

“Democratic Expansion, Informational Inequality and the Rise of Political Lying”

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Western Political Science Association  
March 29, 2013  
Hollywood, CA

*Abstract:*

*This paper argues that an apparent rise in political deception on behalf of democratically elected representatives or their appointees can in part be attributed to socio-political changes stemming from the expansion of the electorate, advances in mass communications technologies, and the growth and growing influence of state intelligence agencies. Recognizing that the pressure to deceive arises from these broader developments in the public and private realms can help us understand how political deception challenges the notion of democratic legitimacy rather than simply treating deception as a violation of moral principles.*

On June 13, 1971 the *New York Times* ran, under the headline “Vietnam Archive: Pentagon Study Traces 3 Decades of Growing U.S. Involvement,” the first in a series of articles exploring a leaked government study documenting the rationale for and implementation of policy concerning American military engagement in Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> The Pentagon Papers, as they would come to be known, made abundantly clear the extent to which information was manipulated, misrepresented or simply kept from the American public. Hannah Arendt, reflecting on the publication of America’s rationale for a prolonged military campaign, wrote that “secrecy [...] and deception, the deliberate falsehood and the outright lie used as legitimate means to achieve political ends, have been with us since the beginning of recorded history.”<sup>2</sup> That being said, Arendt argues that the Pentagon Papers shed light on two new varieties of lies that set this episode apart from the long and bountiful history of political mendacity: the lies told by “public-relations managers” whose job it is to market and advertise politicians and their policies, and those told by “professional ‘problem solvers’” who come to government armed

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<sup>1</sup> “Times Topics: Pentagon Papers,” The New York Times Online, last accessed March 9, 2013, [http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/p/pentagon\\_papers/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/p/pentagon_papers/index.html).

<sup>2</sup> Arendt, Hannah, “Lying in Politics,” in *Crises of the Republic*. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1969), 4.

with “game theories and systems analyses.”<sup>3</sup> It is possible that these new ways of manufacturing, packaging and selling politicians and their policies ushered a new era of lying in politics. I think Arendt was certainly onto something here, but attributing these changes to groups that had managed to work their way into the halls of government - for Arendt these were advertising professionals with Madison Avenue pedigrees and analysts from think tanks and universities - ignores the socio-political changes that brought about larger shifts in how political messages were conceived and transmitted to the public at large. I argue that the changes in personnel highlighted by Arendt were symptomatic of broader developments in the political and private spheres. By closely examining these changes, we begin to see how a perverse set of incentives has been constructed in which deception on the part of elected representatives or their appointees has become increasingly noncontroversial and even expected. This is evident in our often muddled response to political deception even today. The deceived, on the one hand, abhor and decry the actions of the deceiver (once the deception has been uncovered) and, on the other, generally tend to accept that playing fast and loose with the truth is somehow a fundamental part of politics. There is something unsettling about the typical reaction to the exposure of lies and deceptions on behalf of political leaders that begins with a generalized sense of moral outrage and then quickly fades into resignation that deception is almost standard operating procedure in political affairs. This seemingly paradoxical response, one indicating both an ethical violation and political inevitability, sits uneasily next to our notions of civic duty, accountability and democratic legitimacy. How can popular sovereignty be anything more than a farce if the polity is consistently and consciously manipulated and deceived? Can a policy or political action still be deemed legitimate if its acceptance was assured via the employment of

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<sup>3</sup> Arendt, “Lying in Politics,” 7-10.

deceptive or misleading stratagems? The long and storied history of political mendacity notwithstanding, doesn't the institution of a democratic government impose higher standards of sincerity and truthfulness on citizens, representatives and/or political institutions?

