

# TRUTH, REASON, AND DEMOCRACY

---

PROFESSOR COLIN MACLEOD

PHILOSOPHY AND LAW

UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

## DISCLAIMER



**University  
of Victoria**

Retirees  
Association

The views and opinions expressed in this presentation are those of the presenter, and do not represent official policy positions, or views of the University of Victoria or the University of Victoria Retirees Association.

# OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENTATION

---

1. The Current Context: The Fragility of Democracy
2. Democracy and Political Legitimacy
3. Aggregative vs. Deliberative Democracy
4. Why Truth Matters
5. Challenges of Truth Seeking
6. The Demands of Truth Seeking
7. Truth As Integral to Democracy
8. Four Threats to Truth-Oriented Democratic Discourse
9. What Can We Do?

# I. THE FRAGILITY OF DEMOCRACY

---

The U.S. Capitol,  
January 6 2021



# CONTEXT FOR THE INSURRECTION

---

- Bitter partisan division
- Deep ideological disagreement (e.g., between social conservatives and liberals)
- Defective political institutions and practices (e.g., the Electoral College, voter suppression)
- Propaganda efforts by powerful media corporations (e.g., Fox News)
- Incivility (e.g., ‘Crooked Hilary’ ‘Sleepy Joe’)
- Alienation from democratic politics (e.g., low voter participation, high levels of cynicism)
- Sea of falsehoods (e.g., lies about electoral fraud propagated by Trump and his allies; Trump’s 30,000 + lies)

## 2. DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL LEGITIMACY

---

- Disagreement is an ineliminable feature of social and political life
- Political systems offer ways of addressing disagreement and shaping the character of the societies in which we live
- Democratic communities seek to address disagreement in ways that are LEGITIMATE
- The basic ideal of political legitimacy: A political outcome is legitimate if even those who disagree with it have sufficient reason to accept it and abide by it. (E.g., losers of a fair election accept that they have lost; acceptance of a law that one thinks is bad but which is created in a democratic fashion.)

# LEGITIMACY

---

- The basic ideal of political legitimacy: A political outcome is legitimate if even those who disagree with it have sufficient reason to accept it and abide by it. (E.g., losers of a fair election accept that they have lost; acceptance of a law that one thinks is bad but which is created in a democratic fashion.)

# LEGITIMACY THROUGH DEMOCRACY

---

- Fair democratic procedures help secure legitimacy (e.g., fair electoral systems with universal suffrage)
- Some (but not all) unjust outcomes can have political legitimacy (e.g., a tax code that does not fully address significant inequalities could be unjust yet legitimate)
- Legitimacy not guaranteed by majority rule with procedurally fair background (e.g., some rights violations endorsed by democratic majorities are NOT legitimate)



# FACETS OF DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

---

- **Procedural Fairness:** democratic processes for reaching decisions must allow citizens to participate equally in decision making and should be responsive to the views of citizens (e.g., equal voting rights, fair systems of representation)
- **Basic Justice:** legitimate outcomes must be consistent with recognition and respect of basic rights including rights of political participation (e.g., majority cannot legitimately disenfranchise minority via a vote)
- **Justification:** legitimate outcomes are ones that all people affected by them have reason to accept even when they disagree with the outcome

# 3. AGGREGATIVE VS. DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

---

**Aggregative Conception of Legitimacy:** an outcome (e.g., a law or public policy) is legitimate if it reflects the will of a democratic majority as ascertained via fair democratic procedures (e.g., majority vote in parliament)

Justification of the sort integral to legitimacy is **solely** a function of the procedural fairness of democratic processes.

---

**Deliberative Conception of Legitimacy:** a legitimate outcome is a function of both fair procedures and good faith efforts by participants in democratic debate to provide (relevant) reasons for laws or policies.

Justification depends crucially on: (a) processes of mutually respectful reason giving and reason taking and (b) use of *public reason* – considerations that are germane to democratic debate that all citizens can acknowledge as reasonable (e.g., reasons linked to public good)

- Reasons that are non-public are ones that other citizens cannot be reasonably expected to accept as relevant to the justification of public policy (e.g., reasons grounded in controversial religious or metaphysical commitments)

# BASIC CASE FOR DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

---

- The mere fact that a group has lost a procedurally fair vote on a matter of importance does not provide them adequate reason to believe that outcome is politically justified.
- Some considerations that may lie behind a majority vote do not seem relevant to public justification (e.g., private gain of a politician). So it is important that there be open and honest articulation of reasons for laws and policies.
- Healthy politics should be orientated towards persuasion and justification rather than mere a exercise of power

# 4. WHY TRUTH MATTERS

---

- Truth can be elusive and contested in many domains including the political domain but it is valuable for two reasons:
- *Truth is instrumentally valuable* – truth helps us to negotiate the world successfully. True beliefs about the world facilitate our pursuit of our projects by, among other things, revealing casual connections about how things work (e.g., how vaccines protect people from diseases) and by revealing facts that are salient to our relationships (e.g., whether a person loves me or not).

