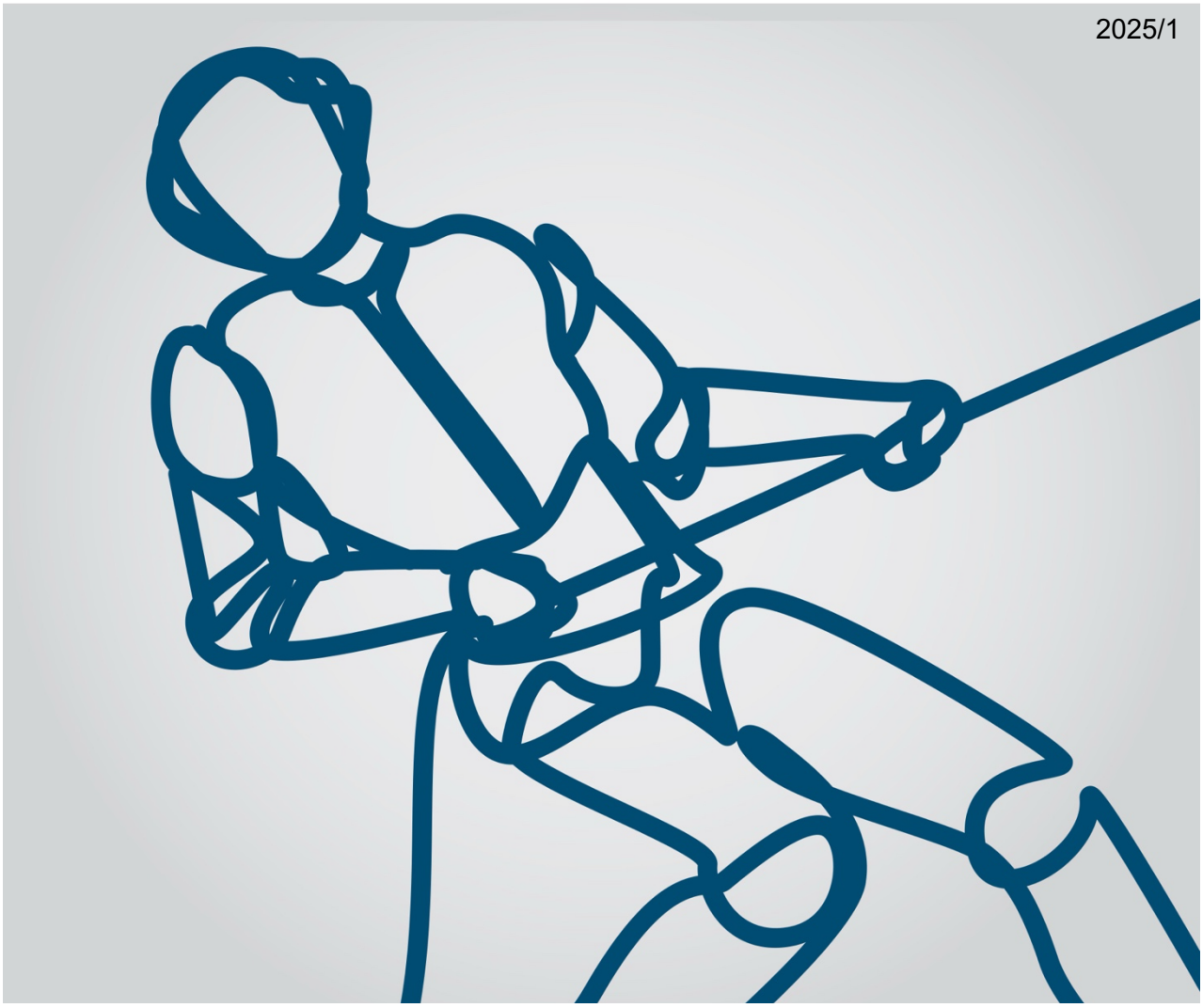
RECLAIM Discussion Papers



Reclaiming the Epistemic Basis of Liberal Democracy

Maximilian Conrad – University of Iceland

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RECLAIM Reclaiming Liberal Democracy in the Postfactual Age

RECLAIM is a three-year research project (2022-2025) funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe program. Consisting of a consortium of researchers from thirteen partner universities around Europe, the RECLAIM project addresses the implications of the challenge of post-truth politics for the future of liberal democracy in Europe, in order to (a) produce theoretically and empirically robust visions for the future of liberal democratic institutions, (b) to reflect on the meaning of liberal democracy in the 21st century in Europe and, (c) to develop recommendations, toolkits, narratives and methodologies to reinstate the legitimacy and effectiveness of liberal democracies.

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RECLAIM Reclaiming Liberal Democracy in the Postfactual Age

Reclaiming the Epistemic Basis of Liberal Democracy

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Abstract:

This discussion paper outlines the RECLAIM project's ideal-typical understanding of the post-truth condition. Such an ideal-typical understanding is necessary as a heuristic device for the empirical analysis of the various phenomena that – collectively and through their interplay – constitute the post-truth phenomenon. Moreover, an ideal-typical definition helps to avoid unnecessarily dichotomous questions about whether or not our age *is* indeed one of post-truth. By contrast, the proposed ideal type allows for the assessment of the *degree* to which signs of a coming post-truth condition are already observable in liberal democracies. Drawing on existing definitions of post-truth as well as related concepts, the paper argues that post-truth is characterized by more than a declining of role of facts and analysis in politics and political debate. Instead, the presumed substitution of objective fact with emotion as a key factor informing public opinion – as in the Oxford English Dictionary's oft-cited definition of post-truth – is indicative of a more fundamental epistemic crisis of democracy: the rise of 'alternative facts' suggests that objective facts are increasingly *contentious* and contested rather than simply less relevant. The post-truth condition, then, needs to be understood as a development in liberal-democratic political culture resulting from an information environment that makes it increasingly difficult to discern fact from fake/fiction. This points to a more far-reaching erosion of the epistemic foundations of public deliberation in liberal democracies. This erosion, in turn, is connected to an increasing blurring of the distinction between fact and opinion, and fundamentally also to a decline in understanding of the scientific method, i.e., that facts can be considered objective to the extent to which they are supported by empirical evidence. It is this epistemic basis that needs to be reclaimed for democratic deliberation to remain possible. Ultimately, this makes the post-truth condition a challenging task both in terms of citizenship education and in terms of the regulation of disinformation in liberal democracies. Liberal democracies will need to face these challenges and take the right steps to equip their citizens with the skills and competences that will empower them to discern fact from "alternative fact" (i.e., fake) in democratic deliberation.

