



How a New Pro-Truth Pledge Can Help Counter America's Rising Tide of Fake News and Dishonest Politics

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After lying proved a successful political tactic in the 2016 U.S. elections, the *Oxford Dictionary* chose post-truth as the word of the year, defining the term as “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” In 2017, *Collins Dictionary* made a similar choice for word of the year, this time defining “fake news” as “false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting.”

Fake news shared by ordinary citizens combined with falsehoods spread by politicians may well prove fatal to U.S. democracy, as it has to other democracies. To address this grave threat, a number of scholars and concerned citizens have put together the Pro-Truth Pledge project, drawing on behavioral science and crowdsourcing to fight fake news and post-truth politics.

The Extent and Threat of Fake News and Post-Truth Politics

The traditional way of sorting truth from falsity in politics involves fact-checking by mainstream media. But polling shows that trust in the mainstream media has recently plummeted, even as people are increasingly using social media to get news – now the news source for more than three in five Americans. Unfortunately, according to a Stanford University study, most social media news consumers cannot differentiate real from fake news stories. Alarming, in the three months before the 2016 presidential election, the top 20 false election-related news stories had more Facebook shares, reactions, and comments than did the top 20 true news articles.

Given the crumbling trust in traditional media and people’s vulnerability to lies spread by social media, it should not come as a surprise that politicians of all stripes try to manipulate voters into believing untrue things. After all, politicians want to win elections, and if they can safely ignore or circumvent media fact-checking and use distortions on social media to win votes, post-truth politics is bound to gain momentum. This, in turn, undermines trust in the political system, possibly opening doors for authoritarian and corrupt and leaders.

Tilting toward Truth with a New Pledge

Tilting the political scale toward truth requires a two-pronged approach focused on both private citizens and public figures. Research reveals that people tend to ignore information that challenges their beliefs and are more likely to accept deceptions that benefit their group, especially if they think opponents do the same. But people have less incentive to lie or accept lies when they are reminded about the value of honesty and make commitments in advance to truth. Public figures can also be swayed if they know there will be transparent, clear information about who is truthful, coupled with reputational rewards for honesty and penalties for dishonesty.

Drawing on such research-backed insights, the Pro-Truth Pledge project asks all who want to confront fake news and post-truth politics to sign a pledge at ProTruthPledge.org. Signers commit to truth-oriented behaviors such as verifying information before sharing, providing contrary information even when it doesn’t support one’s opinion, citing sources, clarifying differences between facts and opinion. Pledge signers also promise to acknowledge true information provided by others, make reevaluations after new information is provided, use true information and defend others doing so, correct misconceptions, educate others, defer to experts, and celebrate people who change their minds based on new information.

All of these behaviors are intended to counter deceptive tendencies and facilitate truthful ones. Private citizens sign the Pledge in order to contribute to a truth-oriented society, while reputational benefits go to signers who are public figures – such as politicians, media figures, business and nonprofit leaders, academics, faith and community leaders, and others who influence public discourse. Reputational gains are possible because all pledge-takers are notified when public figures sign the pledge. Yet the reputational boost comes with accountability, because anyone can report a public figure who violates the pledge, kicking off an investigation by private citizens who volunteer to help enforce the Pledge. Overall, the Pledge combines the Wikipedia crowdsourcing model of fact-checking with the Better Business Bureau model for rewarding ethical behavior and holding public figures accountable.

The Impact of the Pro-Truth Pledge

The Pledge was rolled out in March 2017 and gained more than 5000 signees by January 2018. The new effort has gotten some positive mainstream media coverage in venues like *Scientific American*, *Newsweek*, *The Guardian*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Columbus Dispatch*, *Salon*, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, *The Plain Dealer*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, as well as major far-right ones such as *The Daily Caller* and far-left ones such as *AlterNet*. Pledge-takers include a number of politicians, talk show hosts, academics and public commentators who expressed strong enthusiasm for the project, including globally-known thinkers such as Peter Singer, Steven Pinker, and Jonathan Haidt, and U.S. Member of Congress Beto O'Rourke

There are preliminary indications that the Pledge can shift behavior. For example, Michael Smith, a candidate for Congress in Idaho, posted a screenshot to Facebook of a tweet by Donald Trump criticizing minority and disabled children. After being called out, Smith searched Trump's feed and, after not finding the original, wrote that "Due to a Truth Pledge I have taken, I have to say I have not been able to verify this post." The peer-reviewed *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* accepted a study of private citizens based on a survey of Facebook engagement, which found that 70.83% of participants (17 of 24 respondents) reported an increase in truthful behaviors after taking the Pledge.

Much more remains to be learned, but the evidence so far shows that the Pro-Truth Pledge has the potential to help protect U.S. democracy from a tide of misinformation. Whether this approach can succeed depends on how many people go to ProTruthPledge.org to sign on and then proceed to spread the word, lobby public figures to sign the Pledge and monitor the truthfulness of those who do. The early results look promising, but there is a long way to go.

Read more in Gleb Tsipursky, Fabio Votta, and James Mulick, "A Psychological Approach to Promoting Truth in Politics: The Pro-Truth Pledge" *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* (Forthcoming); Gleb Tsipursky and Zachary Morford, "Addressing Behaviors That Lead to Sharing Fake News" *Behavior and Social Issues* 27, no.1 (2018).