This paper argues that instead of viewing deception as an agent-centric, moral problem implicating personal characteristics such as character and integrity, we can best evaluate the continued prevalence and relevance of political deception in modern, advanced industrialized democracies by examining several socio-political developments affecting how government agents communicate with their constituencies. More specifically, the gradual expansion of the franchise during the 20th century coupled with the development of mass communications technologies - radio, television, the internet - greatly expanded the pool of relevant electoral constituencies while providing a mechanism for the instantaneous communication of political messages and information to the masses. Parallel developments resulting in the increased importance of government intelligence and an expanded intelligence bureaucracy - with its associated norms of secrecy and duplicity - have made governments one of the primary distributors of relevant political data, especially in foreign affairs. In responding to these developments, Arendt's agents of change play a significant role, as their particular expertise helped politicians and government officials overcome the challenge of relying on greater public support for electoral and legislative success. Yet, as these political and media environments developed, a premium was placed on message control and damage limitation, with the use of deception and obfuscation developing into useful political tactics. The continued and possibly increasing use of these tactics, the deliberate and calculated deception of a domestic constituency, calls into question the legitimacy of supposedly democratic decisions.

In order to clarify and support the argument, this paper is divided into three sections: the first brief section first acknowledges the somewhat limited scope of the paper (and the reasons for it) as well as sets the parameters for what is meant by the term ‘deception’. Furthermore, this first section points us towards several of the major ways in which mass publics are led astray by those in power. The second section traces the socio-political developments just mentioned and explains how they either create opportunities for mendacity on the part of political officials or solidify norms and/or practices that increasingly put the broad public at an informational disadvantage. The concluding section simply begins to turn to the requirements of democratic governance and asks whether deceptive political practices are parasitic on democratic legitimacy.<sup>4</sup>

## I

As we proceed you will no doubt notice that the socio-political developments discussed in this paper are exclusively from the American political context and that my examples are almost exclusively from American presidential administrations. While I think the general thrust of this paper’s argument does apply broadly to other political actors both in the United States and other advanced, industrialized democracies I have chosen to use the American presidency as my institutional case study primarily because it limits the scope of the paper and it is an institution with whose history and corresponding academic literature I am most familiar. In short, I have made the decision to stick with what you know. My hope, though, is that this narrowed focus will also sharpen the arguments put forth. To try and

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<sup>4</sup> I also recognize that as this is a preliminary foray into this debate, there are several argumentative positions that need further elaboration and support and it is the goal of this paper presentation to identify these areas and discuss new ways of approaching and arguing these issues.

address how the consequences of expanding electoral constituencies and a rapidly advancing media culture have affected political actors at all levels of a federal system, just in the United States to say nothing of other liberal democracies, would prove untenable and it is my fear that we would lose the forest for the trees. So what this paper lacks in institutional and cross-national comparison I hope it makes up for in clarity, intellectual rigor and perhaps even intrigue. On the other hand, it is possible that focusing exclusively on this institutional arena limits my abilities to make generalizations about other political actors in different contexts and I recognize that risk. Presidents are afforded particular advantages when it comes to media coverage and access to government intelligence so they will be acutely affected by the developments discussed in this paper. That being said, I also feel that this narrowed focus can serve a wider purpose in that an apparent rise in political deception, while perhaps particularly salient in the presidential context, can help put into stark relief the changing political environment and structured incentives facing political actors as they consider deceptive political actions. Political representatives operating within a different institutional positions may not be immune from the same pressures to deceive and they may simply be affected to a lesser extent given their placement. In short, while perhaps not felt as acutely as American presidents, the the broader shifts in political and media culture will still be felt nonetheless. I think the same holds for political representatives in other countries. Prime ministers, I conjecture, would be affected in much the same way as American presidents even though their formal powers and electoral path to the premiership are distinctly different. Indeed, several recent studies of government deception have focused both on the American and British political contexts.<sup>5</sup> Obviously further analysis and investigation is needed before larger claims to

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<sup>5</sup> See Lionel Cliffe, Maureen Ramsay, and Dave Bartlett, *The Politics of Lying*, (New York: St. Martin's, 2000) and Peter Osborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, (New York; Simon & Schuster, 2005).

cross-national applicability, but I want to make clear at the outset that although I deal specifically with the political atmosphere as experienced by American presidents, I don't see the broader points about the rise of political deception being exclusive to this institution. The specific changes in electoral politics, media culture and government intelligence agencies soon to be discussed are not necessary or sufficient conditions for a political arena where deception exists, but may - and I think do - mirror developments in other advanced, industrial democracies.