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Introduction

Background

This paper is the first in a series of discussion papers published as part of the RECLAIM project.[1] The RECLAIM project analyzes the impact of *post-truth politics* on liberal democracy in Europe and generates evidence-based policy recommendations on how best to mitigate the presumed detrimental consequences of the post-truth condition. Considering the ambiguity as well as the ambivalence surrounding the concept of post-truth, the main aim of this paper is to define the project's underlying understanding of post-truth and thereby to provide a conceptual basis for the project's empirical work.

Despite the emergence of a burgeoning literature on various aspects of post-truth (or post-truth politics) since the watershed year of 2016, conceptual debates on the post-truth condition have not yielded a commonly accepted definition of the term, or even a shared understanding of what is at stake in the debate on post-truth politics. On the contrary, this debate continues to be characterized by considerable ambiguity, but also by a certain *ambivalence* towards the concept of post-truth. This ambiguity and ambivalence are in large part due to the – perhaps justified – criticism that post-truth has become an umbrella term conflating quite distinct phenomena (McIntyre, 2018: 9). Consequently, considerable efforts have been made to come up with more suitable concepts, describing the post-truth phenomenon as, e.g., "information disorder" (Wardle/Derakhshan, 2017), "truth decay" (Kavanagh/Rich, 2018; Devaux et al., 2022), or an "epistemic crisis of democracy" (Dahlgren, 2018). Moreover, the terms *post-truth* and *postfactual* (MacMullen, 2020) have tended to be used interchangeably.[2] However, these different concepts have in common that the phenomena they denote are widely considered to constitute a fundamental challenge to liberal democracy.

Aim

The main aim of this paper is to spell out the RECLAIM project's understanding of post-truth and the post-truth condition by way of an ideal-typical definition. Such an ideal-typical approach to post-truth does not seek to determine (a priori) whether the proposed concept fully applies to circumstances in the real world, but instead presents a heuristic device that can be used in analyzing the *extent* or degree to which different aspects of the phenomenon at hand can be shown to exist and what impact this has on politics in liberal democracies. Beyond this ideal-typical definition of the post-truth condition, the paper frames the possible emergence of a post-truth condition as a fundamental challenge and as a potentially existential threat to liberal democracy. As a *development* observable in the political culture of various liberal democracies, post-truth denotes several *trends* (cf. Kavanagh/Rich, 2018; Devaux et al., 2022) rather than asserting that these developments have already resulted in a full-fledged post-truth condition. The post-truth condition therefore needs to be viewed as the ideal-typical *endpoint* of such trends, which are spelled out in detail in section 2 below.

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[1] The RECLAIM project is a three-year research project funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe program coordinated by the Institute of International Affairs at the University of Iceland under the author's leadership. Under the title *Reclaiming Liberal Democracy in the Postfactual Age*, the project analyzes the origins and expressions as well as the impact of what has come to be referred to as *post-truth politics* on liberal democracy in Europe. In addition to its empirical analyses of various aspects of post-truth politics, the project also sets out to produce evidence-based policy recommendations as to how best to mitigate the detrimental effect of the various phenomena studied in the project.

[2] Moreover, some languages tend to prefer one term over the other while referring to essentially identical phenomena. In German, for instance, *postfaktisch* would be the translation for the English *post-truth*.

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These factors are crucially shaped by the emergence of an increasingly manipulative information environment connected to the rise of disruptive technologies, including recent advances in the field of generative artificial intelligence. This information environment makes it increasingly difficult to discern fact from fake/fiction and, thus, for citizens to be able to play their role as active and informed participants in the democratic life of a given polity; hence the notion of a profound epistemic crisis of democracy (Dahlgren, 2018; Bennett/Livingston, 2018; Bennett/Livingston, 2020). This changing information environment is furthermore closely linked to the resurgence of anti-liberal and/or authoritarian populism, as such forces actively seek to question and undermine trust in the epistemic authority of once-trusted sources of information, all in the pursuit of often radically anti-liberal agendas. The emergence of a post-truth condition is therefore not merely an epistemic crisis, but indeed a potentially *existential* crisis for the liberal understanding of democracy.

Organization

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: following this short introduction, the second section presents and motivates the ideal-typical definition of post-truth underlying the RECLAIM project, thereby engaging with and positioning the project's understanding of post-truth within the broader literature on post-truth and related concepts. This section also introduces the various components of the project's ideal-typical definition of the post-truth condition and discusses the way in which the interplay of these different components collectively constitutes the post-truth condition. The third section discusses the extent to which the post-truth condition, thus conceived, constitutes a challenge and a potentially existential threat to liberal democracy. This is done by reference to the project's take on the impact of post-truth politics on the often taken-for-granted link between democracy as a system/form of governance and the liberal principles underpinning it. The fourth section explores potential liberal-democratic responses, arguing that liberal democracies are not defenseless in the struggle against an emerging post-truth political culture and/or the actors promoting a post-truth style of politics. However, significant efforts will need to be undertaken not only to drive home the point that what is at stake is liberal democracy itself, but also to demonstrate that the looming post-truth condition requires that the right steps be taken towards regulating disruptive technologies, to build resilient media systems and to equip citizens with the skills and competences to navigate the *undoubtedly* increasingly manipulative information environment (Breakstone et al., 2024) – and thus to reclaim the epistemic basis of liberal democracy.

