FAKE NEWS AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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It is a well-known fact that truth is the first victim in war. The same goes for the opposition between political factions that are so polarized the opposing group is considered an enemy. If tribal thinking, or tribalism, in which you identify strongly with a group of which you form part, becomes strong enough, then politics boils down to a friend or foe relationship in which truth, and often also substance, takes second place. It becomes merely a matter of winning. All is fair in war, including telling lies, misleading and spreading conscious disinformation. If those in the opposing group, *the others,* are seen as an enemy, then *blue lies* are legitimate. The expression blue lies is inspired by cases in which police officers have lied out of loyalty to the group to cover for colleagues, or in order to ensure conviction of an indicted person (Barnes 1994). Blue lies are lies on behalf of a group that serve the group.[1] The lies may strengthen the internal coherence of the group and the loyalty between its members. But those who are not part of the group pay the price. If the loyalty to the group of police officers is greater than the loyalty to the law and the citizens, then it undermines the rule of law; and if political loyalty to a political party, the minister, or the President is greater than the law, the constitution, and citizens as a whole, then it undermines democracy. Since politics and population have become so polarized in the US, blue lies may be part of the reason why so many of Trump's supporters do not seem to react negatively to the revelations of falsehoods and downright lies (figure 5.2).
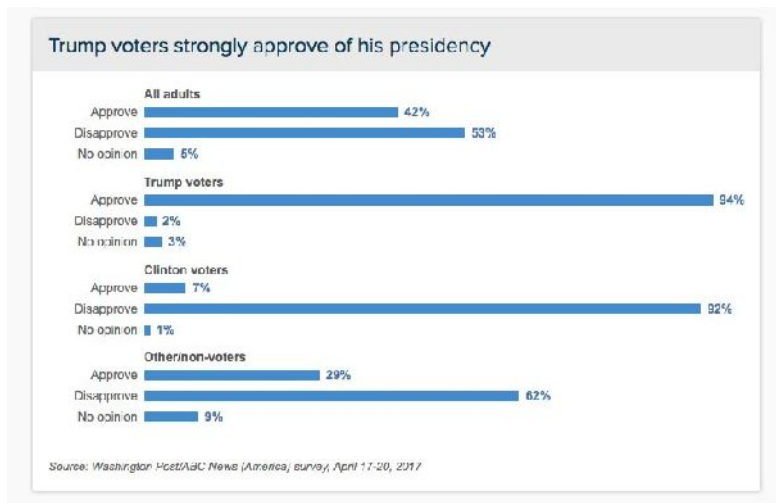

Figure 5.2. Poll from April 17, 2017 that shows a deep polarization in the evaluation of Trump as President. 94 % of Trump's voters applaud him, and only 2 % are dissatisfied. Amongst Clinton's voters, 7 % applaud him while 92 % turn their thumbs down.[2]

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1 Fu, G. et al. (2008): "Lying in the name of the collective good", *PMC*, October 20, 2008. Verified June 10, 2017: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2570108/#R1

2 Hanrahan, C. (2017): "Donald Trump: Is he the most unpopular United States president in history?", *ABC News*, April 28, 2017. Verified June 10, 2017: http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-28/donald-trump-is-he-the-most-unpopular-president-in-history/8469854

Trump's lies are lies on behalf of "the movement" and in its favor against an enemy that needs to be fought. So says politics researcher George Edwards from Texas A&M University, who explains the lacking of reaction from Republicans to the revelations of Trump's falsehood as a result of tribal thinking, deep polarization, and group internal acceptance of blue lies as legitimate weapons against the others: "People applaud lying to enemy nations, and since many now view those on the other side of American politics as enemies, they may feel that lies, when they recognize them, are legitimate means in the warfare."[3]

When polarization is so deep and tribal thinking so prominent, they compromise the capacity for observation in the first placef and then also the willingness to report truthfully what is observed. The factual question as to which crowd is the bigger one in two photos where the difference is clear (see chapter 4) may under these circumstances become a political question, the answer to which depends on political affinity (figure 5.3).
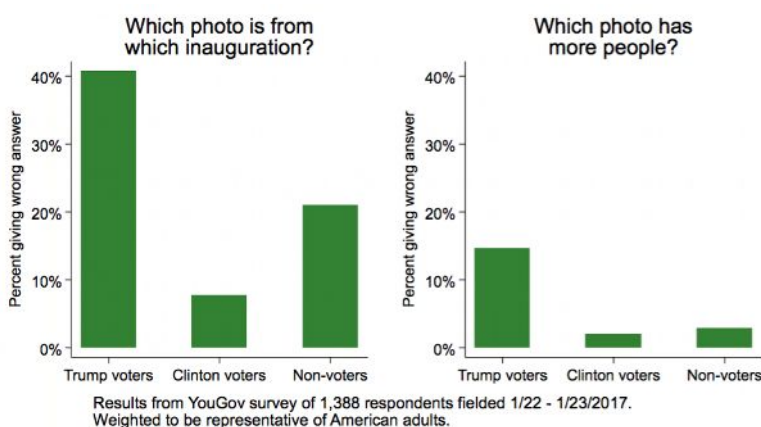

Results from YouGov survey of 1,388 respondents fielded 1/22 - 1/23/2017. Weighted to be representative of American adults.

Figure 5.3: Tribal thinking and polarization may cause strong fact resistance. 40 % of Trump's supporters believe that the photo from Obama's inauguration (the one with the bigger crowd) was from Trump's inauguration. Worse yet, 15 % of Trump's supporters were even willing to claim (perhaps as a blue lie) that the crowd shown on the photo from Trump's inauguration was bigger than the crowd on the photo from Obama's inauguration back in 2008.[4]

Psychological bias phenomena and social psychological group and polarization mechanisms not only cause fact resistance; they also contribute to popularizing, simple, identity building narratives of us versus them. That's what populism is much about – and populism has a weakness for fake news as well.

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[3] Smith, J.A. (2017): "How the Science of 'Blue Lies' May Explain Trump's Support", *Scientific American*, March 24, 2017. Verified June 10, 2017: https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/how-the-science-of-blue-lies-may-explain-trumps-support/

[4]
 Schaffner, B. & Luks, S. (2017):" This is what Trump voters said when asked to compare his inauguration crowd with Obama's", *Washington Post*, January 25, 2017. Verified April 28, 2017:
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/01/25/we-asked-people-which-inauguration-crowd-was-bigger-heres-what-they-said/?utm_term=.182e2c9af76a