Episteme (2025), 1–22
doi:10.1017/epi.2025.10081

episteme

ARTICLE

Why Demagogues Lie Big

Jesper Kallestrup[1] and Matteo Michelini[2,3]

[1]Department of Philosophy, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK, [2]Philosophy and Ethics Group, Technology University of Eindhoven, Eindhoven, Netherlands and [3]Philosophy and Education Department, Ruhr University Bochum, Bochum, Germany
Corresponding author: Jesper Kallestrup; Email: jesper.kallestrup@abdn.ac.uk

(Received 17 December 2024; revised 16 July 2025; accepted 2 August 2025)

Abstract
The best strategy for getting away with lying is to lie small by only deviating from the truth as much as is necessary to achieve the intended deception. Why then do some demagogues lie big? One set of views has it that the only difference between small and big lies concerns the size of their contents. They claim that the purpose of big lies is the formation of false beliefs in their literal contents via counterfactual reasoning, conspiracy theories, or the illusory truth effect. The negative part of this paper questions these accounts. The positive part proposes a different explanation for why demagogues use big lies and argues that big lies may serve three distinct purposes for demagogues: they reinforce their supporters' deeply held beliefs, test the loyalty of their close followers, or publicly demonstrate the demagogue's power. For a big lie to serve these purposes, genuine belief in the lie is not required – in fact, few are likely to believe it. What matters is that the demagogue's supporters publicly endorse the lie. We contend that they do so, either because they interpret them as motivational statements or use them to express or justify their shared emotions or convictions.

Keywords: Lying; demagoguery; belief; evidence; defeat

1. From small to big lies

The literature on how to define "lie" takes as its starting point a widely adopted definition according to which *S* is lying if and only if *S* asserts a disbelieved proposition p with the intention to deceive hearer *H* into believing *p*. Most of the debate revolves around whether deceptive intent is necessary for *S* to lie. For instance, Sorensen (2007) offers examples of bald-faced lies, that is, cases where lying is common knowledge and thus undisguised.[1] In contrast, Lackey (2013) argues that none of these succeed in severing the connection between lying and deception. We shall not attempt to settle that

"The press takes [Trump] literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally." Salena Zito in *The Atlantic*.

[1]One case (Sorensen 2007, 251-2) involves an Iraqi minder from the Information Ministry telling a journalist during the Iraqi war that "everything President Saddam Hussein did in the past was good and everything he will do in the future is good." In this case, everyone knows the speaker is lying. For Sorensen (2007, 262), "lying is just asserting what one does not believe." We shall return to bald-faced lies in fn. 25 and in §3.2.

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

question here; indeed, our project rather concerns the teleological function(s) of lying, and in particular of big lies. One might try to flesh out size by modal distance, for example, using Lewis' (1979) notion of similarity of worlds which allows for a ranking in terms of closeness to actuality. We shall leave such measure of size as an intuitive notion. At best we offer an ostensive definition of "big lie," pointing to canonical instances. The phenomenon of our interest is that of demagogues, or other manipulative agitators, lying big with some extreme political or ideological aim in mind.

Here's the basic puzzle. Suppose you want to offer guidance on how to get away with lying. Seemingly, the best strategy is to lie small, by only deviating from the truth as much as is necessary for you to deceive your audience in the intended way. If you depart more from the truth than you strictly need to, they are less likely to believe you at first on your say-so, given what else they know, and you are more likely to be caught out later, because gathering rebutting evidence will be easier. Additionally, you are likely to incur more blame – as usually big lies are more disruptive than small ones, and thus, may entail harsher sanctions. Why, then, would demagogues, or indeed anyone, lie big if that involves increased risk of not being initially believed, or later found out, and more severely criticized? Our two case studies are Hitler's big lie about a Jewish master plan for world domination and Trump's lie about the US 2020 presidential election being stolen, which have recently been subject to intriguing comparative analyses by historians, cultural theorists, and political scientists, though in the interest of contemporaneity, we shall focus mostly on the second case study.[2]

One way to look at big lies – we shall call it "the literal view" – is to account for their use by reference to how any other lies function, except their content is bigger in size. On this view, a demagogue would resort to big lies because he has an interest in, and an ability to, convince followers of their disbelieved literal contents. But the challenge is then to show how so many people could possibly come to believe such blatant and outlandish falsehoods. To that end, several explanations have been proposed. Some claim that a big lie is usually believed because people assume it's too big to be false, or that anything is believable if only repeated frequently and emphatically enough, or that building a supporting conspiracy theory around its content induces belief in it.

However, none of these versions of the literal view offer a completely satisfactory explanation of why so many report belief in big lies, or so we claim. Although we cannot rule out the possibility that some will form a genuine belief in a big lie, it's reasonable to think that proper belief in its literal content isn't part of its teleological function. Instead of taking the big lie literally, we should take the big liar seriously. Under the latter heading, we propose several explanations for why demagogues adopt big lies. Primarily, they seek to reinforce their supporters' deeply held beliefs in other contents they perceive as true, but

[2]See, for instance, Weber (2023) and Henk de Berg (2024). Hitler was a prolific liar, many of which were about Nazi intentions, for example, "We have no territorial demands to make in Europe"; others were highly conspicuous, for example, "Germany wasn't beaten in 1918." For examples of Hitler's lies, see https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/05/a-list-of-hitlers-lies-compiled-by-the-office-of-war-information-in-1942.html. Likewise, the *Washington Post* (https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-fact-checker-tracked-trump-claims/2021/01/23/ad04b69a-5c1d-11eb-a976-bad6431e03e2_story.html) calculated a dramatic escalation in the rate of Trump's dishonesty during his first presidency, averaging 39 claims a day in his final year. More recently, Trump is lying, not only about the 2020 election he lost, but also about the 2024 election he won. In a 2025 speech to the Conservative Political Action Conference, Trump falsely said his vote total was "actually much more than [77 million]," since unspecified people "cheated like hell." What's even more striking is the nature of his lying. The most common lies among ordinary people are those that aim to promote self-interest or make others feel better. But, as Bella DePaulo discovered (https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/living-single/201712/how-president-trumps-lies-are-different-other-peoples), Trump utters more self-serving lies and fewer kind lies than most other people. Worse, about 50% of Trump's lies are cruel lies that aim to hurt or disparage others, in contrast with about 1–3% among ordinary people.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

they may also, inter alia, wish to test the loyalty of their inner circle, or to demonstrate their power publicly. Importantly, for a big lie to achieve these objectives, the supporters must publicly endorse the lie, and this happens either because they interpret it as a motivational statement, or else use it to rationalize their emotions. Our central aim is to offer a new – and, in our view, more explanatorily powerful – account of why demagogues resort to big lies. However, not least because our overarching hypothesis draws on diverse empirical research, for example, in cognitive psychology and political communication, further inquiry – within philosophy and beyond – is no doubt needed to test and develop it. Our main contribution, then, isn't the final answer, but, we argue, a more theoretically fruitful framework for understanding this phenomenon.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In §2, we discuss the three ways in which one may defend the literal view on big lies and show how each fails to properly explain their seeming success in public discourse. In §3, we develop what we call "the serious view," which takes the big liar seriously rather than the big lie literally. We first discuss why people embrace the big lie so conspicuously and how this allows using it to fulfill the objectives outlined above. §4 contains some concluding remarks.

2. *The literal view*

Our question is: what are big lies for? One proposal is that big lies are just like any other lies, except their contents are big in some measure of size. On this literal view, the purpose of a big lie is to deceive the audience into falsely believing its literal content. But given that, other things being equal, an audience is more likely to form and sustain belief in a small lie, the challenge is to explain why (or how) a hearer would come to believe the content of a big lie. As the literal view comes in different versions, depending on which such explanation is being offered, we shall explore – and question – each of these in turn. After having done so, we provide a general argument against any such literal explanation.

2.1. Counterfactual reasoning

Seeing that ordinary people lie small, and never resort to big lies, the last person they would expect to lie big is a political leader in whom they trust, and share values and ideology. In fact, in the case of Hitler and Trump, a sizeable number of their supporters project(ed) superhuman qualities onto them, considering them as mythical figures with divine attributes, for example, white evangelicals not only trust Trump more than previous presidents, but many of them also see him as their savior;[3] and the Nazi party used religion-inspired imagery, rites, and language on a grand scale, portraying Hitler as Germany's "redeemer" who would "resurrect" it from the shame of Versailles.[4] Consider the following from *Mein Kampf* (Hitler 1969, 134):

"The broad masses of a nation [. . .] more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie, since they themselves often tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods. It would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously."[5]

[3]See Taylor (2024) and Pew Research Center survey (2025a) https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/04/28/white-evangelicals-continue-to-stand-out-in-their-support-for-trump/.

[4]Becker and Voth (2023).

[5]In Hitler's mind, it was the Jews of Vienna who spread the original big lie – about Germany's conduct in the First World War. Hitler took himself to be telling a million small lies in the service of a bigger truth. Many thanks to Tom Weber.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Basically, Hitler claims that a big lie is easily believed because it's too big to be false; or at least, as Arceneaux and Truex (2023) put it, that a big lie is so grand that it's difficult to believe that someone would have the gall to make it up. One charitable way of reconstructing the argument in this passage is as follows:

(1) *S* asserts what seems like a "colossal untruth" that *p*.
(2) If *p* were false, *S* wouldn't have "the impudence to" assert *p*.
(3) So, *p* must be true.