An Ideal-Typical Definition of the Post-Truth Condition

On the benefits of an ideal type of the post-truth condition

There is no doubt that the literature on post-truth and related concepts has been a growth industry ever since the events that resulted in the Oxford English Dictionary's choice of the adjective post-truth as its word of the year in 2016. The re-election of Donald Trump as the 47th President of the United States and the experience of his first few months in office have sparked renewed interest in research on post-truth politics and, maybe more than before, in the anti-liberal agendas that tend to go hand in hand with it. But close to a decade after the watershed year of 2016, academic debates on post-truth politics remain contentious. Alongside a strand of literature that acknowledges post-truth populism as a "new political

paradigm" constituting a challenge to liberal democracy (Newman/Conrad, 2024; see also Strandbrink, 2024; García Guitián, 2024), there is still a certain unease about a lack of conceptual precision as well as a concern about the potentially detrimental consequences of efforts undertaken to mitigate the effects of post-truth politics (e.g., Farkas/Schou, 2020; Harsin, 2024).

The unfortunate result of this conceptual ambiguity as well as ambivalence has been that promising openings to academic debate – whether on the expressions of the post-truth condition or on the challenges that to liberal democracy – have been closed prematurely precisely because the debate has not fully managed to move beyond what we consider to be an unnecessarily dichotomous question. Conceptual discussion on what post-truth means is obviously necessary and relevant, but given the fundamental challenge facing liberal democracy, it is crucial for research on post-truth politics to move on from purely conceptual issues towards addressing, on the one hand, the preconditions and expressions of these constitutive phenomena *and* towards discussing, on the other hand, possible strategies to mitigate their impact, whether in Europe or elsewhere. Our suggestion is therefore not to succumb to the temptation of wanting to assert, *a priori*, the existence or non-existence of a postfactual/post-truth age. Such dichotomous questions are counterproductive because they tend to direct researchers away from pressing *empirical* questions about the various phenomena that – collectively and through their interplay – constitute the broader phenomenon of the post-truth condition that now openly challenges liberal understandings of democracy.

Consequently, the RECLAIM project is working with an *ideal-typical definition* of post-truth and the post-truth condition. In line with the Weberian understanding of ideal types, the post-truth condition is not assumed to have already come into existence in absolute terms. However, elements of a development towards a post-truth condition are already clearly observable. Following Max Weber's definition, an ideal type is understood here as an analytical construct or *idealization* that "selectively abstracts from reality by […] accentuating certain aspects to produce an internally coherent image" (Turner, 2019: 581). As such, a Weberian ideal type "is found nowhere in empirical reality; it is a utopia" (Weber, quoted in Jackson, 2017: 81). The advantage of constructing a Weberian ideal type in approaching the post-truth condition is that it helps to avoid the bottleneck identified above, i.e., the temptation to insist on the need to clarify, in a dichotomous fashion, whether or not liberal democracies currently find themselves in a post-truth and/or postfactual era. Such dichotomous questions are unnecessary – and indeed counterproductive – for a meaningful engagement with the phenomena that, collectively and through their interplay, create the conditions for post-truth politics. By contrast, an ideal-typical approach to post-truth does not seek to determine (a priori) whether the proposed concept fully applies to circumstances in the real world, but instead presents a tool that can be used in analyzing the *extent* or degree to which different aspects of the phenomenon at hand can be shown to exist and what impact they have on politics in liberal democracies.

Post-Truth as a Political-Cultural Transformation

In its oft-cited 2016 entry, the Oxford English Dictionary defined 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*" (emphasis added). The RECLAIM project broadly sides with this understanding of post-truth, but also adds an important *epistemic* dimension. The OED definition suggests that objective facts are always clearly known and accessible, which makes post-truth a matter of ignoring or disregarding

facts that one knows – or could know – to be correct. But the notion of an epistemic crisis of democracy (Dahlgren, 2018; Bennett/Livingston, 2018; Hoggan-Kloubert/Hoggan, 2022) indicates that this can no longer be taken for granted in an evidently increasingly manipulative information environment rife with mis- and disinformation and characterized by conscious efforts to undermine the authority and credibility of once-trusted institutions. This argument applied to the rise of social media and their potential as a vehicle for the spread of mis- and disinformation, but it gains a new level of urgency with regard to the rapid development of generative artificial intelligence and its potential to create personalized and tailor-made alternative realities (Youngs, 2025; Schmidt, forthcoming 2026). Clearly, the post-truth condition is characterized *to an extent* by a blatant disregard for objective facts. This *motivational* postfactualism (MacMullen, 2020) is epitomized by a brand of populist politician who openly disregards objective facts, rejects and discredits scientific evidence as (liberal) bias, and proposes "alternative facts" instead (McIntyre, 2018; Newman, 2019; Newman, 2023). However, even more relevant to a definition of the post-truth condition is that in an *increasingly manipulative* – and arguably still largely unregulated – information environment (Wardle/Derakshan, 2017), *telling fact from fake* (or *objective* from "*alternative"* fact) is indeed becoming increasingly challenging. The RECLAIM project unambiguously considers facts to be objective to the extent to which they acknowledge the scientific state of the art (as opposed to being "imposed" from above by what is often misleadingly construed as epistemic *authorities*). But the debate on post-truth politics also needs to consider that in an age of disruptive technologies, objective facts increasingly need to compete with "alternative" facts, which may increasingly be tailor-made and generated with the help of artificial intelligence. Arguably, the changing information environment and the mis- and disinformation spread via social and other digital media plays a more important role in this epistemic crisis of democracy than the motivational postfactualism of post-truth populists and their supporters.

