'Searching for something to believe in': Voter Uncertainty in a Post-Truth Environment

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Abstract

As other authors in this collection have stated, post-truth came into common parlance as commentators analysed and reflected on election campaigns and their results: the suggestion being that emotions and beliefs had become more powerful than reasoned, fact-based argumentation. Given that most campaigns present their own redacted perspective of reality into an environment containing multiple, contested alternative interpretations, the association between the most contested variant of a campaign, a political contest, and post truth is unsurprising. All campaigns contain elements of post-truth, appeals to emotions which build bridges between that which is sold and the identity of the consumer. Campaigns may encourage people to think but also to feel, and as such campaign strategies chime with understandings of human engagement and the levels of cognitive attention given, with many decisions being gut responses rather than being carefully considered. Our research focuses on two UK contests, the 2016 referendum on membership of the EU and subsequent 2017 snap general election. Interviews among older voters who voted to leave the EU and younger voters who supported Corbyn-led Labour give insights into how what might be seen as peripheral aspects influenced voting decisions. The data we suggest highlights challenges for democratic institutions, as populist voices present themselves as change agents to win support from voters dissatisfied with consensus politics. Mainstream politicians meanwhile are mistrusted while the arguments of outsiders who appear authentic are given credence. Such observations go to the heart of issues facing democracy and place debates surrounding post-truth as core to those challenges. This article offers insights into how voter choices reveal cognitive processes that explain the link between campaign communication, belief formation and voter choice making all of which combine to threaten democracy.

Introduction

> "I feel you can't really believe any politician. They say what they think you want to hear and hide the important stuff. [Interviewer: so do you just disengage from politics?] No I vote, I try and work out what sounds most likely or who is least likely to tell lies for bad reasons. We all hide stuff but for the right reasons, you wouldn't tell someone they were ugly just to be truthful would you, so I try and work out for myself who and what to believe" (extract from an interview with a Politics student at Bournemouth University)

It is unorthodox to begin an article with an extract from the data but the above extract from an interview captures one of the issues at the heart of discussions around post-truth. As a consequence of living in an age when marketing communication is not only pervasive in public life, but also widely discussed and critiqued, the average citizen is likely to view political communication from many sources with a degree of scepticism while also attempting to estimate how true a claim is or a political communicator might be. One might argue that every campaign, corporate or political, every advertisement, every piece of strategic communication, offers a redacted view of reality one that is produced to offer an audience the foundation for a set of attitudes that align with the strategic objectives of the producer. Whether the claim is that 'Heineken refreshes the parts other beers cannot reach' or that Theresa May offers the 'strong and stable leadership' Britain in 2017 required to deal with the challenges of Brexit, both are only believed if they are deemed to be believable. In other words neither can be proven prior to the point of purchase or election, so the citizen must calculate how true they believe each claim to be. Of course buying a pint of lager and finding it does not meet expectations is to most an insignificant commitment, electing a prime minister for five years has more long term implications. Yet as political and marketing communication become more closely intertwined, and all political performances become sales pitches rather than frank and open accounts of the processes of governance, the processes of disaggregating the reality from the claims made becomes increasingly complicated

Believability, and the notion that some claims ring truer than others independent of the evidence presented is what is claimed to make the post-truth era distinct. The phrase entered common parlance in the context of electoral contests, specifically the UK's 2016 referendum on EU membership, and the 2016 US presidential election, but arguably it can apply to ongoing public engagement with political communication. For politicians to offer redacted views of reality is nothing new. Plato railed against the use of eloquent but deceptive rhetoric by the Sophists in the 4th century BC, Machiavelli advocated the use of spin in pre-renaissance Italian states, and as Garland (this volume) notes, the processes behind post-truth are embedded within the art of politics. What has perhaps changed is the pervasive way in which persuasive communication, from multiple sources, some whose motives and identity are obscured, is disseminated across the hypermedia environment. As citizens intersperse television watching with monitoring of social media, viewing videos on YouTube or Vimeo, browsing websites, listening to digital radio and navigating the offline environment populated by poster advertisements and graffiti they face an unquantifiable number of persuasive

messages which they view and absorb. In this unregulated and uncontrollable communication environment facts are permeable, all truths are contestable, and so the citizen must resort to shortcuts and heuristics to determine the extent that one claim is truer than another. The logical conclusion is that when a citizen is presented with vastly contrasting arguments they are increasingly likely to attempt to make quick assessments based on gut feelings.