However, there are several worries with this proposal: First, even if (1)–(3) is a plausible reconstruction of the text, it may be an inaccurate psychological description of the reasoning of the "broad masses." While valid, it involves non-obvious deductive steps: from the counterfactual in (2), one can infer the corresponding material conditional, and then conclude (3) via modus tollens on (1) and (2). And given that we need an explanation of why people are taken in by the literal content of a big lie, it's doubtful whether they would arrive at belief in (3) based on such fairly complex reasoning.

Suppose instead the reasoning isn't deemed unduly demanding. If that's so, however, there is a similar opposing – but also more plausible – line of reasoning, namely that the lie is too big to be true. As its content is highly newsworthy, surely evidence for it would be readily available if it were true. As such, the lack of such evidence is evidence against it. This line bears resemblance to Goldberg's (2011) notion of a coverage-based belief, where one infers not-*p* from the absence of evidence for *p*. Such inference is normally invalid, except when one would have evidence for *p* if *p* were true.

2.2. Conspiracy theories

Let's stipulate a "conspiracy theory" as follows: (i) some agents have a plan involving a major event of public interest; (ii) steps have been taken to minimize public awareness of their activities; and (iii) the agents aim to achieve some (typically nefarious) end regarding that event. With that in mind, the proposal is that people form beliefs in big lies because their contents feature centrally in, or perhaps as a summary of, conspiracy theories to which they subscribe. Big lies are often vague and spread with (next to) no support, but the claim is that they are devised to be believed, because they are cognitively underpinned by the more elaborate, detailed structure of conspiracy theories. That is, beliefs in big lies are situated within a wider set of conspiratorial beliefs, which together form a coherent whole of relations of explanation and inferential support. And people sustain belief in big lies by resisting evidence purporting to refute them, due to baked-in reinforcement mechanisms. Part of such conspiracy theory says that outsiders are expected to falsely deny the whole theory, or the big lie specifically. When believers do confront such counterevidence, it's exactly what they expect to hear. Because the evidence was predicted by past conspiratorial beliefs, it would thus be neutralized – perhaps dismissed as a fabrication of the conspirators to steer them away from the truth. In fact, by confirming such predictions, reporting contrary beliefs actively increases the credence level of existing beliefs. The upshot is that believers end up in a state of epistemic self-insulation – or so the thought is.[6]

[6]Nguyen (2020) and Napolitano (2021). Uscinski et al. (2022) show that (online) conspiracy theories might not persuade as much as reinforce existing views. We revisit reinforcement mechanisms in §3.2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Although prima facie appealing, this proposal faces several worries. First, its explanatory power is rather limited. While it is certainly true that some of the core MAGA supporters are deep down the rabbit hole of conspiracy theories, peddled by right-wing media, most Trump voters shouldn't be considered devout conspiracy theorists.[7] Similarly, while some anti-Semitic Germans no doubt accepted the literal content of Hitler's big lie, if convinced that powerful Jews secretly conspired to plan world domination, others might "merely" have questioned the patriotism of German Jews, or embraced other aspects of Nazi propaganda, deriding and dehumanizing Jews.

Additionally, many people who assert, promote, and generally behave as if they believe conspiracy theories are best understood as not really believing them.[8] For if belief were the right attitude, (many) conspiracy theorists would hold incoherent beliefs through contradictory theories. For instance, it's sometimes held against conspiracy theorists about the assassination of J.F. Kennedy that they might actively entertain both the theory that he was murdered by the American "military industrial complex" and that he was accidentally shot by a member of his Secret Service detail. To proffer two such mutually exclusive explanations would smack of incoherence. But if they are understood as merely interesting – or perhaps entertaining – avenues of investigation, contradictory theories pose no prima facie problem.[9]

Another problem is that the conspiracy theory that's supposed to cognitively shore up belief in the lie isn't sufficiently detailed to provide explanatory or inferential support. Our definition of "conspiracy theory" implies that the plan which the plotters secretly devised can explain a major event of public interest,[10] but as Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019, 3) argue, the new conspiracism that moved into the White House in 2017 is conspiracy without the theory. As they put it:

"... there is no punctilious demand for proofs, no exhaustive amassing of evidence, no dots revealed to form a pattern, no close examination of the operators plotting in the shadows."

But if we dispense with the burden of explanation, this proposal can't account for why people are supposedly led to believe big lies. In fact, unlike the liar, the truth is of little importance to new conspiracists. If a claim isn't obviously false, it might be true, and that's true enough for people to speak and act as if they believe it, irrespective of whether any supporting evidence is available (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, 49).

[7]Uscinski's et al. (2022) studies establish no systematic evidence for an increase during the last decade in conspiracism, which is a pejorative label reflecting a pathological belief in conspiracies without good reason. And Enders et al. (2023) found little evidence across multiple surveys that among the mass public those on the political right are more prone to conspiracy theorizing than those on the left.

[8]And those that do can be talked out of them. Thus, Costello et al. (2024), and Bago and Bonnefon (2024) show that an AI chatbot – a "debunkbot" – can reduce confidence in conspiracy beliefs by presenting counterevidence in a measured and piecemeal fashion. If they are right, conspiratorial rabbit holes may have a rational exit. While that is consistent with the claim that reporting or expressing such beliefs serves to fulfill unmet psychological needs, it questions those psychological theories, for example, Douglas et al. (2017) and van Prooijen (2020), which posit that conspiracy beliefs are adopted to sate such underlying needs in a way that renders them impervious to counterevidence.

[9]Relatedly, Munro (2023, 2024) argues that conspiracy theories are more akin to storytelling as a social practice. In particular, the function of conspiracy narratives is to arouse and resolve audience emotions through vivid imagination. And Levy (2022) claims that for many, conspiracy theories are serious play. Because they're immersed in an imaginative game without realizing it, they are engaged in pretense, hence suspended between belief and disbelief. Levy (2024) coins "shmeliefs" for such sincerely reported imaginative attitudes, which are mistaken for belief, because the content is resistant to introspective unmasking.

[10]See also Keeley (1999).

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2.3. The illusory truth effect

A third version of the literal view of why people believe the content of big lies is that the lie has been repeated often enough that they have come to believe it's true. The illusory truth effect, first reported by Hasher *et al.* (1977), is the tendency to believe information to be correct after repeated exposure.[11] People tend to rate information they've encountered before as more likely to be true than comparable new statements, simply because familiarity through repetition increases processing fluency, which, after all, is normally correlated with truth.[12] That holds irrespective of the truth-value, or indeed of the plausibility, of the new statements. People thus learn to use such fluency as a marker for truthfulness.

Interestingly, Fazio *et al.* (2015) rejected the widely held assumption that the illusory truth effect depends on the absence of prior knowledge – it can happen even to people who initially know the information is false. Indeed, as Fazio *et al.* (2019) showed, even highly implausible statements, for example, "smoking cigarettes is good for your lungs," will sound truer with enough repetition. Their participants demonstrated that knowledge neglect, that is, the failure to properly utilize stored knowledge, can occur even when participants explicitly evaluate statements for truth.[13] By relying on repetition as a signal of truth, perceived truth increases regardless of whether stored knowledge can be deployed to detect the misinformation. Because we tend to rely on the fluency of processing experiences, the more familiar we become with a piece of information through repeated exposure, the more it feels true, and the less our prior knowledge seems to matter.

Consider again Hitler's lie about the Jews aspiring to world domination, which was used as a propaganda tool. The claim would be that repeating this lie often enough would make it seem more likely to be true, and thus lead people to believe it, even if they could draw on available evidence against it. Goebbels (1948) is often credited with the law of propaganda that a lie becomes true if repeated often enough:

"If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and/or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State."

And Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf* (Hitler 1969) that:

[11]The effect is robust and generalizes across a range of factors. See, for example, Unkelback (2007), Fazio et al. (2015, 2019), and Brashier and Marsh (2020). In particular, Hassan and Barber (2021) discovered that perceived truthfulness increases logarithmically as repetitions increase, that is, the largest increase came from encountering a claim for the second time, beyond which increases are incrementally smaller for each additional repetition. Interestingly, Vellani et al. (2023) showed that the effect also fuels the spread of misinformation: repeated information is shared more because judged as more accurate.

[12]Serota et al.'s (2010) study of US adults estimates that people lie on average, 1.65 times a day, though 60% report telling no lies, whereas almost half of all lies are told by only 5% of people. Most people detect dishonesty at a rate barely better than chance (Bond and DePaulo 2006), in part due to weaknesses in behavioral cues to deception (Hartwig and Bond 2011), and in part due to an inclination to regard others' statements as truthful (Bond and DePaulo 2008). These findings lend some support to Reid's (1997, Sec. 24, Chap. VI) claim that we, or at least most of us, have "a propensity to speak the truth," (the principle of veracity), as well as "a disposition to confide in the veracity of others, and to believe what they tell us," (the principle of credulity).

[13]See also Fazio (2020). Marsh and Umanath (2014) use "knowledge neglect" for knowledge stored in memory, which people fail to retrieve and apply appropriately, due to different kinds of insufficient monitoring.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"Slogans should be persistently repeated until the very last individual has come to grasp the idea."

Likewise, Trump and his MAGA supporters have repeatedly claimed that the 2020 election was stolen, for example, by using "Stop the Steal" or "Rigged" rhetoric. In fact, the lie is popularly regurgitated by elite figures in the Republican Party and conservative media, adding perceived legitimacy and truth, perhaps to the point of inducing belief.