Consistent with the points raised so far, the RECLAIM project understands the post-truth condition as the ideal-typical *endpoint* of a political-cultural development that undermines the epistemic foundations of liberal democracy. In this condition, politics becomes post-truth to the extent to which it has been deprived of its factual basis. It is a condition in which facts are not simply *ignored*, but in which the very idea of objective facts is rejected, based on the common assumption that all facts are infused with an implicit or explicit (political) agenda and are therefore, in one way or another, misleading, biased, or even fabricated. As a consequence, *informed* public debate – one of the hallmarks of deliberative understandings of democracy – becomes impossible because it loses its grounding in shared facts. This undermining of the epistemic foundations of liberal democracy is intimately connected to a changing information environment that is, on the one hand, characterized by the increasing role of social media as a source of information on political events (Conrad/Newman, forthcoming 2026) and, on the other hand, by the rapid development of *generative artificial intelligence*, creating conditions in which it is becoming easier than ever to spread increasingly sophisticated and deceivingly authentic-looking fabricated content. In this changing information environment, it can no longer be taken for granted that citizens will be able to tell fact from fiction competently and confidently, in particular since undermining trust in once-trusted sources of information such as, most importantly, scientific experts and journalists (Kavanagh/Rich, 2018) has become a standard feature of the post-truth populist playbook (Conrad/Newman, 2024).

But the political-cultural development towards a post-truth condition, thus conceived, is neither simply a matter of a decline in trust towards once-trusted institutions such as science and journalism, nor is it purely a matter of an increasingly manipulative information

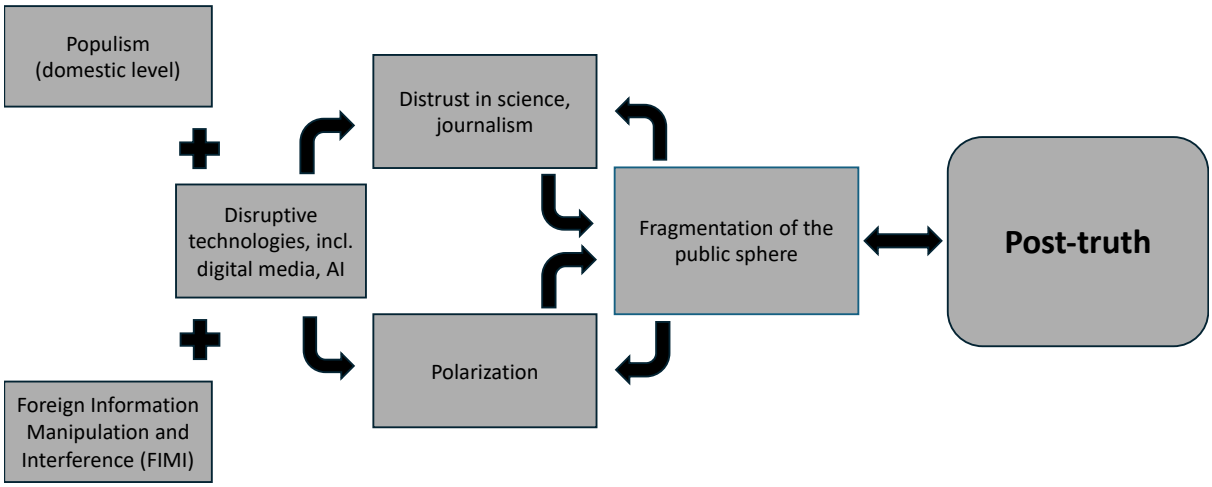
environment. Instead, the post-truth transformation of liberal-democratic political culture is also indicative of a more fundamental erosion of the understanding and/or acceptance of the scientific method, i.e., the procedures and methods used in generating *scientific* knowledge. In the post-truth condition, the substitution of objective facts by *alternative* facts is accompanied by a more fundamental rejection of the process through which facts are established. At least in part, the apparently increasing contentiousness of objective facts – or, indeed, the decline of *shared* facts – is therefore only the result of a more fundamental contestation (or misunderstanding) of the scientific method and/or the politicization of science. It is this politicization of science as well as the contestation of knowledge established through the use of the scientific method that provides the ground for the emergence of the very idea of alternative facts. Clearly, alternative facts are not facts at all since they are not grounded in the same procedures that make facts objective. This argument is compellingly made in the Truth Decay project (Kavanagh/Rich 2018), which sees increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data as one of the four related trends that characterize "truth decay". Kavanagh and Rich distinguish between "objective facts that can be verified and are *observably consistent*" (2018: 21, emphasis added) and "analytical interpretations of objective facts" (ibid.) and point out that "truth decay is about increasing disagreement despite clear data and evidence" (ibid.). In addition, they identify a "blurring of the line between opinion and fact", an "increasing relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact", and a "declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information" as drivers of truth decay. Some authors consequently address "science denial" or "science denialism" (McIntyre 2018) as an integral part of the post-truth phenomenon.[3] Therefore, beyond a fundamental reinstatement of trust in science, reclaiming the epistemic basis of liberal democracy will require a renewed awareness and appreciation of the scientific method through which facts are established in the first place.

Elements of the Post-Truth Condition

With this in mind, the RECLAIM project considers the ideal-typical post-truth condition to be constituted by the co-existence and causal interplay of various elements that will be explored in the following paragraphs. As a fundamental caveat, it has to emphasized already at the outset that in our perspective, there is no clearly identifiable single factor that triggered the processes contributing to the post-truth condition. Instead, the post-truth condition is the result of the complex *interplay* of all the factors discussed below. Consequently, this ideal-typical definition should be understood as an attempt to identify and describe the symptoms that are characteristic of the post-truth condition in an effort to explore how the complex causal relationships between these various factors may be imagined. Figure 1 represents an effort to illustrate the various factors contributing to the rise of the post-truth condition.