So what is meant by the term political deception? Having only mentioned one series of deceptive acts from America's tumultuous decade of the 1960s, it is important to note, somewhat obviously, that the credibility gap lives on. The public expression of dishonest statements by American presidential administrations did not stop with Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. Questions still remain whether the administration of George W. Bush was simply a victim of a shoddy intelligence operation or whether they deliberately perpetrated falsehoods and embellishments (if not outright lies) when making the case made for the existence of weapons of mass destruction before the invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>6</sup> Former president Bill Clinton, Bush's immediate predecessor, lied under oath about a sexual relationship with then-intern Monica Lewinsky, leading to only the second impeachment of a sitting president in U.S. history. Indeed, the list of deceptions put forth by presidential administrations, to mention nothing of other federal, state and local officials, continues to grow in the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate era. Modern political campaigns do not even wait for the votes to be tallied before charges of exaggeration and dissimulation are levied. Political campaigns have spawned an army of

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<sup>6</sup> Knickerbocker, Brad. "Did the CIA just mess up on Iraq's 'weapons of mass destruction'?" *The Christian Science Monitor*, last accessed March 9, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/DC-Decoder/2012/0908/Did-the-CIA-just-mess-up-on-Iraq-s-weapons-of-mass-destruction>.

partisan and independent “fact checkers” that sift through speeches and press releases attempting to discern which arguments are backed by evidence and the historical records and which statements deserve closer scrutiny, perhaps deserving a “Pants on fire” rating from PolitiFact’s “Truth-O-Meter.” Writing in the *New York Times*, Jason Stanley has even suggested that voters no longer even expect to politicians vying for political office to make sincere and truthful assertions.<sup>7</sup> This supposed contempt for the facts of the matter, and its resonance with audiences in the United States and abroad, calls into question the statement attributed to former Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau who, when asked at the Paris Peace Conference how history would remember World War I, responded that though he was not clairvoyant, he knew “for certain they will not say Belgium invaded Germany.”<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately for the persuasive force of Clemenceau’s statement, the sad truth is that we are no longer certain whether we live in a “reality-based community” where facts have widespread acceptance.<sup>9</sup> That there may not be a commonly held sets of facts muddies the water in that it is both hard to identify and categorize the many varied acts of mendacity.

The clearest example of deception is the outright lie, where an individual makes a statement they believe to be false with the purpose of getting their audience to hold this belief to be true. Our understanding of lying has remained relatively unchanged since St. Augustine wrote that a lie was “a false statement made with the desire to deceive” in his tract *Against Lying*.<sup>10</sup> While flat-out lies may be

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<sup>7</sup> Jason Stanley, “Speech, Lies and Apathy,” *New York Times*, Aug. 30, 2012, last accessed March 10, 2013, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/08/30/speech-lies-and-apathy/>.

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 2nd ed., (New York: Viking, 1968), 239.

<sup>9</sup> The phrase “reality-based community” and its political importance stem from the quoting of an unnamed government official in Ron Suskind’s *New York Times Magazine* article “Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush,” published October 17, 2004. Accessed online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/17BUSH.html>.

<sup>10</sup> St. Augustine, “Against Lying” (*Contra Mendacio*), in *Fathers of the Church*, (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1954), 60.



the most egregious examples of political deception, they are generally also the easiest to analytically distinguish. The statement “I did not have sexual relations with that woman,” for instance, is seemingly a lie either when evidence is found that proves the existence of a sexual relationship or when the speaker admits that the initial denial is in fact untrue.<sup>11</sup> The falsity of the proposition, though, is not enough to categorize a statement as a lie. You can be objectively wrong about something and not be accused of lying. The intent of the speaker is the key characteristic, and since the accused liars are often not the most reliable sources for determining whether or not they intended to deceive their audience for some purpose or reason, we must construct an interpretation of the episode, relying on the available evidence, to determine whether someone has actually lied.