In response, we should note that what Fazio *et al.* (2015, 2019, 2020) found is that the biggest influence on whether a statement *p* is judged to be true is whether *p* actually is true. The repetition effect couldn't mask the truth. Goebbels' claim above about the truth being the "mortal enemy of the lie" seems to be borne out by their empirical research. The effect works best when people are ignorant or uncertain, hence the need Goebbels identified for the State to "shield people from the [. . .] consequences of the lie." When in the know, they are still more likely to say they believe the facts than some falsehoods, and even more so if *p*'s truth-value is obvious, repeated or not. Repetition can increase perception of *p* as true, even when we know *p* is false, but it doesn't override that knowledge. Here we need to tread carefully. Fazio et al. often characterize their studies as showing that "repetition increases belief in falsehoods that contradict existing knowledge" (Fazio *et al.* 2020, 4, 2015, 996, 2019, 1709). But if the participants do know that *p*, repeating not-*p* shouldn't be taken to induce belief through processing fluency, as that would saddle them with contradictory beliefs. The more charitable interpretation is that the effect of repetition is that not-*p* sounds truer, which is consistent with knowing, and hence believing, that *p*.[14] And that means the effect doesn't support the literal view of lying big. Thus, repetition of a big lie could at best lead more people to perceive its content as true, but nothing suggests it would also prompt actual belief formation, as required by that view; and indeed, any increase would remain fairly limited, assuming most people would correctly identify it as false given their prior knowledge.

2.4. A general point

While we find each of the foregoing proposals wanting for different specific reasons, there is a shared fundamental difficulty with any explanation of big lies in terms of their capacity to induce belief in their literal contents. On the one hand, people are notoriously resistant to adopting beliefs that contradict their prior convictions, especially on matters they take to concern them directly and when evidence is readily available.[15] This suggests that people are unlikely to be doxastically taken in by big lies, particularly those that affect their lives, when having antecedently disbelieved them for good evidential reasons. On the other hand, people also heed factual information when it challenges their partisan attachments and ideological commitments.[16] This suggests that even people

[14]Compare with intellectual illusions, such as that it might seem to one that the naïve comprehension axiom is true, despite learning the set-theoretical paradoxes. In such a case, overall doxastic coherence suggests one doesn't believe this principle, even though it may continue to somehow ring true. See also Bealer (1998, 208–11).

[15]Following Sperber et al. (2010), Mercier (2017, 2020) argues that people aren't strongly gullible, as they are endowed with mechanisms of epistemic vigilance, which makes shifting their pre-existing beliefs difficult. In contrast, when nothing is at stake, no prior opinions are formed, and no evidence is accessible, manipulation may succeed; however, in that case, belief reports could well be non-veridical, serving as social signals. See Levy (2021) and Funkhouser (2017, 2022).

[16]Wood and Porter's (2019) study found little evidence for Nyhan and Reifler's (2010) so-called "backfire effect," that is, that people double down on their misperceptions relevant to their ideology when presented with correcting evidence. Rather, their participants overwhelmingly accede to the correction and distance

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who may be antecedently favorable to the contents of big lies are likely to be doxastically moved against them when presented with counterevidence.

Hence, it's highly implausible that such large numbers of individuals, for example, two-thirds of Republicans in the case of Trump's lie,[17] would genuinely believe contents, which not only grossly misrepresent the truth but also are patently implausible and opposed by abundant evidence. Moreover, no serious evidence in favor is being provided, and supporters typically don't consider the demagogue as someone highly knowledgeable or skillful,[18] which makes them unlikely to simply take his word for it without critical reflection. More generally, attitudes toward big lies seem to lack a key feature of ordinary beliefs, namely what Van Leeuwen (2014, cf. 2018, 2023) calls "evidential vulnerability," that is, such beliefs respond to supporting or opposing evidence, with the believer revising accordingly, for example, adjusting their strength of confidence, but these attitudes aren't extinguished by strong available evidence against them.[19]

Thus, Hitler's big lie about Jewish world domination is largely based on the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion,* describing an alleged master plan secretly agreed upon during the First Zionist Congress held in Basel in 1897. However, while this Congress did take place, these documents are a forgery: no such minutes were ever written because no such meetings ever took place. In fact, when *Mein Kampf* was first published in 1925, the *Protocols* were widely known to be fake, including, presumably, by Hitler himself.[20] Similarly, while Trump's team questioned the integrity of the 2020 election, concocting spurious legal arguments and unfounded claims, for example, that Dominion voting machines were tampered with, all of them were thrown out by the US courts. All evidence suggests that voting in the US is more secure and reliable than ever. Moreover, even though many respondents in Arceneaux and Truex's (2023) study said they would update their opinion about Trump's big lie in the direction of truth if certain events happened, for example, Biden's inauguration, reported attitudes toward the lie didn't shift after these events.[21] Crucially, in neither case did available evidence have an updating impact on attitudes.

themselves from the inaccurate claims, even if made by a political ally. Nyhan and Reifler posited that backfire is a consequence of counter-arguing ideologically unwelcome facts, so as to entrench existing attitudes, but, as Wood and Porter point out, concocting new considerations to offset the threatening information is cognitively demanding, and respondents typically shy away from cognitive effort, deploying shrewd strategies to avoid it.

[17]See https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/04/09/some-trump-falsehoods-stick-more-than-others-fact-checker-poll-finds/. In fact, fewer Republicans than in 2018 now say that Trump regularly makes misleading statements.

[18]Stiers et al. (2021). More on this later.

[19]They arguably also lack what Van Leeuwen (2014) calls "cognitive governance," that is, they don't supply the informational background that supports inferences involving other attitudes. In contrast, genuine beliefs drive cognition wherever their content is relevant, by engaging inferentially with other attitudes. Van Leeuwen (2018) operates with a "factual" conception of beliefs: they aren't factive like knowledge, but they "imply a matter-of-fact way of processing ideas," that is, their function is to represent the world, to be deployed in reasoning that can guide behavior. See also fn. 22.

[20]Cohn (1967) and Evans (2020). Hitler (1969, 190ff) explicitly acknowledged that *Frankfurter Zeitung* had exposed them as forgeries in 1924, but he is also essentially saying that people should take the *Protocols* seriously if not literally. Thanks to Tom Weber.

[21]As for Trump himself, any stable belief is hard to pin down. Trump's ghostwriter, Tony Schwartz, said in a 2016 interview for *The New Yorker*: "Lying is second nature to him. More than anyone else I have ever met, Trump has the ability to convince himself that whatever he is saying at any given moment is true, or sort of true, or at least ought to be true." Likewise, in a 2017 interview with CNN, Kellyanne Conway claimed that Trump "doesn't think he is lying," because he doesn't believe that what he's saying is false. And McAdams (2020) argues that Trump is an "episodic man" for whom the past and future are of no importance. Truth is simply reduced to whatever works here and now.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While none of these considerations completely rule out the possibility that some people do believe big lies, they strongly suggest that the surrounding context is far from conducive to such belief formation.[22] This, in turn, invites the pressing question of why greater effort isn't made by the demagogue (and his enablers) to make such lies seem at least somewhat credible, if indeed their purpose truly is to foster genuine belief. Why do demagogues merely assert these lies without offering any supporting (and consistent) evidence? Even if some supporters do properly believe big lies, there is little to suggest that engendering such belief is their intended purpose.

3. The serious view

We examined three versions of the literal view of big lies, which share the assumption that their unique purpose is to deceive the audience into adopting false beliefs in their literal contents. They all assume that a big lie works just like a small lie except its content is big, on some measure of size. We critiqued each of these for specific reasons, but they all confront the challenge of explaining how people end up forming beliefs in contents that are both highly improbable and evidentially unsupported. The bottom line, we suggest, is that they all fail to accurately capture the teleological function of big lies. To repeat, our claim isn't that nobody believes big lies. For instance, some of the die-hard MAGA fans who subscribe to the QAnon conspiracy theory that America is run by a shadowy cabal of Satanic child molesters may well believe that the same powerful people in government, business, and mainstream media conspired against Trump to steal the election. But that's not what big lies are for – or so we contend.

In this section, we turn to our serious view, which provides a new and more compelling explanation for the use of big lies, one that rejects said assumption. It takes the liar seriously rather than the lie literally. We propose that big lies serve a variety of other functions – and are far more effective in fulfilling these than in convincing people of their literal contents. Our proposal also explains why demagogues find big lies more advantageous in promoting their extreme ideology than simply relying on smaller, more conventional falsehoods. Accordingly, we argue that there's reason to regard the literal view as misguided and potentially harmful, as it can obscure the more disruptive consequences that big lies may bring about. More specifically, we propose that big lies (i) mainly seek to reinforce supporters' deeply held beliefs in other contents they perceive as true, but they also serve the purpose of (ii) testing the loyalty of the inner circle, and (iii) demonstrating power in public discourse.[23] While a seasoned demagogue may actively pursue all of these, others will deploy only some of them, or to different degrees in different contexts. What matters for our project is that while each hinges on the lie's

[22]Belief in big lies is more plausible if types of belief other than Van Leeuwen's (2018) ordinary "factual" beliefs are admitted. Thus, Levy (2024, 474) argues that some genuine beliefs will be less responsive to evidence and cause behavior less broadly than such mundane beliefs.