[3] Along these lines, Lee McIntyre argued that "scientific facts are now openly questioned by legions of nonexperts who happen to disagree with them" (McIntyre, 2018: 2019) and spoke of a "cynical attempt to undercut the idea that science is fair and raise doubts that any empirical inquiry can really be value neutral" (19).

Figure 1: Factors contributing to the post-truth condition



First, at the domestic level, the post-truth condition is characterized by the existence of one or several politically significant **populist movements or parties** that engage in a markedly post-truth political style and actively seek to undermine the authority of science and expertise. Second, the post-truth condition is characterized by efforts of **external actors** to destabilize liberal democracies, specifically through the use of "foreign information manipulation and interference" operations (European External Action Service, 2021; see also European External Action Service, 2023).[4] At the structural level, the profound changes that have occurred in the media and information environment are key to our understanding of the post-truth condition in general and post-truth politics in particular. These changes are intimately connected to developments in information technology, including the ongoing rapid rise of generative artificial intelligence. The **third** constitutive feature of the post-truth condition is therefore connected to technological aspects, specifically (a) the **rise of social media** as an increasingly important source of information on political issues and as a powerful vehicle for the spread of all sorts of false and misleading information, and (b) the rise of generative artificial intelligence as a means to create false and misleading information that is becoming ever more difficult to identify as such. Such transformations do not unfold in a vacuum. The increasing relevance of social media as a source of news is facilitated by at the same time as it contributes to the decline of quality journalism/mainstream legacy media. But this decline of quality journalism is not simply due to decreasing revenues and a faster news cycle that makes proper journalistic methods and standards increasingly difficult. Indeed, the decline of quality journalism is also accompanied both by a **decline of trust** in mainstream media that is fuelled at the same time as it is exploited by populist actors who use "fake news" allegations instrumentally in an effort to undercut and potentially silence the

[4] In its 2021 Stratcom Activity Report, the European External Action Service (EEAS) defined foreign information manipulation and interference as "a pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes" and that is "manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner". The report further highlights that FIMI actors "can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory" (EEAS, 2021).

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voice of critical journalism (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Sehl et al., 2020; Conrad, 2023; Conrad, 2024). Even more concerningly, such fake news accusations play an instrumental role in undermining the very idea that political decisions need to be justified in public deliberation, as discussed in more detail in section 3.2 below. Distrust in mainstream media – as well as in expertise more broadly – is therefore the **fourth factor** in RECLAIM's understanding of the post-truth condition.

The four factors mentioned so far – populism, foreign information manipulation and interference, technological developments, and distrust in media and other expertise – all contribute to the fifth factor, which constitutes one of the most crucial infrastructural challenges to liberal democracy: the **fragmentation of the public sphere.** In the post-truth condition, what was once imagined as a shared communicative space for public opinion and will formation – and for the generation of communicative power (Habermas, 1992) – has disintegrated into a multitude of semi-public forums (or echo chambers) of the like-minded (Habermas, 2022; Rosa, 2022; cf. Sunstein, 2017). This fragmentation is a direct result of the factors discussed so far: populism thrives on a delegitimating critique that brands mainstream media as part of a corrupt liberal elite, thereby exploiting as well as promoting distrust in mainstream quality media. This distrust – or rather, the decline of trust – drives people from the traditional forums of the public sphere into a multitude of forums whose emergence has been facilitated by the rise of the social/digital media. Paired with the rise of generative artificial intelligence as a way of creating fabricated content, this constitutes a potent mix for the dissemination of false information that undermines the epistemic basis of public deliberation on matters of shared concern. This constellation is exacerbated by the external dimension of the post-truth condition, i.e., the strategic efforts undertaken by foreign powers to shake the epistemic foundations of debate and deliberation in liberal-democratic societies (e.g. Kratochvíl et al., forthcoming 2025; Kratochvíl/Doležal, 2025). But the fragmentation of the public sphere is further driven by increasing political – in particular *affective* - polarization in liberal societies. Understood as a fundamental dislike (or loathing) of opposing political camps, affective polarization does not emerge in a vacuum either, but is causally connected to the factors discussed above: it is not simply *exploited,* but very much driven and actively *promoted* by populist movements and/or parties. Moreover, it is also driven by social media algorithms and the mis- and disinformation spread via social and other digital media.

Collectively and through their interplay, these factors thus shape the post-truth condition and undermine the epistemic basis of liberal democracy. They create epistemic uncertainty, thus making it increasingly difficult to tell fact from fake with confidence – and which sources of information to trust in a constellation characterized by an overabundance of conflicting and contradictory information.

The Post-Truth Condition as a Challenge to Liberal Democracy

There are many ways in which the post-truth condition, thus conceived, can be considered to constitute an *existential* threat to liberal democracy. Because our focus is on post-truth as a transformation of political culture, however, the following discussion will highlight two specific and interconnected aspects, i.e., the *anti-deliberative* as well as the *anti-liberal* thrust of post-truth politics. Regarding the former, our contention is that post-truth politics does more than to deprive liberal-representative democracy of the epistemic basis for public deliberation. As discussed above, public deliberation requires a shared factual basis, as a meaningful exchange of arguments is inconceivable among deliberators who cannot agree on mutually accepted facts. But in our view, post-truth politics is also fundamentally *anti-*

deliberative in that it rejects the fundamental systemic role of public deliberation as a day-to-day process of probing the democratic legitimacy of political decisions. Moreover, our contention is that post-truth politics is fundamentally *anti-liberal* in that it has an intimate – though not necessarily *inherent* – connection to the authoritarian agendas pursued by many post-truth populist movements.