While the lie may be one of the easiest forms of political deception to identify, audiences can be misled in a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Further, political deception is not necessarily identifiable by one statement or speech act, it can include an entire campaign of statements, propaganda, innuendo and secrecy. Maureen Ramsay, addressing the philosophical treatment of lies and deceptions in the moral and political realms, reminds us that the avenues are methods for political mendacity now take a variety of shapes and forms. She writes:

People can be deceived by conscious deliberate lies which are directly communicated to them by word or deed. Typically in politics this takes the form of denial, an explicit lie which claims ‘this did not happen’, ‘the policy has not been changed.’ They can be systematically manipulated by propaganda designed to spread particular ideas which influence the attitudes of large numbers of people. The public can be the subject of governments ‘manufacturing consent’, a process of managing and orchestrating information received by the public so as to set and limit agendas and colour opinions. The can be deceived by other forms of institutionalised lying, by misinformation, the

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<sup>11</sup> Bill Clinton, “Response to the Lewinsky Allegations (January 26, 1998),” press conference transcript posted by The Miller Center, University of Virginia, last accessed March 10, 2013, <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3930>.

distribution of official lies to give a misleading account of the truth; or by disinformation, the spreading of false information to conceal the truth. Rather than an explicit lie being told, the truth can be evaded by manipulating information and presenting it in such a way so as to disguise a problem from public view. The truth can be hidden. Official secrecy can be used to control and suppress information to prevent democratic debate about matters of substantive significance.<sup>12</sup>

When we talk about political deception we are often implying vast systems of informational distribution which includes acts of commission as well as omission - the proverbial giveth with one hand and taketh away with the other. While this certainly broadens the spectrum of what counts as deception and perhaps muddies the conceptual clarity of the concept, it is especially important to take into account the various ways that individuals and groups alike can be misled.

## II

While political deception has been around as long as politics, its prevalence in modern advanced democracies stems from an amalgam of political or politically relevant developments, namely the institution of mass politics in Europe and the United States beginning in the late 19th century, advances in mass communications technologies (especially television), and the growth of government intelligence agencies. The rise of political deception itself has become a political issue, with various political campaigns crafting concepts like the “credibility gap” or creating talking points around an opposing candidates character or integrity. The rise of the intelligence state, characterized by expansive protections of government information and privileges and an ongoing struggle between arguments for official secrecy and the public’s right to know. Now it is important to note that what I am arguing is not that these are the only developments that have increased the frequency and importance of political

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<sup>12</sup> Lionel Cliffe, Maureen Ramsay, and Dave Bartlett, *The Politics of Lying*, (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000), 5.

deception. My argument claims that these developments have helped give rise to a perverse set of incentives faced by elected and appointed political officials wherein political deception, using a position of informational advantage to advance political and/or personal goals, appears to be a preferred, and even seemingly legitimate option.

One of the initial political developments that has laid fertile ground for political deception is the the gradual expansion of the franchise during the late 19th and 20th centuries in the United States and Western European democracies. In the U.S. this takes place mainly through women's suffrage and the passage of the 19th Amendment, the end of segregation and the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the ratification of the 26th Amendment giving all U.S. citizens over the age of 18 the right to vote. Taken together these reforms greatly expanded the pool of eligible voters in the United States and this extremely significant expansion of eligible votes has fundamentally changed the electoral incentives of political actors aspiring to elected office. The inclusion of these sizable constituencies into the American political landscape and electoral calculus has not only broadened the issue agenda but also requires the electoral candidates - to the degree that their electoral constituency reflects the sex, age and ethnic diversity of the nation - appeal to more electorally important groups with varying interests and ideologies. As "the people" have become more important for electoral success and attaining political power, especially in statewide and national elections, politicians have become increasingly dependent on mass support for their proposed policies. Democratic government places a premium on this dependency on public support. As Ruth Grant writes in Hypocrisy and Integrity: Machiavelli, Rousseau and the Ethics of Politics:

Democratic politicians, unable to take their support for granted and subject to frequent elections, must continually cultivate the public as well as actual and

potential coalition partners. It would be difficult to imagine a less autonomous actor than a politician in a democracy. In order to achieve anything at all in a democracy, political actors need the cooperation of a great many other people. And they need to be able to count on that cooperation over time by cultivating trust and loyalty. The language of democratic politics requires “You can count on me” and “I know I can count on your support.” Politics, even or especially in a democracy, takes place among people embedded in relationships of dependence.<sup>13</sup>