[23]This list isn't exhaustive. For instance, a big lie could well create doubt or disorientation in the public. Those who initially reject the lie may begin to question their own belief when they see so many openly embracing it. After all, people are naturally inclined to re-evaluate their beliefs when confronted with widespread disagreement. If not presented with counterevidence, they may fail to recognize that in this case, such re-evaluation is unwarranted, and inadvertently allow skepticism to creep in. In fact, research shows that merely correcting false information will not prevent it from having a lingering effect on cognition. Following Seifert (2002), Thorson's (2015) "belief echoes" show that exposure to negative political misinformation can continue to shape attitudes and affect inferences even after it has been acknowledged as discredited through effective fact-checking.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

literal content, they don't require audiences to properly believe it to be true. Many will express endorsement, but outright belief isn't the norm.[24]

How can big lies obtain multiple functions at once? The key lies in the varied reactions of different audiences. Basically, an audience reaction is shaped by how they interpret the lie itself and how they read the responses of others to it. Since the interpretation depends on the audience's attitude toward the demagogue's intention, and on what they perceive the message to be, different audiences will interpret the lie differently. This, in turn, will likely foster different reactions. The variability allows demagogues to deploy big lies strategically, capitalizing on the diverse responses they provoke. Among all audience reactions, one stands out as critical for a big lie's success: the response of the demagogue's supporters. The three objectives outlined above rely on the majority of supporters publicly professing belief in the lie. This overt endorsement, in turn, could trigger secondary reactions in others and allow a big lie to achieve these objectives. Our analysis, therefore, begins by examining why supporters express belief in such lies. Once this aspect is clarified, we proceed to discuss each objective in turn.

3.1. Audience reactions

Audiences may react differently to a big lie because they interpret both the utterance itself and the speaker's intentions in different ways.[25] We argue that opponents are likely to understand the lie literally, as an attempt by the demagogue to deceive others into believing a blatantly false claim. Their response will be to debunk the lie and lower their trust in the speaker, whom they view as a manipulator with extreme ulterior motives. Since evidence against it is overwhelming, they will have no difficulty in finding rebutting defeaters. On the contrary, we maintain that many supporters, who are antecedently inclined to view the demagogue in a positive light, are likely to adopt a non-literal interpretation, because they also recognize the lie to be factually inaccurate. Since they take the speaker seriously, they attribute significant importance to the lie, stemming from considerations other than truth. They may view the statement as a way to express or report a deep-seated shared state, like a conviction or an emotion they have in common, but with different content. Other supporters may understand it as a motivational message – something to accept, but exclusively for the practical benefits it may bring. Let's explore these reactions of supporters under two headings.

3.1.1. Illusions of closeness and directional truth

Characteristic of the unique connection a demagogue builds with his supporters are features that together produce what De Berg (2024) calls an "illusion of closeness." The intentional creation of this illusion by the demagogue has been extensively studied by different scholars, who have highlighted several underlying mechanisms. First, supporters often perceive the demagogue as remarkably authentic, seeing him as honestly speaking his mind, unfiltered and avoiding the typical guardedness of political language (De Berg 2024; Stiers *et al.* 2021; Theye and Melling 2018;

[24]As Mercier (2020) and Van Leeuwen (2018, forthcoming) argue, people don't (straightforwardly) believe many of the bizarre things they profess to believe. In fn. 9, we mentioned Levy (2022, 2024) and Munro (2023, 2024), who argue that people may sincerely report an attitude, for example, involving a conspiracy theory, they mistake for a belief.

[25]Evidence in support of this possibility abounds. See, for example, the accounts of bald-faced lies by Kenyon and Saul (2022) and Tillyris (2024), which rely on the fact that different audiences react to the same statements differently.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Montgomery 2017).[26] This perception is shaped by the demagogue's self-presentation strategies and the broader trends in their political communication. Second, this sense of authenticity is often coupled with a feeling of familiarity, where supporters listen to the demagogue much as they would a friend or a relative. To support this second point, Morini (2020) shows how some demagogues mimic the language of the home, alluding to daily goings-on. Third, this same feeling of homeliness is reinforced by continuous references to a set of aspirations and values that are perceived as shared by family or friends. Supporters usually share a pervasive sense of racial grievance and ingroup victimization.[27] They feel the system is rigged against them, their natural rights have been stolen, and they are longing for retribution. In fact, it's often the demagogues themselves that incite and weaponize such feelings: they weave into their speeches what Homolar and Scholz (2023) call "crisis narratives" with the result of making supporters feel even more "at a loss" and "persecuted." But who do they hold accountable? Typically, they blame broad categories like "the Jews," "the radical left," or "illegal immigrants." And finally, as Davis *et al.* (2018) and Hall *et al.* (2016) observe, demagogues often give the impression that they and their followers have fun together by ridiculing or demeaning others.

We consider this "illusion of closeness" crucial to understanding how supporters may react when confronted with a big lie. Initially, they might be confused – hesitant to outright reject it, but not fully convinced either. This leads them to ask why their leader is asserting this. First, supporters may privately acknowledge that the lie is likely false, as they recognize the evidence provided by their trusted sources is at best weak. Yet, they dismiss the possibility that their leader is deliberately deceiving them – or is accidentally mistaken. They consider him neither ill-intended nor incompetent, on something so big. Thus, they may come to understand that they aren't asked to believe the literal content on evidential grounds. Instead, they would draw the natural conclusion that he is expressing that he feels as if such content, or a closely related content, is the case. His statement, though exaggerated or hyperbolic, is seen as conveying an emotion toward some such – very similar – content.[28] Adams (2017) refers to such statements as "directionally accurate," insofar as they are accurate in communicating an emotion or a feeling toward some content. And the speech act allows for a considerable degree of "interpretive openness" in terms of which content is imparted, which prompts the supporters to fill the gaps however they see fit.[29] Once the supporters interpret the big lie in that way, they are likely to react by pondering their own feelings – and if they share emotions similar to those they take their leader to convey, they would proceed to endorse the relevant statement. Thus, they embrace the big lie, because they find it an accurate reflection of their own experiences toward a related content, irrespective of evidential support. And that perception may be amplified by other supporters reiterating the lie, that is, they may find evidence that they have interpreted the lie correctly in the behavior of other supporters who publicly endorse it.[30]

[26]In fact, the perception of authenticity is a crucial aspect of what makes politicians popular. As Allen et al. (2018) point out, when evaluating the performance of politicians, people value honesty over competence.

[27]Filindra et al. (2024).

[28]We can assume with Epley (2018) that emotions are not just evaluative responses, but should also be treated as genuine attitudes, which are responsive to reasons.

[29]De Berg (2020).

[30]This fits Hitler's blueprint in *Mein Kampf* (vol. 1, chap. 6) of later Nazi propaganda: "The art of propaganda consists precisely in being able to awaken the imagination of the public through an appeal to their feelings, in finding the appropriate psychological form that will arrest the attention and appeal to the hearts of the national masses."

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Let's illustrate the foregoing. A 2023 CBS News/YouGov poll showed that Trump voters trust him more than their family and friends. They feel that what he tells them is true, he is on their side, and "fights for people like me." His strongest supporters admire his authenticity: he says what he thinks, and he tells it like it is. Detailed veracity is less important to them – and, in fact, while MAGA supporters regard him as more relevantly competent than they are, they don't consider him as competent as he is authentic.[31] What matters is that his instincts and intentions are all good. Consequently, his supporters are willing to be highly charitable to him, even when his utterances are obviously false or, as they increasingly are, incoherent. Trump's 2016 campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski, criticized the mainstream press: "You guys took everything Donald Trump said so literally. The American people didn't." His supporters take his big lie as "directionally accurate," by understanding it as a metaphor for his emotions, though they are likely to ascribe slightly different ones. We tend to project onto others the emotions we feel ourselves, and, at the same time, Trump is always rather vague and unclear, which allows for multiple interpretations. Maybe the election was stolen from him, because of fraud involving non-citizens and mail-in ballots, or because the Democrats continue to persecute him, or because the elites obstruct his ultra-nationalist agenda. And yet, despite individual emotional differences, a common pattern is likely to emerge in that supporters would all see in Trump feelings of racial grievance, resentment, and longing for retribution – similar to their own.[32] In terms of being a victim of unjust treatment, or plain neglect, by powerful people in government, business, or media, MAGA supporters liken Trump to one of them, and so they interpret those claims as pertaining equally to their own precarious circumstances. They are likely to understand his words and tone as reflecting a sense of frustrated powerlessness in the face of elite control, or the "deep state," as well as anger toward a system that discriminates against them and obstructs their shared interests and values.

3.1.2. Motivational force and justifying beliefs

True statements aren't always impactful enough to motivate action – indeed, often people find more motivation in false statements. Motivational speech, understood as statements that offer a direction of action and convincing reasons to pursue it, is typically associated with imprecision and inaccuracy.[33] In particular, exaggeration is exactly what provides motivational oomph. Take a doctor who tells a patient they will add 20 years to their life if they improve their diet, even though the patient may only live for another five years. Despite the statement being false, the doctor is still right that pursuing a better diet improves the odds of a healthy and thus longer life. Yet, the patient is happy to embrace the statement, and – even if she doesn't genuinely believe it – to act as if it were true, for she understands the benefits to her health, and consequently life expectancy, of such a course of action. We argue, following De Berg (2020), that

[31]See also Stiers et al. (2021), and Pew Research Center survey (2025b): https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/02/07/trumps-second-term-early-ratings-and-expectations/.