The Anti-Deliberative Thrust of Post-Truth Politics

The post-truth transformation of political culture fundamentally undermines the *epistemic* foundations of liberal democracy. This assertion is closely connected to the Arendtian view that politics fundamentally requires a shared factual basis: no meaningful exchange of arguments is conceivable unless arguments are grounded in a mutually accepted and acknowledged set of facts. In this context, facts need to be distinguished clearly from opinions or interpretations of facts.[5] The constitutive elements of the ideal-typical post-truth condition (described in section 2 above) fundamentally unsettle these epistemic foundations of public deliberation, creating a constellation of epistemic uncertainty that makes it increasingly difficult for citizens to tell fact from fake or even to know whom and which sources of information to trust. This makes fact-based deliberation virtually impossible.

Beyond this epistemic point, our contention is *also* that post-truth politics – as a political style that actively seeks to unsettle liberal democracy's epistemic foundations – has a more profoundly *anti-deliberative thrust* that needs to be fully appreciated. This assertion is premised on the view, derived from deliberative theories of democracy, that public deliberation plays a significant systemic role in contemporary representative-liberal democracy (Habermas, 1992; see also García Guitián et al., 2024). In such accounts, deliberative democracy is seen as a complement to representative-liberal democracy (Marx Ferree et al., 2002) in that democratic legitimacy is not derived exclusively from the results of elections held at regular intervals but depends prominently on the day-by-day practice of providing arguments and justifications for political decisions. Subjecting such justifications to the critical scrutiny of the public has become a widely accepted normative requirement, also beyond the realm of deliberative-democratic theorizing.

Part of this day-to-day practice is the normative expectation that politicians are accountable to the public by answering the critical questions of journalists. But this normative expectation can no longer be taken for granted in a political culture characterized by political leaders who no longer feel compelled to answer questions from journalists whom they discredit as "fake news". Donald Trump's branding of the press as "the enemy of the American people" (Kalb, 2018) strongly suggests that his initial fake news accusations (in his first term) against critical journalists were motivated by much more than a simple unwillingness to engage with critical questions. In the second term, such concerns were exacerbated by the decision to no longer admit representatives of the Associated Press (AP) to attend White House press briefings (Washington Post, 2025).[6] This highlights the post-truth populist assault not only on the role of the journalism in democracy, but on the much more fundamental premise that political decisions in democratic systems have to be explained and justified in public.

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5 It is however worth keeping in mind the point, made in section 2 of this paper, that one of the defining features of "truth decay" is an increasingly blurred line between fact and opinion (Kavanagh/Rich, 2018).

6 In a statement justifying the decision (which it described as a "Trump White House Victory Against the Associated Press", the White House declared that "asking the President of the United States questions in the Oval Office and aboard Air Force One is a privilege granted to journalists, not a legal right. We stand by our decision to hold the Fake News accountable for their lies, and President Trump will continue to grant an unprecedented level of access to the press. This is the most transparent Administration in history" (White House, 2025, emphasis added).

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This challenge to the deliberative mechanisms within representative democracy constitutes an existential threat to liberal democracy not only in the event that it "goes mainstream", i.e., if mainstream politicians also adopt this particular version of post-truth politics. The practice of delegitimizing the role of journalism in democracy already has a transformative impact on the – now no longer presumed – normative expectation that politicians subject themselves to the critical scrutiny of of public deliberation. Even though it is still largely confined to the populist playbook, there is no reason to assume that it will not – at some point – spill over into mainstream politics. If mainstream politicians follow suit by not only adopting the use of false and misleading information, but also carefully selecting the journalists that will have the privilege to ask them questions, then this would fundamentally undermine one of the core epistemic pillars of liberal-democratic political culture. It would fundamentally deprive the public sphere of its potential not only to challenge bad arguments, but specifically also to identify factually incorrect information.

The Anti-Liberal Thrust of (Much) Post-Truth Politics

Beyond this anti-deliberative thrust, post-truth politics is characterized also by a strongly *anti-liberal* thrust that is intimately linked to the authoritarian agendas of various populist movements that are frequently linked to post-truth politics. This *anti-liberal* thrust questions the link between democracy as a form of governance and the liberal rights and values underpinning it. It should be noted at the outset that without these liberal rights and values, democracy as a form of governance – i.e., rule of the people based on equal rights and opportunities – would be inconceivable. Therefore, the anti-liberal thrust of (much) post-truth politics is indeed a profound and existential threat to liberal democracy.

Our argument on the anti-liberal thrust of post-truth politics requires some more conceptual discussion on the post-truth challenge to the specifically *liberal* rights and values that are fundamental to the idea of democracy. Our unambiguous contention is that democracy *necessarily* has to be based on liberal rights and values, despite the fact that the idea of democracy as a form of governance and the liberal values underpinning it have have emerged from different traditions (Mounk, 2018). Initially, classical liberalism's emphasis on individual rights and limits on state power presented a counterweight or balance to the possibility of democracy turning tyrannical. Alexis de Tocqueville famously feared that democracy – understood purely as majority rule – could easily into a tyranny of the majority capable of depriving citizens of their individual rights (De Toqueville, 2012/1835). This provides the clearest justification for constitutionally guaranteed individual rights, but also for a constitutionally enshrined separation of powers between the three branches of government that is characteristic of liberal democracy. In terms of the liberal rights underpinning democracy, freedom of religion is possibly the seminal example, considering that classical liberalism first emerged out of the religious struggles of the post-reformation phase, essentially as an answer to the question of how a *modus vivendi* could be found that would accommodate the peaceful co-existence of people with seemingly irreconcilable moral worldviews. But contemporary liberal democracies evidently also require respect for civil rights, including freedom of expression, freedom of association, or freedom of the press, to name but a few. John Stuart Mill's harm principle (Mill, 2011/1859) is instructive in this context. For Mill, the only justifiable reason to limit a person's freedom was to prevent harm to others, underlining once again the classically liberal idea that peaceful coexistence of people – a *modus vivendi* – requires tolerance for other worldviews and ways of life. This view of freedom also informs contemporary understandings of fundamental civil and political rights, not least in Rawlsian political liberalism.