Political actors in a representative democracy are reliant on the support of the public, organized interests and other political actors. Political power is bestowed upon individuals and parties through regular elections and the primary vehicle for attaining votes is political persuasion and the development a reliable base of electoral support. That’s not to say that elected politicians are simply placeholders for the aggregated policy preferences of the constituency. Even today we see politicians staking out positions on legislation that are seemingly at odds with majority opinion (whether nationally or within their state or district) due to political incentives stemming institutional or partisan structures. For instance, given the importance of party structures in Congress, a representative may have few incentives for breaking with party leadership on key votes regardless of the preferred policy positions of her constituency, since the ability to secure a preferred committee assignment, raise campaign funds, and establish a successful legislative record will all be tools used to ensure electoral success. Thus, representatives necessarily have to manage an assortment of allegiances and alliances in order to achieve electoral and other forms of political and personal success. This puts increasing importance on the ability to manage a variety of politically important relationships, both for electoral survival but for the effective achievement of political goals.

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<sup>13</sup> Ruth Grant, *Hypocrisy and Integrity: Machiavelli, Rousseau, and the Ethics of Politics*. (Chicago UP: Chicago, 1997), 44-5.

Let's be very clear about the implications of this argument. I am not claiming turning back the clock through the restriction of voting rights and privileges will lead to less deceptive political strategies. Rather, as the number and diversity of eligible voters has increased, it has meant that aspiring political candidates have to diversify their appeals to the interests and concerns of constituencies that are much less homogeneous and unified on political issues than they perhaps were in the past. This is especially apparent in campaigns of candidates for statewide or national office. Presidential hopefuls, campaigning in Iowa, may tailor their messages for a local constituent group, perhaps expressing their support for farming and agricultural subsidies, whereas in Michigan their focus may be on the creation of manufacturing jobs, with agricultural policy receiving nary a mention. There's no necessary deception involved in tailoring a message about one's policy positions, legislative priorities, or vision of leadership to particular groups, but it certainly has increased the opportunities for candidates to tell one thing to group A with a expressed interest in issue X, while telling group B something different because their expressed interested is in issue Y. Keeping track of the various groups and the messages tailored to their concern is certainly no easy task and since important electoral constituencies may have different prioritizations of interests or perhaps interests that are in direct conflict with one another, aspiring politicians operate within an environment which privileges those who can appear to be all things to all people. It can be argued that this type of environment can give rise to particularly Machiavellian political actors. As Grant concludes:

While most in need of honesty as a political virtue, liberal democratic regimes are most likely to produce the conditions that undermine that virtue. [...] Liberal democratic regimes make particularly strong claims to be able to provide open and honest political processes at the same time that those processes are structured so as to increase the

dependencies conducive to hypocritical political behavior.<sup>14</sup>

The electoral and legislative dependencies built into the structure of a representative government place tremendous pressure on political aspirants to cultivate advantageous relationships, and in some cases, deceptive and misleading communication can be an effective strategy to ensuring support either at the ballot box or in the legislative chamber.

Occurring simultaneously alongside the expansion of voter rolls were advances in mass communications technologies - first radio, then television, and now the internet. These new broadcast mechanisms provided the means for communicating politically relevant information to these newly broadened constituencies. Television in particular allows politicians to reach thousands of people at once, but has also had the consequence of increasing the importance of “image” - both personal and more broadly political - and has led to an increase in the hiring of public relations specialists, as argued by Arendt. The White House Office of Communications, established by Richard Nixon during his reorganization of the Executive Office of the President, is an entire division tasked with crafting and managing the public distribution and reception of the president’s image and agenda.