[32]The tendency to identify oneself with a political leader has been called "identity fusion" and has been found to correlate with violent political behavior; see Swann et al. (2009), and Kunst et al. (2019). When a leader then loses, as Trump did in 2020, denying that loss is a mechanism by which supporters can preserve their identity. Since people tend to dissociate themselves from perceived losers to manage their own identities, election denial is a way to "cut off reflected failure," as Arceneaux and Truex (2023) put it, following Boen et al. (2002). See also fn. 45.

[33]Adams (2019, 87-90) and de Berg (2024, 31ff) discuss the value of motivational speech in politics. Additionally, there is an extensive literature on what makes motivational speech in sports successful; see, for example, Smith et al. (2018) and Gonzalez et al. (2011).

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

demagogues leverage such connections between speech and action by deliberately making exaggerated, or otherwise extreme, assertions. In particular, they use big lies as motivational speech, and people buy into them because of their motivational punch. The underlying mechanism vis-à-vis influence on action, rather than belief in factual accuracy, is fundamentally the same as when a patient accepts a doctor's exaggeration.

To demonstrate the plausibility of this explanation, we present three convergent lines of thought. First, we delineate how the relationship between a demagogue and their supporters exhibits many characteristics analogous to that between a doctor and their patients, or a coach and their team members. Second, we observe how salient features of the environment and narrative framework established by a demagogue resemble those typically associated with, say, a sports team. Third, we discuss how the content and structure of the big lie, along with the broader demagogic narrative, align with the features of effective motivational speech. Together, these three elements suggest that it's plausible for supporters to interpret the big lie as a component of a broader motivational statement, thereby accepting it based on its perceived motivational value.

As mentioned already, supporters usually consider a demagogue highly authentic and are consequently likely to consider him as "one of them," fully on their side. Additionally, supporters are also likely to take the demagogue as someone who, given their shared goals, knows better than they do how to achieve them. After all, as mentioned earlier, in the case of Trump, they consider him more relevantly competent than they are. These are precisely the conditions our doctor's utterance meets, but they also obtain in the eyes of Trump's supporters. They trust him as a leader and are willing to follow his guidance. They believe he knows best how to achieve what they both want: to put America first and make it great again! The intentional vagueness with which these objectives are presented allows for different interpretations by different people. The second crucial aspect is the environment and general narrative that demagogues construct. As De Berg (2020) explains, demagogues extensively rely on uniform imagery, repeated catchphrases, shared symbols, and other overt signals that distinguish their supporters from others.[34] This produces feelings of "us" and "them," thus increasing the perception of a strong divide.[35] In turn, a feeling of belonging leads supporters to perceive their own group as a team, one united by the same goals. The demagogue's supporters feel they are on a mission – similar to a sports team – and are willing to let their leader inspire them. Finally, the contents of big lies have pertinent features in common with the contents of motivational statements. As Smith *et al.* (2018) observe, a successful motivational statement often conveys an "underdog narrative." Underdog teams are depicted as having overcome immense obstacles, thereby having "nothing to lose." This narrative motivates players to exert maximum effort and persevere until the end. Big lies frequently fulfill this exact function: framing an underdog narrative. Thus, both Hitler's and Trump's big lies represent archetypal ways of fabricating a context for a struggle in which their supporters are cast as underdogs.

We argue that together these elements contribute to inducing a feeling of team membership: a demagogue's supporters feel part of a shared mission. Thus, when Trump asserts that the 2020 election was stolen, his MAGA supporters don't scrutinize the claim for its factual accuracy. Instead, they interpret it as motivational rhetoric and endorse it, trusting that their leader has a valid reason for asking them to do so. Convinced they are living in a time of crisis that demands radical political action, they embrace the stolen-election narrative as the necessary motivation to take such action.[36]

[34]See also Cosgrove (2018).

[35]The demarcation between "us" and "them" is a key feature of populism – one that is often connected to the Schmittean friend/enemy distinction. See Schmitt (2007) and Venizelos (2022).

[36]Homolar and Scholz (2023).

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Interestingly, the fact that a demagogue's statement is understood as motivational also explains the typical process of evidence neglect by the supporters.[37] Take the pep talk a coach gives her team before a game. She might tell the players they'll win if they keep passing the ball. Even if false, playing as if it's true will result in a better performance. Suppose the players find themselves two goals down. What they should do isn't lose faith in the coach's words, but continue to maximize effort, ignoring the current score. Trump's supporters are also likely to disregard evidence. They seem to dismiss the claims of mainstream media about the 2020 election, or experts warning of imposing sweeping tariffs, or of mass deportation of immigrants. In this respect, a demagogue's supporters respond in similar ways to members of a sports team: they act as though the evidence doesn't matter, maintaining faith in their leader's narrative to achieve their shared goals. And that's especially true when supporters find plain evidence in the behavior of other supporters that they share interpretations of their leader's words, that is, when the motivation of others is manifested in such a way as to reinforce their own, just as between members of a sports team.

Just as lying big can motivate supporters, lying big can also be utilized by them to justify their beliefs.[38] A Trump supporter who claims to believe the 2020 election was stolen would then be rational in holding a grudge against powerful elites. People spend much time trying to justify their beliefs, as if they were rational.[39] In particular, testimony from sources they consider authoritative can play a significant role in justifying beliefs that strike others as bad if not bizarre (Levy 2021). Consequently, we continually look for such evidence that helps us do so. In view of this, Williams (2023) argues that our epistemic environment is nothing but a huge marketplace of rationalizations. In the same way people shop for groceries in a real marketplace, they search (online media, opinionators, etc.) for information that justifies their deep-seated beliefs. In particular, they look for like-minded people who can confirm, or enrich, their own convictions. MAGA supporters listen to Trump's words in a similar manner. They think he feels the same way they do with respect to the "radical left," "illegal immigrants," etc., and they yearn for him to provide them with reasons to do so.

Do supporters then come to believe the big lie to better rationalize their own profound convictions? Williams (2023) argues that we are often likely to form beliefs just to justify our choices, actions, and interests. Whether or not this is the case for the big lie isn't clear at all. It may well suffice that an authority in whom people trust says so, from which they may infer that, say, if a powerful elite can steal an entire election, it surely is also responsible for the socioeconomic wrongs that they feel they suffer. In fact, the bigger the lie, the more reason supporters have to justify their own entrenched beliefs. That offers another explanation of why demagogues often resort to wildly exaggerated or extreme assertions: by opting for the big lie, they optimize such justificational force.

Let's take stock. We surveyed different explanations as to why supporters choose to profess belief in a big lie. It may convey a shared feeling toward some other cognate content, act as a motivational statement, or serve as a justificatory tool. In neither case is the truth-value of its literal content of particular importance. When supporters react by overt endorsement, they don't take the lie literally, because they don't think such a statement is descriptive. Rather, they take the demagogue seriously, insofar as they look for alternative reasons for why he made it, which don't involve genuinely believing its content at face value.

[37]See Marsh and Umanath (2014) for more on knowledge (or evidence) neglect.

[38]We understand "justify" in terms of rationalizing the belief from a subjective point of view, which may not involve being conducive to truth.

[39]Williams (2021, 2023) and Bortolotti (2015).

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3.2. Revisiting our three objectives

With the foregoing account of audience reactions in mind, let's now turn to the question of how a demagogue may exploit those to achieve the objectives of (1) reinforcement, (2) loyalty test, and (3) display of power, as per our serious view of big lies.

3.2.1. Reinforcement

First, the big lie could have the effect of reinforcing supporters' deep-rooted feelings and beliefs in other contents they perceive as true. How so? We argued in §3.1 that supporters are likely to adopt a non-literal interpretation of the lie, seeing that it's factually inaccurate, or at least highly unlikely. The demagogue's statement thus creates a potential cognitive dissonance between its literal content and what else they hold true.[40] While the supporters don't actually believe this content, or so we argued, they are disinclined to outright reject the statement. Rather, they view it in a positive light, given that they are antecedently favorable to what the demagogue is telling them. Since the supporters, just like everyone else, are averse to any such clashing modes of thought, they will seek to relieve the felt discomfort by adjusting their thinking, so as to remove any conflict between the involved elements.[41] The most obvious way to overcome any would-be mental discord is, as we suggested, for the supporters to interpret the demagogue as not intending to communicate the asserted content. Instead, they would understand the statement as conveying a different, but related, content or emotion, which they take to have in common with the demagogue – such as, in the case of Trump, a sense of racial grievance, powerlessness and victimization, and of longing for retribution. This interpretation would not only align the statement with the supporters' existing opinions and sentiments, and thus restore consonance, but it could well also strengthen the latter, given that they regard the source of the statement as a highly credible and trustworthy authority. The lie will exacerbate those entrenched states, making the supporters feel even more that the cards are stacked against them. Yet, depending on the explanation they opt for, this may happen through different pathways. For those who take the demagogue to simply express or report a feeling, the fact that he feels the same way they do may embolden them in their feelings and convictions: they understand that theirs are legitimate, and that they are not alone. In fact, seeing that so many other fellow supporters endorse the same statement – and clearly do so for non-epistemic reasons – further boosts this impression.