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But contemporary authoritarian regimes advocate for an *illiberal* understanding of democracy, arguing that rule of the people – understood essentially as unchecked majority rule – does not necessitate respect for liberal rights and values. In highlighting the conceptual-analytical distinction between liberalism and democracy, Yascha Mounk refers to this as "democracy without rights" (Mounk, 2018). Our point in this regard is that democracy under illiberal premises is inconceivable even as a thought experiment, largely because it strips its citizens of (all or most of) the rights that are necessary for them to exercise their role as members of a democratic community. In particular, democracy under illiberal premises is inconceivable because it is deprived of the fundamental communicative rights that form the preconditions for public deliberation. The type of communicative freedom that is required for the generation of communicative power (Habermas, 1992: chap. 7) is indispensable in democracy. This highlights the irony that although post-truth populists are quick to assert limits on freedom of speech in liberal democracies, but are evidently keen to silence critical voices and impose a singular version of the truth once they are in power (Newman, 2024).

The Post-Truth Condition as an Existential Threat to Liberal Democracy

Because of its apparent anti-liberal as well as anti-deliberative thrust, the type of post-truth politics that is facilitated by the post-truth transformation of political culture has to be understood as an existential threat to liberal democracy. In this context, post-truth political culture provides a fertile ground for the pursuit of authoritarian agendas, characterized by a longing for a strong leader that represents (or manifests) the will of the people (Müller, 2016) as well as by a rejection of the deliberative principles and the liberal rights and values underpinning (reprentative-)liberal democracy. The post-truth condition thus marks a transformation of political culture that does more than merely devalue the role of facts in politics (and hence in the collective search for truth). While it would be an overstatement to say that all post-truth politics necessarily and inherently has authoritarian ambitions, it is nonetheless justified to claim that the post-truth condition – characterized by the features outlined in section 2 above – creates the political-cultural conditions in which authoritarian agendas can thrive. Liberal democracies therefore need to be aware of the way in which post-truth politics may masks the authoritarian and anti-liberal ambitions of political forces whose end goal is to dismantle not only liberal rights and values, but ultimately also the separation of powers, rule of law, and liberal democracy itself.

Liberal-Democratic Responses to Post-Truth

This leaves us with the question how liberal democracies can "fight back" (D'Ancona, 2017) against the rise of the post-truth condition. Our key assertion is that liberal democracies need to reclaim their shared epistemic basis by pushing back against the continuous devaluation of facts and analysis in public deliberation. As an important part of this process, liberal democracies will need to reclaim a shared sense of the criteria to be applied in establishing facts and evaluating their significance. Beyond a mere focus on the regulation of an increasingly manipulative media and information environment, this touches fundamentally on the crucial role of education in addressing the challenges of an emerging post-truth condition. Consequently, the argument in the following paragraphs explores the potential of both – regulation of the information environment and citizenship education – as possible liberal-democratic responses to the emergence of the post-truth condition. These

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remarks are by no means intended to be exhaustive, but rather to suggest potential avenues for further analysis.

The regulatory aspect

Initially, post-truth politics was perceived primarily as a problem of the increasing proliferation of false information and, consequently, of the declining symbolic authority of truth in politics. In this initial phase, *fact checking* appeared to be an intuitively plausible (non-regulatory) response (Navarro et al., 2025) to the way certain politicians were "playing fast and loose with the truth" (Newman, 2024), but also to the vast amount of false information disseminated via social and other digital media. Fact checking has however proven to be an instrumentally ineffective as well as normatively problematic approach to tackling digital mis- and disinformation, largely due to (justified) concerns over its implications for freedom of expression as one of the most fundamental civil rights that characterized liberal democracy.

However, the debate on regulatory approaches to the problem of mis- and disinformation has since then shifted towards questions regarding the accountability of social media companies and, in particular, "very large online platforms". Ongoing debates on "tech sovereignty" versus "tech citizenship" in the European Union (Youngs, 2025) underline that efforts to respond to the challenge of mis- and disinformation also need to be complemented by more ambitious and visionary efforts to design the future of digital citizenship in Europe. The difficulty of holding social media companies – or *very large online platforms* (VLOPs)[7] – accountable for the content they host highlights the difficulty of finding a normatively acceptable balance between freedom of speech and the ambition to curb the detrimental impact of disinformation in public debate. So far, social media companies have tended to reject any responsibility for the contents published there, claiming their status as mere *platforms* as opposed to actual media. Despite this, the European Union has considerable authority to shape the social media landscape. This relates not only to social media companies' accountability for patently false information, but also to questions of algorithmic transparency, i.e., that social media users should know according to which principles information is being selected for them (and for which purposes). The business models of social media companies play a key role in this regard. While the commercially driven model of the main US tech companies is evidently detrimental to the functioning of the democratic public sphere (Oleart/Rone, 2025; Youngs, 2025; Navarro et al., 2025), the European Union has considerable regulatory leverage to determine the conditions under which social media companies may be allowed to operate in the EU in the first place. Ambitious and comprehensive efforts by the European Union to protect liberal democracy in Europe have certainly addressed this in recent years, for instance as part of the Digital Services Act (DSA), the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) or currently in developing the European Democracy Shield. Recent analyses have pointed out that this leverage has been used too cautiously so far, mainly for the sake of competitiveness in the tech sector (Youngs, 2025).

Arguably, the debate on regulatory responses is no longer purely about social media companies' responsibility for the proliferation of mis- and disinformation. One could indeed argue that liberal democracies – characterized by freedom of speech and tolerance for different perspectives and worldviews – can withstand a certain amount of mis- and disinformation in public deliberation. But to the extent to which social media become

[7] The EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) classifies platforms with more than 45 million users per month in the EU as "very large online platforms" (VLOPs).