As electoral constituencies continued to expand and diversify, new communications technologies also became more widely used, thus allowing politicians to reach much broader audiences with greater ease. While the use of radio was perhaps the first wave of the new mass communications technologies put to use for political purposes - Franklin Roosevelt’s “fireside chats” being some of the most memorable - I would argue that the use of television broadcasts was the real game changer. The ability to not only hear but also see a politician as they speak on a given topic, whether through a televised

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<sup>14</sup> Grant, 176.

debate, a campaign commercial or a press conference ushered in the era of the political public relations managers. This is a lesson that Richard Nixon, whose pale and sickly figure during the first televised presidential debates in 1960 against a young and vigorous-looking John Kennedy, learned as some analysts credit this episode with contributing to Nixon's defeat.<sup>15</sup> Television has been a tremendous tool used by political officials, especially presidents, to advance their political agendas. The press conference has become a key political tactic for presidents and other political actors to make claim to the news cycle and advance their political agenda.<sup>16</sup> The key aspect of communication via television, though, is that it tends to be highly staged with the message and imagery special constructed in order to levy the biggest persuasive effect. The power and informational advantages afforded political leaders of television has also increased the possibility, and perhaps probability, of mass publics being intentionally deceived. As Wise writes, "Television has not only increased the impact and speed of communication, it has made it much easier for the government to mislead the public. A President can go on television during a crisis, real or imagined, and rally substantial public support for military actions taken without regard to Congress or the Constitution."<sup>17</sup> The advent of the internet, and the increasing importance of social media has also begun to reshape the media environment in that it becomes even closer to instantaneous, but the power of television and citizen journalism cuts both ways. As Mitt Romney found out during the 2012 presidential election, a clandestine videorecording passed on to an opposing political campaign can have a devastating effect on the narrative that a campaign has so carefully

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<sup>15</sup> David Wise. *The Politics of Lying*. (New York: Random House, 1973), 258.

<sup>16</sup> For an in depth investigation of how much more often presidents "go public" to garner public support for their legislative agendas see Sam Kernell's *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*, 4th ed., (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Wise, 352.

constructed. When the polished and curated image of a candidate pushed by a campaign doesn't seem to fit the candidate in their more candid moments then the public starts to wonder whether or not they're being misled. Therein lies both the risks and rewards of new communications technologies for politicians. On the one hand, it is now easier and less time-consuming to reach large swaths of the electorate. Furthermore, important news events, especially those which may need to be "spun" in order to be used to one's advantage or to pre-empt attacks can be done in very short order. The government, though, does not control these mediums, aside from some indirect regulatory control, and news cameras, microphones, and now even mobile phones can capture events and remarks that are not subject to editing by public relations staff. Thus, political actors have the means to make highly visible statements more often and to greater effect than ever before, but the public also possesses the means of exposing any contradictions or exaggerations contained within those messages.

While technological advances in mass communications technologies have dramatically expanded the reach of political persuasion, and therefore opportunities for the spread of deceptive half-truths and untruths, a parallel development within the halls of government have increased the vast amounts of information being kept from the electorate. A growing intelligence bureaucracy in the United States and other advanced, industrial democracies has added added a cloak of secrets to the argument that there are some issues, some bits of information that should be kept from the people for a variety of reasons: their own safety, national security, the protection of men and women in the armed forces, etc. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these intelligence bureaucracies operate under a veil of secrecy, where knowledge and access are closely guarded and it is principally important to limit the amount of information possessed by those whose interests may be counter to the relevant agencies or state as a whole. David Wise, in The



Politics of Lying, contributes much of this development to the geopolitical position the United States found itself in after World War II.<sup>18</sup> As a global superpower, locked in an existential grudge match with the Soviet Union, the United States ramped up its espionage apparatus and intervened, most often covertly although often very overtly in the cases of Vietnam and Cuba, in world affairs in order to contain the threat of communism. Given that one of the likely outcomes if the Cold War become hot was actually nuclear annihilation, the information gathered and distributed amongst officials at the highest levels of government was guarded by many layers of official secrecy. It was this expanding system of official classification, claims Wise, that set in motion “the institutionalized machinery that makes it possible for officials not only to proclaim, but to practice, the ‘right to lie.’ It is a system that permits the government to tell the people selective truth, and, as previously noted, to shape events to fit policy.”<sup>19</sup> With an expanding electorate and an independent media with the means to transmit sounds and images to them every night via the evening news, elected political officials had an increasingly difficult time sustaining the public approval needed to sustain a large military intervention in Southeast Asia, for instance. While claims for secrecy generally referenced keeping military and government secrets away from potential enemies, Wise claims that it was actually the American public who is the primary target of government secrecy. As Wise writes:

To put it simply, the classification system has been used to deprive the American people of vital information, which is then later sold to them by political leaders whom they elected, or by appointees of those elected leaders. But the same information is denied to Americans when it is current, when it might be pertinent to the opinions they hold and the manner in which they express those opinions at the ballot box.

