

SOCIOLOGY

Authentic lies

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Credit: Martin Barraud/Ojo Images/Getty

How can a blatantly lying demagogue be perceived as authentic? Oliver Hahl of Carnegie Mellon University and colleagues identify a type of lies that is characteristic of a lying demagogue: lies that are obviously so, because the facts are common knowledge. Common-knowledge lies violate the established public norm of truth telling. When a political system suffers from a crisis of legitimacy — for example, because political leaders favour the interests of an incumbent social category at the expense of others or because the incumbent group has been losing power to a group of outsiders (for example, immigrants), who are seen to be favoured by the establishment — a candidate who flagrantly challenges established social norms (for example, of truth telling) will be perceived as more authentic. This account of the authentic appeal of lying demagogues is borne out in two online experiments involving crises of legitimacy in a fictive college government election.

Hahl and colleagues show that partisanship alone cannot explain how and why a lying demagogue can be perceived as authentic. However, if a social group regards the political system to be flawed or illegitimate, they will perceive as authentic a politician who is prepared to flagrantly flout the norms of the establishment.

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