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weaponized as a vehicle for deliberate and strategic efforts to undermine liberal democracies, for actors such as the EU should have a very strong incentive to rethink the regulatory conditions under which profit-oriented *media* should be allowed to operate in the EU in the first place.

In deliberative theories, public deliberation has an important epistemic dimension in that it can challenge factually incorrect claims and thus unmask mis- and disinformation. But public deliberation can only perform this epistemic role in an environment where it is reasonably easy to tell fact from fake. In the post-truth condition, however, the public sphere is itself facing the existential threat of increasing fragmentation. Its status as a shared communicative space, where critical questions are asked and answered, is undermined by the rise of semi-public online forums that claim an equal epistemic standing (Habermas, 2022; Rosa, 2022; Conrad, 2024). But the public sphere is further undermined by a political culture, impacted by post-truth populism, that no longer even demands that leaders of the own camp are held accountable to critical voices from the (presumably) opposing camp. This highlights the crucial role of citizenship education in the struggle to reclaim the epistemic basis of liberal democracy, precisely because post-truth is not simply a matter of disinformation, but also an indication of a political culture that is being transformed alongside a changing media and information environment.

The educational aspect

Citizenship education will therefore necessarily have to be a key component in a *comprehensive* strategy to mitigate the rise and impact of a post-truth condition. This requires significant efforts to evaluate existing and ambitiously (re-)design citizenship education programs in liberal democracies. Specifically, the aim will have to be to empower citizens to navigate the changing and increasingly manipulative information environment (McGrew, 20224; McGrew/Kohnen, 2024). Consequently, education systems will need to focus on developing strategies that will give their citizens the skills and competences to *critically evaluate* – on their own – the reliability of information both online and offline and to identify and to question potentially false and fabricated contents. One key goal of citizenship education in the post-truth condition will thus be to enhance citizens' critical and evaluative skills so that they can effectively "read like fact checkers" (McGrew, 2024). This goal needs to pursued in addition to the skills and competences that are already considered to be part of democratic citizenship education. To achieve this goal, citizenship education programs in liberal democracies will need to go beyond abstract formulations regarding which skills and competences are to be achieved (e.g., media literacy, critical thinking, digital skills) and spell out the concrete practical steps and teaching tools through which these abstract skills and competences will be achieved.

The identification and critical evaluation of potentially false information as part of media literacy is however only one part of the educational response to the rise of the post-truth condition. Importantly, also the other characteristic features of the post-truth condition will be equally important to address in citizenship education programs. For instance, (dis-)trust in journalism requires a clear educational answer in that citizenship education could and should provide students with a solid sense of what journalism is, how it works and what role in plays in the public sphere (and thus in the broader context of liberal democracy).

Furthermore, since the post-truth condition is virtually inconceivable without social media and, increasingly, also generative artificial intelligence, citizenship education has to go educating young people to be critical and discerning in their choice of media diets. Instead,

it also has to furnish students with a fundamental understanding of how social media companies currently operate. For example, it is essential for young citizens to fully appreciate how their media diets are shaped by social media companies' business models and to understand how this process of algorithmic selection differs from the criteria that guide the work of journalistic outlets. Importantly, citizenship education will also need to provide a practical understanding of what echo chambers are, how they emerge and how people are drawn into them, but also how they undermine the public sphere, public deliberation, and ultimately liberal democracy as such.

Concluding Reflections

The aim of this paper was threefold: to introduce an ideal-typical definition of the post-truth condition, to reflect on the post-truth condition as an existential threat to liberal democracy, and to consider possible liberal-democratic responses to this threat. Despite all the criticisms directed towards the concept since the watershed year of 2016, this paper has maintained that post-truth continues to be an important and useful concept in making sense of the broader transformation of political culture in liberal democracies in the digital age. The first key argument was that the post-truth condition needs to understand in ideal-typical terms, i.e., not as a description of an existing situation, but as a heuristic device to evaluate the ongoing transformation of liberal democracies. This ideal-typical view sees the post-truth condition is shaped by the co-existence and dynamic interplay of various factors, including a changing and increasingly manipulative media and information environment, driven largely by developments in information technology (including generative artificial intelligence), but used strategically and maliciously by actors – both foreign and domestic – whose aim is to destabilize liberal-democratic societies. The post-truth condition is therefore not simply a matter of undermining the epistemic basis of public deliberation as a cornerstone of liberal democracy, but indeed a weapon to be used in the dismantling of liberal democracy as such. In order to fend off such developments, liberal democracies need to realize that what is at stake in the struggle against post-truth is indeed liberal democracy itself. Post-truth is part and parcel of a populist project that is fundamentally anti-liberal as well as anti-deliberative in the sense spelled out in the second part of the paper. Post-truth is not only about undermining the shared factual basis required for any meaningful discussion on matters of public concern, but also about undermining the very idea of public deliberation in a more fundamental sense: it is characterized *also* by an increasing reluctance to exchange arguments with people who hold different convictions. But maybe most crucially, the post-truth condition – premised as it is on fundamentally disrupted epistemic foundations – is characterized also by a level of polarization that releases political leaders from accountability in the (once-shared) forums of the public sphere: in a post-truth world, the normative expectation that power has to be legitimated in day-to-day deliberation can no longer be taken for granted. The decline of the public sphere – accompanied by a crisis of quality journalism – highlights that the post-truth condition is not simply a matter of fact checking and the regulation of the media and information environment, but that it requires decisive action in the field of citizenship education. Specifically, efforts to safeguard liberal democracy will need to go beyond increased efforts geared towards empowering citizens to navigate the changing and increasingly manipulative information environment. Media literacy and digital skills are clearly key in the struggle to reclaim the epistemic basis of liberal democracy, but they can only be part of a more comprehensive strategy that also reinstates an appreciation of the fundamentally liberal values that underpin democracy and that must not be compromised.

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