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<sup>18</sup> Wise, 343.

<sup>19</sup> Wise, 62.

This was one of the most shocking revelations uncovered by the publication of the Pentagon Papers in the *New York Times*. For the first time the changing rationales put forth by government officials in favor of sustaining military intervention were stacked up side by side. It wasn't hard for the American public to discern that the information being distributed through official channels was not meant to confuse or confound the North Vietnamese or the Soviets, but to maintain support for the war effort. The consequence of this expansion expansion of the intelligence bureaucracy is that it creates a generalized norm amongst government officials, especially as it pertains to foreign affairs that supports keeping information away from the public. The fear is, this continued pressure to conceal and classify generates "a pervasive [accepting, permissive] mood, not anything as concrete as a policy or executive order or a conspiracy, toward obfuscation."<sup>21</sup>

### III

So what, if anything, does this discussion of the rise of political mendacity have to do with democratic thought and the question of whether or not decisions reached via deceptive means are democratically legitimate. In *Truth and Truthfulness*, Bernard Williams opens the chapter titled "Truthfulness, Liberalism, and Critique" with a simple question: "Why does truthfulness in politics matter?"# He then examines three arguments that could be made in defense of political truthfulness: the anti-tyranny, democracy, and liberty arguments. The anti-tyranny argument maintains that because the coercive powers of government are so great, and since individuals in control of the levers of power may

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<sup>20</sup> Wise, 98.

<sup>21</sup> Cliffe, Ramsay, and Bartlett, 79.

be tempted to conceal incompetence or corruption, it is in the interest of all the governed to have access to true information. While Williams states that this argument is both widely known and intuitively persuasive, he is not satisfied with its argumentative force. Our familiarity with this argument and the fact that the contemporary examples of deception and dishonesty in politics simply do not reach the level of tyrannical rule has turned the anti-tyranny argument into a useful reminder rather than a forceful defense of truthfulness. Next, Williams turns his eye towards democracy and a potential justification for truthfulness that stems from the structure of popular sovereignty. He wonders, though, whether the nature or structure of democratic government will itself provide us with any unique and forceful arguments in defense of truthfulness. He writes, “[the argument from democracy] will have to give special reasons why the value of truthfulness is, in a democracy, built intrinsically into the relations between the government and the people.”<sup>22</sup> Williams is skeptical that a model of democracy, more specifically an understanding of democratic legitimacy as self-government, can be found that not only implies the promotion of the virtues of truthfulness but also applies to any democratic government as they exist in the world today. As he concludes, “[b]ut to understand the government in a democracy as an *agent* of the people implies an exceedingly strong model of democratic government as self-government, which cannot be applied to any modern democracy.”<sup>23</sup> Finally Williams introduces the argument for truthfulness via the substantive value of liberty. Democracy, claims Williams, is simply derivative of this foundational value of the modern liberal democratic complex. He concludes that “democracy (in its modern, constitutional, forms) is valued, to an important extent, in the name of liberty. Rather than appealing specifically to the democratic element, we may argue for governmental and more

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<sup>22</sup> Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 210.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, 210.

generally political truthfulness by relating it directly to liberty, which for many people is the central element in the liberal complex.”<sup>24</sup> The argument from liberty, then, is Williams’ theoretical support for truthfulness in politics. While I may not disagree with Williams’s conclusions relating to the need for greater political truthfulness, I argue that Williams dismisses the argument for political truthfulness via democracy much too quickly.