The big lie may have a similar effect on those who take it to be a motivational statement: uptake of a motivational speech not only indicates the right direction of action, but it also reinforces the idea that its final objective is important, and that they – as a group of supporters – are in the same boat. In the case of Trump, their values and way of life are perceived as under attack by "radical left lunatics" who are the "enemy from within,"[42] or by "illegal immigrants" who, using language similar to Hitler's, are "vermin," with "bad genes," "poisoning the blood of our country."[43] When does a football coach motivate her players? When the match is tight and winning is of crucial importance. A football coach wouldn't rally them when the opposition is easily defeated, or when playing for fun in

[40]For general overviews of the various strands to cognitive dissonance theory, see for example Cooper (2019) and Harmon-Jones (2019).

[41]Festinger (1962), who instigated research on cognitive dissonance, considered three ways to deal with it: (i) changing one of the elements in the dissonance relationship, (ii) adding new elements to ease or resolve the tension, and (iii) reducing the importance of the elements.

[42]https://edition.cnn.com/2024/10/13/politics/trump-military-enemy-from-within-election-day.

[43]https://theharvardpoliticalreview.com/trump-rhetoric-hitler/. See also Tirrell (2012), who examines the role played by derogatory terms in laying the social groundwork for the Rwandan massacre in 1994.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

training. From this, they understand that the opposing team is a threat and that the fight is on. And for those who interpret the lie as an offer of a rationalizing justification, their entrenched beliefs and deep-seated sentiments may be strengthened, since they now have a testimonial reason available from a highly trusted authority. They are not only left with a vague sense of injustice and discrimination, but having taken onboard the lie, they can better comprehend and process those feelings.

Note finally that by reinforcing his supporters' convictions the demagogue can obtain a particularly useful gain. In §2.2, we discussed – and rejected – the idea that people sustain beliefs in big lies by resisting evidence purporting to refute them due to reinforcement mechanisms that are baked into the conspiracy theories in which those lies feature centrally. Following Nguyen (2020) and Napolitano (2021), the claim was that since any such counterevidence was predicted by past conspiratorial beliefs, it would actively increase the credence level of their beliefs in big lies, and so people trapped inside the rabbit holes of such theories would eventually be epistemically self-insulated. The point is now that even if such reinforcement doesn't explain belief maintenance, it can still screen supporters off from reliable epistemic sources.

By way of illustration, suppose a journalist asserts in front of MAGA fans that the 2020 election wasn't rigged – and explains to them that Trump is tricking them into supporting him while doing little in their favor. They will likely reject everything she says as "fake news" – after all, such a journalist isn't to be trusted. For mainstream media was part of a cover-up to conceal from the American people that the election was stolen from Trump, and by extension, from his supporters. So, anyone representing such media saying the opposite is exactly what the supporters would expect, and hence, because the assertion was predicted by past beliefs, it can serve to strengthen (confidence in) their existing beliefs. Via such reinforcement mechanisms, demagogues can thus exclude their supporters from counterevidence, that is, the lie in effect serves as an undercutting defeater for otherwise reliable information. Here size matters. The bigger the lie is, the more severe cognitive disruption it can bring about through these mechanisms, for example, if mainstream media could cover up on such grand scale, surely, they cannot be trusted not to manipulate in more mundane matters. Once the trust is undermined, supporters could thus be cut off from vast amounts of pertinent knowledge, beyond what pertains specifically to the big lie. A small lie, on the other hand, would cause limited damage, as any epistemic insulation would be localized.

3.2.2. Loyalty test

The big lie is often used by supporters to signal membership in the group (cult or tribe) that the demagogue leads.[44] For instance, "Stop the Steal" has become a slogan among MAGA fans, which is printed on merchandise, chanted at rallies, etc. The big lie, when sufficiently entrenched and encoded, can thus serve to determine group membership. For by pretending to believe it, supporters not only signal identity and belonging,[45] but they also pledge loyalty.[46] Put differently, supporters may engage in expressive

[44]Compare our proposal with Funkhouser's (2017, 2022) claim that we adopt certain beliefs to signal belonging to our tribe. Yet, as Funkhouser admits, a belief has a signaling value only if endorsed by a large part of the tribe. Hence, while our account explains why supporters initially endorse a big lie, it may also spread because of its signaling function.

[45]Arceneaux and Truex (2023) showed that Republican voters mostly continued to link their identity to Trump as the 2020 election loss became apparent and displayed net increases in self-esteem, suggesting that believing the lie helped "cut off reflected failure," so as to protect their identities. See fn. 32.

[46]Compare with Havel (2018) and Wedeen (2015) who argue that, in authoritarian countries, citizens are obligated to live "within the lie" and behave "as if" they believe obvious falsehoods propagated by their regimes.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

responding, which is a kind of partisan cheerleading that occurs when people insincerely report a belief they don't genuinely hold in order to express support for their preferred party or candidate.[47] But if, as we have argued, a demagogue's supporters understand such a lie non-literally, whereas political opponents, experts, and mainstream media clearly don't, members of the inner circle of the demagogue find themselves in a thornier situation.

The demagogue's enablers may well not see him as a likable or authentic individual.[48] These are usually people who sooner or later could compete with the demagogue, or who are called to decide between him and another candidate, for leadership. Hence, they are likely to see through the big lie – and understand exactly why and how the demagogue is exploiting it to achieve his objectives. Naturally, then, they would refrain from believing it, seeing that there's no epistemic reason to do so. Indeed, they are likely aware that the supporters embrace it for non-epistemic reasons, and yet those same reasons will not work for them. They neither feel as the ordinary supporters do, nor do they see any value in being motivated by the big lie, or utilizing it to rationalize their other beliefs. Additionally, because they know that those who publicly embrace the lie are being played by the demagogue, they may well hesitate to openly give the same impression.

Hence, they are faced with a tough choice. If they endorse the lie publicly, they gain the trust and support of the supporters and demagogues alike, but also lose respect with everyone else – but if they don't, they risk being ostracized by both.[49] Therefore, the demagogue deploys the big lie as a litmus test to select the most loyal among his inner circle. In that sense, a big lie works in the same way Kenyon and Saul (2022: 182) argue that bald-faced compliance (or authoritarian) lies do. Both types of lies are designed to, as they put it, "extract humiliating displays of loyalty from associates who know that they are false." Failing to exhibit such devotion poses an immediate threat of exclusion from the party leadership. That way, the demagogue can undercut their independent standing with the public, thus growing more dependent on the demagogue and less likely to mount independent rebellions against the structure of command.[50]

In fact, as noted in §2.3, most elected or appointed Republicans openly endorse the big lie. They continue to publicly question the integrity of the election, even though they increasingly realize that there is no evidence of fraud.[51] Saying otherwise in public is rather a matter of showing allegiance to Trump (and not falling out of favor) and his base to help secure (re)election, or even promotion within the party. For the leader's close acolytes, the big lie may serve to select who is truly committed and dependable to the leader, namely those who are willing to repeat the lie in public. A leader uttering a big lie may thereby try to understand (and strengthen) the links among his supporters and

[47]Bullock et al. (2015) and Hannon (2021). Schaffner and Luks (2018) offer the striking example of Republicans saying they believe Trump's inauguration crowd in 2017 was bigger than Obama's inauguration crowd in 2009, when confronted with obvious photographic evidence to the contrary.

[48]Kenyon and Saul (2022) discuss at length evidence concerning the stance of Trump's enablers on his many false or misleading claims.

[49]Arceneaux and Truex's (2023) study shows that since Republican voters will claim that the 2020 election was stolen, irrespective of whether they actually believe that, they will reward in the voting booth Republican candidates who claim that it was. And that in turn makes it difficult for such candidates to defend American democracy against the big lie, given their strong desire to be (re)elected.

[50]Mathiesen and Fallis (2014). Take Kari Lake, whose convincing primary win for US Senate was fueled by Trump's endorsement. But according to McGraw (2024), Trump regularly mocked Lake over how fervently she advances his election fraud lie. Most recently, following the 2024 election, a Lake tweet congratulated Trump on his third win.

[51]https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2023/03/14/republicans-increasingly-realize-theres-no-evidence-of-election-fraud-but-most-still-think-2020-election-was-stolen-anyway-poll-finds/.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to figure out who's rallying round in unswerving loyalty. Indeed, in the second term, Trump purged officials whose political sentiments are inimical to him and replaced them with avid loyalists, who not only repeat his big lie but also lack competence in office, thus ensuring that they owe their place in his orbit to him alone.

3.2.3. Display of power

The last teleological function we consider is that a big lie may act as a display of power to friends and foes of the demagogue, for widespread acceptance among supporters and officials creates the impression of an ability to win people over, even of the most extraordinary claims. And because the extreme content of the lie is so attention-grabbing, it dominates public discourse and thus amplifies that impression. Let's unpack this further.

As discussed above, people who take the big lie literally would expect others to do the same. Hence, they face the challenge of making sense of why so many people endorse such blatant lies. While some may react by questioning their own certainty on the matter (as we saw in §3.2.II), others, and especially the firmest opposers of a demagogue, might simply attribute to such supporters a strong bias, a lack of critical thinking, or other cognitive shortcoming.[52] Consequently, they view the demagogue as a dishonest manipulator, who deliberately seeks to mislead and stir up trouble – perhaps even incite violence. Trump is increasingly viewed as an existential threat to democracy.[53] In particular, he seems to be able to control huge crowds who feel disillusioned with the political establishment by his mastery of emotional rhetoric, coupled with his ability to project strength and decisiveness. His ability to make bald-faced lies, blatant provocations, or other outlandish claims, for example, that he could shoot someone on 5th Avenue without losing any voters, that Haitian immigrants eat the pets in Springfield, or indeed the big lie itself, can be taken as a display of power. As Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019, 68) write,

"... it is not clear that Trump cares whether his falsehoods are believed; he seems to care only that they are affirmed. He wants the power to make others assent to his version of reality."