Election campaigns are perhaps the epitome of a post-truth communication environment; a time of highly contrasting claims, the distorting of facts and gut feelings being relied upon to disaggregate information from disinformation. The same statistics can be quoted, or misquoted, by multiple parties or candidates to gain political capital; blame is apportioned for negative outcomes and subsequently countered; promises are made backed by evidence which is often questioned; much of the time elections to be more about competing sets of truths than competing visions. Political campaigners often work with the belief that if a claim is made often enough it will become recognised as a truth. It is suggested that beliefs, in claims of dubious veracity or in individuals of questionable credibility, indeed proved influential in a number of key election contests (Baron, 2018). But often such suggestions are from opponents of the side accused of peddling disinformation. So what evidence is there that voter decisions are made on the basis of ill-founded, non-evidenced beliefs and emotions, rather than facts? The article draws on a small qualitative study of UK voters to explore the way voters explain the reasoning that underpinned their voting decisions to leave the EU (what is referred to widely as Brexit) and to voted Labour during the 2017 general election in constituencies where the party were third place and their votes were unlikely to influence the election outcome.

The data indicates that information processing behaviours among voters may lead to elections being determined by the extent that one side had the better story, the more engaging slogans and visuals as opposed to the best evidenced case. The claim is not that all Brexit and Labour voters did so for shallow, belief-driven, reasons; rather that these played a part and so their role, and the role of post-truth, in election campaigning may be significant. Prior to presenting the data on which we base those conclusions the article will set out the context, and explain how the contests are interesting for the study of post-truth politics and present the theoretical lens through which we understand how citizens might use shortcuts to navigate post-truth environments such as election contests.

Voters and voting in the UK 2016-17: the context
The Brexit referendum and subsequent general election are perfect post-truth environments. At both the divisions were between polarising images of British society. With Brexit the division was over whether Britain as a nation and people would be better off within or outside the European Union. The election just under a year later was ostensibly about Theresa May seeking her own mandate as prime minister and a larger majority in parliament in order to 'deliver Brexit'. An important sub-text was the question of who was best to manage the Brexit process and how the settlement should look. The Conservative hard-Brexit, free market, no compromise mantra opposed the Labour vision of a post-Brexit society built upon fairness and equality through state regulation and nationalisation. There was also a potent

personality-driven message, incumbent prime minister and leader of the Conservatives Theresa May pitched herself as offering 'strong and stable' leadership through the uncertainty of Brexit. The branding was intended to contrast her with that of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who had divided the parliamentary party over his politics and leadership style since being elected leader in September 2015, had faced an unsuccessful leadership challenge and was depicted in the media as being deficient in the qualities required to lead the country (Guardian, 2016).

The media environment contributed further to the polarisation as well as the post-truth environment. The tabloid press were biased heavily in favour of Brexit during the referendum and levelled attacks against Corbyn throughout his tenure as leader and during the election campaign (Barnett, 2017). Social media was equally dominated by Brexit arguments, with claim and counter-claim circulating as well as incredulity at some of the claims made regarding the threat posed to Britain of voting leave. The coherence and reach of the leave supporting Facebook campaign sites showed greater levels of enthusiasm, activism and homogeneity, as well as creating large amounts of engaging and shareable images, all indicating the campaign would probably have higher reach among those less interested in politics (Lilleker & Bonacci, 2017). During the election meme wars raged, each amusing image seeking to impact the attitudes of undecided voters. The main contributors were a range of pro-Corbyn blogs, Twitter feeds and Facebook pages which were created to counter the anti-Corbyn media narrative. While Corbyn was pictured as a man of the people, May was characterised as robotic, out of touch and after not appearing during a leaders' debate missing from the campaign. Thus photoshopped images and memes promoting Corbyn and attacking May were circulated widely across social media platforms (Dutceac & Bossetta, 2017). As with the pro-Leave side during the referendum, pro-Corbyn activist sites offered engaging and shareable materials, and enjoyed much higher levels of activism, again potentially engaging voters with traditionally lower levels of interest.