Williams’s skepticism about the normative force of democratic government and his insistence on a stronger theory of democratic legitimacy stems from his paltry definition of democracy as simply the majoritarian voting mechanism. Interestingly, I argue that instead of Williams’s insistence that support for truthfulness would require a much thicker democratic theory, I claim that peeling back democracy to its basic deliberative and procedural underpinnings is the most persuasive and philosophically consistent way to promote interpersonal and institutional truthfulness within political discourse and practice. Peter Osborne, too, recognizes the deficiency of Williams’ characterization of democracy. Writing in *The Rise of Political Lying*, Osborne counters Williams when he writes that “[t]he right to vote implies a liberty that extends far beyond the entitlement to mark a piece of paper in a voting booth once every four or five years. Citizens have a right to form a fair and balanced judgment, and are therefore entitled to be informed about their political choices.”<sup>25</sup> Quite clearly a more robust conception of democracy, one that sees deliberative procedures of belief formation and transmission constituting popular sovereignty and governmental legitimacy, will allow us to highlight the close connection between democracy and truthfulness. John Dewey, in *The Public and Its Problems*, makes a similar point when he remarks: “Majority rule, just as majority rule, is as foolish as its critics charge it with being. But it never is *merely*

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<sup>24</sup> Williams, 211.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Osborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, (New York: Free Press, 2005), 120.

majority rule.... ‘The means by which a majority comes to be a majority is the more important thing’: antecedent debates, modification of views to meet the opinions of minorities.... The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion.’<sup>26</sup> Democracy cannot simply be understood as the formal establishment of a series of institutions, namely majoritarian voting processes and wide political enfranchisement. While these institutions may certainly be key markers of what it takes to be minimally democratic, the deeper truth is that these institutions, and others like them, structure political relations such that persuasive argumentation is established through deliberative procedures, making possible the free and fair formation of individual opinions and the collective formulation of political will.

If we view political deception as simply a series of isolated incidents, actions of a few power-hungry individuals and not as a symptom of an institutional constellation, then it is hard to see how any meaningful check on government deception would arise. Indeed, David Wise, writing on the pattern of deceptive strategies employed by American presidents during Vietnam, comes to the unsatisfying conclusion that nothing will change unless individual political actors, in this case future presidents, take it upon themselves to be more truthful and sincere. Wise writes:

Unless deception and secrecy are clearly recognized and identified as political issues of major importance, unless the President of the United States and his successors take personal steps to bring about and sustain a new atmosphere of candor and trust, there is little possibility of change, and there will be continuing danger to our political institutions.”

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<sup>26</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, quoted in Jurgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 304

<sup>27</sup> Wise, 346.

This, to me, seems to be the wrong conclusion to draw. It is precisely because politicians act in a political and media environment that privileges deceptive means that these personal steps will never be taken, as the historical record has shown. In fact, until we begin to view political mendacity not as a personal affront, but rather an affront to the basic principles of democratic rule, it is doubtful that this issue will receive the attention it is due. As Lionel Cliffe writes at the conclusion of his and his co-authors examination of political lying in the United States and United Kingdom: “the use of concealment, deceit, secrecy and manipulation even to achieve good political ends has serious implications for the vitality of democracy. This is because these means contradict the basic principles of democratic society based on accountability, participation, consent and representation.”<sup>28</sup> Taking deception seriously, instead of simply accepting its existence as par for the course requires a more thorough examination of institutional transparency and the institution of more robust measures of accountability. In the words of Wise, in a democracy “the governed must know to what they are consenting.”<sup>29</sup> By recognizing the shifts in how elected representatives related to and communicate with their constituencies, and connecting them with broader developments in electoral politics, mass communications technologies, and a growing intelligence community we begin to frame the debate over political deception in political and social terms and can then look for social and political solutions to a perceived increase in political mendacity. This implies that the relationship between representative and represented is one reliant on trust. As Markovits and Silverstein write in *The Politics of Scandal*, “political scandals involve a violation of process, a betrayal of public trust, an abuse of accountability and of the very processes that legitimate the liberal democratic state, that ensure that the state is

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<sup>28</sup> Cliffe, Ramsay, and Bartlett, 35.

<sup>29</sup> Wise, 353-4.

democratically controlled.”<sup>30</sup> The betrayal of trust inherent in the use of deceptive politics is not simply an affront to the moral sensibilities of the public, but is a violation of democratic principles, calling into question the legitimacy of the outcome at hand.

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<sup>30</sup> Cliffe, Ramsay, and Bartlett, 46.

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