In this sense, the meaning we attribute to the objective of displaying power is similar to what Kenyon and Saul (2022) call a "power move." They claim that Trump's lies can be seen as such moves, insofar as they show he can get away with whatever he wants without any political repercussions.[54] Kenyon and Saul (2022) take Trump's claim about the 2020 election to be a bald-faced lie with respect to political opponents whom he has no hope of convincing, and so they serve to communicate contempt for such people. For his core MAGA base, the claim may function as a deceptive lie for some, but it is more likely overheard and recognized as lying, and so they won't feel lied to. Rather, they will feel solidarity and recognize a shared purpose.

[52]People tend, in general, to think that others are more gullible than they are – an effect called the "third person effect"; see Yoo et al. (2022). For instance, Altay and Acerbi (2023) find that people tend to worry about misinformation because they consider others to be more gullible and naïve than they are themselves.

[53]Stockemer (2025) argues that recent events in the US align perfectly with the theory of incremental autocratization. For a large comparative study, see Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018). In particular, as Finkin (2025) shows, Trump's actions are foreshadowed in the early period of the German National Socialist government, called "the Seizure of Power."

[54]On Kenyon and Saul's (2020) view, bald-faced lying is a form of Frankfurtian bullshitting: bald-faced liars deliberately assert falsehoods without intending to deceive their audience. Such bullshitters make no effort to hide that they are bullshitting.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

4. Concluding remarks

Let's briefly summarize. We started off wondering what makes demagogues resort to big lies, for example, that the 2020 US election was stolen, or that the Jews had devised a master plan for world domination. We argued that big lies are unlikely to persuade people of their literal contents and challenged three explanations suggesting otherwise. Consequently, we rejected the literal view – the idea that big lies are primarily intended to induce beliefs in their literal contents. Instead, we proposed a serious view of big lies, identifying three distinct functions they fulfill, none of which require such belief. Demagogues use big lies to: (I) reinforce supporters' deeply held beliefs in other perceived truths, (II) test the loyalty of their inner circle, and (III) demonstrate power in public. For these functions to succeed, most supporters must publicly endorse the lie. We argued that they do so either by interpreting the lie as motivational rhetoric, or by using it to express or justify shared emotions or convictions.

Our analysis provides a foundational exploration of the functions of big lies and highlights their epistemically disruptive effects. While our serious view accounts for the widespread reporting of belief in such lies, it warns against treating big lies as ordinary deceptive lies with big contents. Big lies obtain some of their objectives exactly because people who take them literally – and consequently debunk them – assume others would do the same. They are undoubtedly bewildered and disheartened by how many people seem to genuinely believe in them. Yet, genuine belief is rare, and people who embrace big lies likely do so only because they don't interpret them literally.

That raises the question of whether "big lie" is a misnomer. Labeling Trump's "rigged election" narrative a "big lie" suggests, as per the widely adopted definition of "lying" from §1, an intention to deceive an audience into forming a belief in the disbelieved content. Yet, as we argued extensively, this isn't what a big lie is primarily for. Maybe, therefore, some conceptual engineering is ideally needed to align the concept (and the term expressing it) with its functionality. Be that as it may. The terminology is long-established, including beyond academia, and the phenomenon of our interest is clearly demarcated by pointing to our canonical examples. Not having resolved those conceptual questions should thus not prevent us from urging that we take the big liar seriously rather than the big lie literally.[55]

References

Adams S. (2017). Win Bigly: Persuasion in a World Where Facts Don't Matter, Portfolio.

Adams S. (2019) Loserthink, Portfolio.

Altay S. and Acerbi A. (2023). 'People Believe Misinformation is a Threat Because they Assume Others are Gullible.' *New Media & Society* **26**(11), 6440–6461.

Allen N., Birch S. and Sarmiento-Mirwaldt K. (2018). 'Honesty above all else? Expectations and Perceptions of Political Conduct in Three Established Democracies.' *Comparative European Politics* **16**, 511–534

Arceneaux K. and Truex R. (2023). 'Donald Trump and the Lie.' *Perspectives on Politics* **21**(3), 863–79.

Bago B. and Bonnefon J.F. (2024). 'Generative AI as a Tool for Truth', *Science* **385**(6714), 1164–1165.

Bealer G. (1998). 'Intuition and the Autonomy of Philosophy.', In M. DePaul and W. Ramsey (eds), *Rethinking Intuition: The Psychology of Intuition and Its Role in Philosophical Inquiry*, pp. 201–40. New York, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield.

Becker S O. and Voth H-J. (2023). 'From the Death of God to the Rise of Hitler', CEPR Discusssion Paper 18543.

[55]We would like to thank Eilidh Beaton, David Boylan, Matteo Cerasa, Nicolas Cote, Axel Gelfert, Chris Kelp, Fed Luzzi, Jack Lyons, Bryan Pickel, Michael Quinn, Dunja Šešelja, Paula Sweeney, Stephan Torre, Tom Weber, as well as an anonymous referee for this journal for helpful comments and constructive suggestions on earlier drafts. We are also grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (Grant No. AH/W008424/1) for funding this research.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Benkler Y., Faris R. and Roberts H. (2018). *Network Propaganda. Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Boen F., Vanbeselaere N., Pandelaere M., Dewitte S., Duriez B., Snauwaert B., Feys J., Dierckx V. and Van Avermaet E. (2002). (2002). 'Politics and Basking-in-Reflected-Glory: A Field Study in Flanders.' *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* **24**(3), 205–14.

Bond C.F. and DePaulo B.M. (2006). '"Accuracy of Deception Judgments", Personality andSocial Psychology.' *Review* **10**, 214–34.

Bond C.F. and DePaulo B.M. (2008). 'Individual Differences in Judging Deception: Accuracy and Bias.' *Psychological Bulletin* **134**(4), 477–92.

Brashier N.M. and Marsh E.J. (2020). 'Judging Truth.' *Annual Review of Psychology* **71**, 499–515.

Bullock J., Gerber A., Hill S. and Huber G. (2015). 'Partisan Bias in Factual Beliefs about Politics.' *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* **10**(4), 519–78.

Bortolotti L. (2014). *Irrationality*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Cooper J. (2019). 'Cognitive Dissonance: Where we've been and Where we're Going.' *International Review of Social Psychology* **32.1**, 1–7.

Cohn N. (1967). *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Cosgrove K. (2018). 'Trump and the republican brand refresh.', In J. Gillies (eds), *Political Marketing in the 2016 US Presidential Election, Palgrave Studies in Political Marketing and Management*, pp. 49–64. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Costello T.H. et al. (2024). 'Durably Reducing Conspiracy Beliefs through Dialogues with AI.' *Science* **385**, eadq1814.

Davis J.L., Love T.P. and Killen G. (2018). 'Seriously Funny: The Political Work of Humour on Social Media.' *New Media & Society* **20**(10), 3898–3916.

De Berg H. (2024). *Trump and Hitler: A Comparative Study in Lying*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Douglas K.M., Sutton R.M. and Cichocka A. (2017). 'The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories.' *Current Directions in Psychological Science* **26**(6), 538–42.

Enders A., Farhart C., Miller J. et al. (2023). 'Are Republicans and Conservatives More Likely to Believe Conspiracy Theories?.' *Political Behaviour* **45**, 2001–24.

Epley K. (2018). 'Emotions, Attitudes, and Reasons.' *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* **100**(1), 256–82.

Evans R.J. (2020). *The Hitler Conspiracies: The Third Reich and the Paranoid Imagination*. London: Allen Lane.

Fazio L.K. (2020). 'Repetition Increases Perceived Truth Even for Known Falsehoods.' *Collabra: Psychology* **6**(1), 38.

Fazio L.K., Brashier N.M., Payne B.K. and Marsh E.J. (2015). 'Knowledge Does Not Protect Against Illusory Truth.' *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* **144**(5), 993–1002.

Fazio L.K., Rand D.G. and Pennycook G. (2019). 'Repetition Increases Perceived Truth Equally for Plausible and Implausible Statements.' *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* **26**, 1705–10.

Festinger L. (1962). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Finkin M.W. (2025). 'The "Seizure of Power" 2025: An Historical Reflection.' Verdict. Legal Analysis and Commentary from Justia. 5 June 2025.

Filindra A., Kaplan N.J. and Manning A. (2024). 'Who Buys the 'Big Lie'? White Racial Grievance and Confidence in the Fairness of American Elections.' *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* **9**(1), 182–203.

Funkhouser E. (2017). 'Beliefs as Signals: A New Function for Belief.' *Philosophical Psychology* **30**:6, 809–831.

Funkhouser E. (2022). 'A Tribal Mind: Beliefs that Signal Group Identity or Commitment.' *Mind & Language* **37**(3), 444–464.

Gendler T.S. (2007). 'Self-Deception as Pretense.' *Philosophical Perspectives* **21**(1), 231–258.

Goldberg S. (2011). 'If that were True, I Would Have Heard About It By Now.' in A. Goldman and D. Whitcomb (eds), *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings*, pp. 92–108. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gonzalez S.P., Metzler J.N. and Newton M. (2011). 'The Influence of a Simulated 'Pep Talk' on Athlete Inspiration, Situational Motivation, and Emotion.' *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching* **6**(3), 445–459.