The role of social media may have been significant as both contests saw higher turnout among groups which usually do not vote. The lower-educated, white working class with low income turned out in much higher numbers and were most likely to vote Brexit (Menon & Salter, 2016; Hobolt, 2016). These groups tend often to be more frequent users of social media, particularly Facebook, and so were potentially more exposed to persuasive visuals shared campaign pages. Clearer data on the relationship between political knowledge, Internet use and voting behaviour is found from the 2017 British Election Survey data. 39% of respondents used the internet a great deal or a fair amount at the time of the 2017 UK general election and those respondents were significantly more likely to vote Labour. 61% of those who used the internet "a great deal" to gather news about the general election opted for Labour, compared with only 21% who voted Conservative. In contrast 56% who said they rarely or never used the internet voted Conservative, 30% voted Labour. Given that turnout among 18-29 year olds was up by an estimated 19% compared to 2015, a group that predominantly voted Labour, it seems the online campaign achieved two aims. Firstly it succeeded in mobilising people to turn out and vote; secondly it influenced their voter choice. The concern is that the latter may be most pronounced among the least politically

sophisticated. Survey respondents who used the internet a great deal but scored low on the political knowledge test were most likely to vote Labour. Heavy internet users with high political knowledge tended to vote Conservative. The effects held across all age groups, except Conservative-voting pensioners. Therefore political knowledge was a strong predictor of voting behaviour even when controlling for social class, age, gender, income, left-right placement and how they voted in the 2016 referendum (Clarke et al, 2017). We should not assume from this data that heavy internet using Labour voters are inherently less intelligent or even politically sophisticated; the measures of political knowledge are simple but are not measures of understanding political choices per se. Political knowledge test questions ask respondents to agree or disagree with questions like "The minimum voting age for UK general elections is now 16 years of age," or "The chancellor of the Exchequer is responsible for setting interest rates in the UK". These questions measure levels of being informed about political processes. However, a lack of knowledge can suggest lower levels of interest and engagement. Citizens who have low interest but are mobilised to vote are likely, much like the student quoted at the start of the article, to seek shortcuts that aid them make their choice. The post-truth environment around each contest provided a range of simple heuristic communication that could create beliefs and reinforce biases regarding political actors and make their policy choices more appealing. Hence we hypothesise that those who voted, but had lower levels of political interest, would rely to some extent on cognitive shortcuts offered by more simple but persuasive forms of communication which characterise post-truth political environments. To explain this hypothesis we turn to communication psychology research.

Dual processing, heuristics and bias: why post-truth undermines civic life
Citizens with lower levels of interest or intellectual sophistication are argued to make cognitive shortcuts in order to solve problems; they lack the ability or interest to solve problems using more developed cognitive processes. In practice this involves making quick associations based on heuristic cues, for example well-designed and engaging images that stir an emotion. This contrasts with the 'high-effort, systematic reasoning' which it is claimed should underpin voter choice making (Chaiken & Trope, 1999). The cognitive modes of engagement were classically defined as using 'System 1' or 'System 2' styles of reasoning (Kahneman, 2011). System 1 reasoning involves visceral, emotionally-driven gut reactions to communication, normally leading to over-estimations of positive or negative implications. This manner of reasoning can lead a voter to judge a politician, depicted as being surrounded by ordinary-looking people, to be more 'in-touch'. Also, they may over-estimate threats posed by terrorists or even immigrants when faced with sensationalised claims. In contrast, System 2 reasoning involves reflection and evidence based evaluation. This type of reasoning can involve questioning claims; a system 2 thinker may reflect on the number of deaths and injuries caused by terrorists, or investigate facts to evaluate the economic and social impact of immigration. In other words System 2 reasoning will lead to decisions that were not formed from exposure to simplistic images and slogans, whereas System 1 reasoning allows the formation of the beliefs that are of concern when we consider the post truth phenomenon.