- 
- *Truth is intrinsically valuable* – in some domains we value understanding of the way the world is for its own sake; accessing and appreciating important truths of history or science can enrich our lives even if the truths we contemplate are not practically useful to us.

# INTERMISSION

---



# 5. CHALLENGES OF TRUTH SEEKING

---

- We are **fallible**. We, whether as individuals or groups, often discover that things we thought were true turn out to be false.
- Truth on important matters is often elusive, difficult to establish, and controversial.
- People disagree not only about what is true but about the proper methods to be used in seeking the truth.
- Disagreement about what is true is often a source of division between us.





# 6. THE DEMANDS OF TRUTH SEEKING

---

- **Basic Rationality** - A commitment to reason, consideration of evidence, and logic in the formation of beliefs
- **Humility** - A degree of intellectual humility in which we recognize the possibility that some of our beliefs, even cherished convictions, may be false.
- **Receptivity** - A willingness to revise our beliefs in light of the best evidence we have
- **Open Mindedness** - A willingness to entertain views of people who, in good faith, disagree with us (e.g., avoid the 'echo chambers' on the internet where we only listen to people say the things we already believe)
- **Justification** - A commitment to coherent justification of the beliefs we hold

# TRUTH AS INTEGRAL TO DEMOCRACY

---

- We hope that democratic politics generate genuinely good or right outcomes – e.g., ones that make the community healthier, wealthier, safer, sustainable, and just.
- Democratic deliberation is (or should be) truth sensitive and truth oriented.
- We should aim at justifying our views in democratic debate that reflects this sensitivity to truth (e.g., by providing compelling evidence for our views; by revising our views in light of new evidence etc.)
- We should favor institutional arrangements and social practices that facilitate meaningful exchanges of reasons between citizens and their political representatives
- Regrettably political actors in the pursuit of power often have incentives to eschew the democratic concern for truth

## 8. FOUR THREATS TO TRUTH-ORIENTED DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE

---

1. **Mendacity** – perhaps the most obvious threat is lying by participants in the political arena, especially those with power and influence (e.g., politicians, the media). Liars typically know what is true (or at least know that their utterances are false) but they seek to deceive their audience and thereby manipulate them. (E.g., Trump's claims regarding the outcome of the election.)

---

2. **Bullshit** – the philosopher Harry Frankfurt distinguishes bullshitting from lying. Whereas the liar is concerned with truth but seeks to hide or distort it, the bullshitter makes utterances that are intended to influence people without any regard to the truth. Bullshit is detached from a concern with truth. It aims only on getting people to agree with the bullshitter. It is discourse that masquerades as aiming a justification but is indifferent to truth. (Trump is a liar and a bullshitter.)

---

3. **Trivia Overload** – there are some forms of discourse that are sensitive to truth but which distract us from reflective consideration of important matters. A great deal of contemporary social media is dominated by exchanges of trivia about relatively unimportant matters – e.g., the details of the lives of celebrities such as the ‘Royals’

---

**4. *Personalization of Truth*** – When people disagree about significant matters and when resolution of disagreement seems difficult or contentious, there is a dangerous tendency for people to address the disagreement by declaring that they have their own truths. In this way, truth becomes personalized. Having one's 'own truth' may be a way of avoiding an argument with someone with whom disagree with but it's no way to establish that what you believe is actually true.

# WHAT CAN WE DO?

---

## A Cautionary Note:

- We should void complacency about our current institutions and practices
- We should not assume that they are adequate (our history is full of examples of undemocratic arrangements and practices)
- We should be receptive to reform proposals

# INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

---

- Genuinely representative political institutions
- Strong media organizations not dominated or controlled by powerful interests
- Excellent and accessible educational institutions
- Deliberative fora (e.g., citizen assemblies)
- Provision of meaningful time and opportunity for deliberation (e.g., deliberation day)



# CULTIVATION OF CIVIC VIRTUE

---

- Robust democratic education (e.g., about political processes, history, ideals)
- Development of skills of critical reasoning
- Commitment to respect, toleration, and civility
- Encourage an ethos in which lying, bullshitting, etc by political actors de-incentivized

# QUESTIONS?

---