Hall K., Goldstein D.M. and Ingram M.B. (2016). 'The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle.' *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* **6**(2), 71–100.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Hannon M. (2021). 'Disagreement or Badmouthing? The Role of Expressive Discourse in Politics.' in E. Edenberg and M. Hannon (eds), *Political Epistemology*, pp. 297–318. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Harmon-Jones E. (2019). *Cognitive dissonance: Reexamining a pivotal theory in psychology*. 2d ed. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
Hartwig M. and Bond C.F. (2011). 'Why Do Lie-Catchers Fail? A lens model meta-analysis of Human Lie Judgments.' *Psychological Bulletin* **137**(4), 643–59.
Hasher L., Goldstein D. and Toppino T. (1977). 'Frequency and the Conference of Referential Validity.' *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behaviour* **16**(1), 107–12.
Hassan A. and Barber S.J. (2021). 'The Effects of Repetition Frequency on the Illusory Truth Effect.' *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications* **13**(1), 38.
Havel V. (2018). 'The Power of the Powerless.' *East European Politics and Societies* **3**(2), 353–408.
Hitler A. (1969). *Mein Kampf*. London/New York: Hutchinson Publ. Ltd.
Homolar A. and Scholz R. (2023). 'The Power of Trump-Speak: Populist Crisis Narratives and Ontological Security.' in *Ontological Insecurities and the Politics of Contemporary Populism*, pp. 131–151. London: Routledge.
Keeley B. (1999). 'Of conspiracy theories.' *Journal of Philosophy* **96**(3), 109–126.
Kenyon T. and Saul J. (2022). 'Bald-Faced Bullshit and Authoritarian Political Speech: Making Sense of Johnson and Trump.' in L. Horn (ed), *From Lying to Perjury: Linguistic and Legal Perspective On Lies and Other Falsehoods*, pp. 165–194. Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
Lackey J. (2013). 'Lies and Deception: An Unhappy Divorce.' *Analysis* **73**, 236–248.
Levitsky S. and Ziblatt D. (2018). *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals About Our Future*. New York: Crown.
Levy N. (2021). *Bad beliefs: Why They Happen to Good People*. Oxford: Oxford UniversityPress.
Levy N. (2022). 'Conspiracy Theories as Serious Play.' *Philosophical Topics* **50**(2), 1–19.
Levy N. (2024). 'Believing in Shmeliefs.' *Ergo* **11**(18), 466–488.
Lewis D. (1979). 'Counterfactual Dependence and Time's Arrow.' *Noûs* **13**(4), 455–476.
Lochner L. P. (ed.) (1948) *The Goebbels Diaries*. New York: Doubleday & Company.
Marsh E.J. and Umanath S. (2014). 'Knowledge Neglect: Failures to Notice Contradictions With Stored Knowledge.' in D.N. Rapp and J.L.G. Braasch (eds), *Processing Inaccurate Information: Theoretical and Applied Perspectives from Cognitive Science and the Educational Sciences*, pp. 161–80. Cambridge: MIT Press.
Mathiesen K. and Fallis D. (2017). 'The Greatest Liar Has His Believers' The Social Epistemology of Political Lying.' in E. Crookston, D. Killoren and J. Trerise (eds), *Ethics in Politics*, pp. 35–53. New York: Routledge.
McAdams D.P. (2020), *The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump. A Psychological Reckoning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Mercier H. (2020). *Not Born Yesterday: The Science of Who we Trust and What We Believe*. Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press.
Mercier H. (2017). 'How Gullible Are We? A Review of the Evidence from Psychology and Social Science.' *Review of General Psychology* **21**(2), 103–122.
Montgomery M. (2017). 'Post-Truth Politics? Authenticity, Populism and the Electoral Discourses of Donald Trump.' *Journal of Language and Politics* **16**(4), 619–639.
Morini M. (2020). *Lessons from Trump's Political Communication: How to Dominate the Media Environment*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
Munro D. (2023). 'Capturing the Conspiracist's Imagination.' *Philosophical Studies* **180**, 3353–3381.
Munro D. (2024). 'Conspiracy Theories and the Epistemic Power of Narratives.' Philosophical Psychology.
Muirhead R. and Rosenblum N. (2019). *A Lot of People are Saying*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Napolitano G. (2021). 'Conspiracy Theories and Evidential Self-Insulation.' in S. Bernecker, A. Flowerree and T. Grundmann (eds), *The Epistemology of Fake News*, pp. 82–105. New York: Oxford University Press.
Napolitano M.G. and Reuter K. (2023). 'What is a Conspiracy Theory?.' *Erkenntnis* **88**(5), 2035–62.
Nguyen T. (2020), 'Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles.' *Episteme* **17**(2), 141–161.
Reid T. (1997). *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*. (ed.) D. Brookes, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Schaffner B. and Luks S. (2018). 'Misinformation or Expressive Responding? What an Inauguration Crowd Can Tell Us about the Source of Political Misinformation in Surveys.' *Political Opinion Quarterly* **82**(1), 135–47.
Schmitt C. (2008). *The Concept of the Political*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Seifert C. (2002). 'The Continued Influence of Misinformation in Memory: What Makes a Correction Effective?.' *Psychology of Learning and Motivation* **41**, 265–92.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Serota K.B., Levine T.R. and Boster F.J. (2010). 'The Prevalence of Lying In America: Three Studies of Self-Reported Lies.' *Human Communication Research* **36**, 2–25.

Smith M.J., Figgins S.G., Jewiss M. and Kearney P.E. (2018). 'Investigating Inspirational Leader Communication in an Elite Team Sport Context.' *International journal of sports science & coaching* **13**(2), 213–224.

Sorensen R. (2007). 'Bald-Faced Lies! Lying Without the Intent to Deceive.' *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, **88**, 251–264.

Sperber D., Clement F., Heintz C., Mascaro O., Mercier H., Origgi G. and Wilson D. (2010). 'Epistemic Vigilance.' *Mind & Language* **25** (4), 359–93.

Stiers D, Larner J. and Kenny J. (2021). 'Candidate Authenticity: To Thine Own Self Be True.' *Political Behaviour* **43**, 1181–1204.

Stockemer D. (2025). 'Is the US Moving Toward Autocracy? A Critical Assessment.' *Politics and Policy* **53**(3), e70032.

Swann Jr W.B., Gómez A., Seyle D.C., Morales J. and Huici C. (2009). 'Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior.' *Journal of personality and social psychology* **96**(5), 995.

Taylor M.D. (2024). *The Violent Take it by Force. The Christian movement that is Threatening our Democracy*. Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books.

Theye K. and Melling S. (2018). 'Total Losers and Bad Hombres: The Political Incorrectness and Perceived Authenticity of Donald J. Trump.' *Southern Communication Journal* **83**(5), 322–337.

Tillyris D. (2024). 'Dog-Whistling and Democracy.' *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* **26**(4), 1015–1032

Tirrell L. (2012). 'Genocidal Language Games.' in I. Maitra and M.K. McGowan (eds), *Speech and Harm: Controversies Over Free Speech*, pp. 174–221. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thorson E. (2015). 'Belief Echoes: The Persistent Effects of Corrected Misinformation.' *Political Communication* **33**(3), 460–80.

Unkelbach C. (2007). 'Reversing the Truth Effect: Learning the Interpretation of Processing Fluency in Judgments of Truth.' *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* **33**, 219–230.

Uscinski J. et al. (2022). 'Have Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Increased Over Time?.' *PLoS ONE* **17**(7), 1–19.

Van Leeuwen N. (2014). 'Religious Credence is Not Factual Belief.' *Cognition* **133**(3), 698–715.

Van Leeuwen N. (2018). 'The Factual Belief Fallacy.' *Contemporary Pragmatism* **15**(3), 319–343.

Van Leeuwen N. (2023). *Religion as Make-Believe: A Theory of Belief, Imagination, and Group Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Van Prooijen J.-W. (2020). 'An Existential Threat Model of Conspiracy Theories.' *European Psychologist* **25**(1), 16–25.

Vellani V., Zhenga S., Ercelik D. and Sharot T. (2023). 'The Illusory Truth Effect Leads to the Spread of Misinformation.' *Cognition* **236**, 105421.

Venizelos G. (2022). Donald Trump in Power: Discourse, Performativity, Identification. *Critical Sociology* **49**(4–5), 647–667.

Yoo J., Kim D. and Kim W.G (2022). 'Fake News on You, Not Me: The third-Person Effects of Fake News in South Korea.' *Communication Research Reports* **39**(3), 115–125.

Weber T. (2023). 'Anarchy and the State of Nature in Donald Trump's America and Adolf Hitler's Germany.' in G. Rosenfeld and J. Ward (eds), *Fascism in America: Past and Present*, pp. 78–106. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wedeen L. (2015). *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Williams D. (2021). 'Socially adaptive belief.' *Mind & Language* **36**(3), 333–354.

Williams D. (2023). 'The marketplace of rationalizations.' *Economics & Philosophy* **39**(1), 99–123.

Wood T. and Porter E. (2019). 'The Elusive Backfire Effect: Mass Attitudes' Steadfast Factual Adherence.' *Political Behaviour* **41**, 135–63.

Cite this article: Kallestrup J. and M. Michelini (2025). "Why Demagogues Lie Big." *Episteme* 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2025.10081 Published online by Cambridge University Press