The dual processing model maps neatly to Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) elaboration likelihood model (ELM). The ELM suggests that individuals who lack either the interest or the ability, and particularly both, will only process information peripherally. Images and slogans are absorbed into the subconscious, or schema, and then recalled at the point when a choice needs to be made. The claim that System 1, peripheral processing, is lacks reasoning has been challenged (Mercier & Sperber, 2017). A body of work has emerged to counter the dichotomy between emotion and reason, suggesting the two cannot be disconnected under normal circumstances (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In fact cognitive science demonstrates that it is a lack of emotional intelligence which leads to psychopathic tendencies (Lorenz & Newman, 2002). Therefore we should think of System 1 and System 2, as with peripheral and central processing, as being on a scale where logic, reason and emotion interact to differing extents to determine behavioural choices (Lilleker, 2014, pp 80-99). Where there is low cognitive engagement, and a gut or emotional response is made, judgment errors are found. Judgement errors allow citizens to judge a politician with an authentic style as honest, they allow headlines which repeat claims to be used as evidence, they underpin beliefs that act as mental shortcuts but which are founded more on an emotional response to communication than reasoned evaluation of a range of salient facts (Kahan, 2013).

Politics, and particularly elections, are competitions between contested and largely unverifiable viewpoints. The complexity demands serious evaluation of claims matched with value judgements regarding outcomes, to assess which party, leader or set of policy claims appear most likely to deliver the outcome that most closely matches the individual's values. However, citizens do not begin to engage, whether centrally or peripherally, with an election as a tabula rasa. Rather citizens possess a complex range of values and preconceptions about how the world and the nation should be run, about the key organisations and individuals competing for election, as well as about the other sources of information that are available to them (Lilleker & Pekalski, 2019). A political position, a party's competence or a new leader's abilities may be determined by media frames. Basically how the media portrays any of these can develop widely held perceptions: one can think here of Ed Miliband's lack of competence being exemplified by a picture of him looking stupid while eating a bacon sandwich (de Witt, 2017). Media, the repeat-remind strategies of political campaigners and the churn of viral information online can also lead to what one study referred to as adherence to 'sticky misinformation' (Lewandowsky et al, 2015). Whether the 'fact' be that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, Obama was a Muslim, or that vaccines lead to autism, independent of subsequently being debunked some continue to believe the veracity of a claim if repeated often enough. Over the course of an election campaign, arguably this phenomenon can have significant power. Framing and prolonged exposure can lead to the formation of attitudes towards positions, organisations and leaders and, among lower engaged citizens, lead them to seek confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998).

Once an attitude has formed, many do not want to experience dissonance by having that attitude challenged (Festinger, 1962). Hence they eschew competing views, or dismiss them as lacking objectivity, and assume to be true any information that confirms their preconceived beliefs and attitudes. If a belief is formed out of sensationalist headlines, memetic slogans or

similar they may be flawed but they may still be protected from challenge and shape voting behaviour. Hence it is suggested that choices of media, whether the newspapers read or the Facebook groups joined, many seek affirmation rather than information and so can lock themselves into echo chambers within which one-sided and inaccurate claims abound (Mercier & Sperber, 2017). Carefully designed engaging images and slogans can support the formation of beliefs and attitudes and then the hardening of attitudes around value positions which aid citizens confirm their choice is correct.

This provides in brief a psychological framework for understanding the cognitive mechanisms that undergird the post-truth environment. Put simply, at times of high contestation and competition over visions citizens seek simply answers to the question 'which side would be best'. Their values and preconceptions take form as attitudes which cause them to lean one way rather than the other, especially when choices are polarised. New information is absorbed and filed in memory, creating perceptions of the world and its people; if post-truth is a problem for democracy then those perceptions will be based on weak or non-existent evidence. It is this latter question we seek insights into.

Methodology
The majority of studies which aim to understanding the motivations and reasoning that underpin political participation predominantly adopt a positivist approach and quantitative research methods (for example see van Biezen et al. 2012, Curtice 2005). These studies offer significant insights but struggle to explain the complex combinations of beliefs, opinions, feelings and emotions which interplay to determine voter choices, qualitative methods are deemed for appropriate for the examination of experiences and their impact (Denscombe 2014). Qualitative methods enable researchers to gather data on voters' own perspectives, using their language, and on their patterns of political engagement in their own terms (White et al. 2000). As participation in political activities is often the result of (interlinking) factors, in-depth interviews were most appropriate as they enable in-depth exploration of individual lived experiences and their bearing on voting decisions. To examine the data without a pre-existing set of assumptions, we used principles of grounded theory (Flick 2014). We asked interviewees questions about the respective contests, their levels of interest and knowledge, their voter choices and how they were formed. Through the analysis we identified how they constructed their arguments, the evidence they drew on, when explaining how they arrived at their choice. The analytical process sought to identify how beliefs were formed, whether they were based on informed reasoning, or could we detect evidence that the shallow evidence synonymous with the post-truth phenomenon informed voter choices. Participants of both the study on Brexit and the 2017 general election were selected through purposive sampling as outlined below.

2016 referendum
The 2016 EU referendum saw Britain divided, and hence polarized suggesting high levels of complexity and contestation over voter choices. On average particular divisions were found by age, social class and education; older, less affluent and less educated Britons voted to Leave yet within each demographic there were fault lines. The most committed leave voters

were over 60, a group who are most likely to vote and most likely to hold Conservative values. Many would have had the opportunity to vote in the 1975 referendum on the UK's membership of the EEC, so these should be highly informed and experienced voters able to draw on years of news and experiences. Participants in the research on the 2016 EU referendum were selected based upon their age (all participants were over 60 years old), were British citizens (so had the right to vote) and voted to Leave the EU.

2017 general election

The 2017 UK general election provided similar levels of polarization around contested perspectives, and therefore a further opportunity to examine beliefs and disbeliefs and the influence on voting. Young people, 18-34, voted in greater numbers, the highest turnout among young people in 25 years (Burn-Murdoch 2017), and significantly influence the outcome of the election. Perceived traditions, such as the young being a "disaffected" generation in Britain (Fahmy 2006, p. 9) who are politically disengaged and so "ritual non-voters" (Martin 2012, p. 21), were thus partially confounded in 2017. Not only did young people, at least across the 18-34 cohort, turned up in larger numbers, and they were also more likely to vote Labour (BBC 2017; Holder et al. 2017). Participants in the research on the 2017 general election were the youngest voter group, aged between 20 to 24 years old, held UK citizenship (so eligible to vote in the 2017 general election); were all students or recent university graduates and lived in Bournemouth during the general election of 2017. The Bournemouth area represented safe Conservative seats, but turnout among young people was high and the Labour vote increased in the constituencies Bournemouth East, West and Poole respectively by 18.9%, 18.5% and 16.6% (retrieved from http://electionresults.parliament.uk on January 21st 2018). As young people have lower levels of electoral and political experience, this study offers a different comparison group to those interviewed regarding their participation at the EU referendum.

The EU as a bundle of cues: decision making at the 2016 EU referendum

Older voters were most likely to turn out at the referendum and to vote for the UK to leave the European Union. Polling data suggests the two major issues that drove the leave vote were immigration and sovereignty (Worcester et al, 2017), these were the central issues of the leave campaign and the most discussed issues by followers of the campaign on social media (Lilleker & Bonacci, 2017). However unpacking the perceptions older voters had demonstrates that the EU had become an entity which was blamed for wider social and political change that was not intrinsically tied to the UK's membership. Interviewees' explanations of their voting choices expressed powerful beliefs, yet ones that were largely erroneous. Interviewees referenced changes to the character of the British high streets, not only Polish delicatessens but also chain stores and coffee outlets claiming "you can't buy local anymore" and asking "what happened to traditional English cafes". Many older voters claimed they "feel like strangers in [their] country" yet struggled to reference the last time they met someone non-British. Similarly while referencing broad changes, mostly associated with globalization, when challenged they were unaware of whether change was due to EU membership or not. For example:

"Look, in my lifetime I have seen Britain totally change. We see people from all over the world coming here, buying property, opening shops, even our footballers aren't British. Whether it's the EU or not doesn't matter. I wanted to make things go back to as they were, to say we've had enough. I want my grandchildren to have a country like that I grew up in, safe and just a good place to live. I don't think it is that anymore"

The wide ranging critiques of 21st Century society thus appear to be bundled together and the referendum for these interviewees was not simply on EU membership but on the 50 or so years of social change they had experienced. Key to this is the notion of having lost control, hence the resonance of the sovereignty argument.

Interviewees could not point to specific laws, but rather a feeling of having lost 'control', of borders, of the ability to act as a nation. Trivial media tropes such as diktats on the shape and size of fruit and vegetables that could be sold were referenced along with using the slogan 'taking our country back' as a collective enterprise 'we' took. But largely the evidence drawn upon was a series of beliefs and feelings that invoke the notion of post-truth. Claims made to close down discussion such as "we're Britain and no-one should dictate to us"; "once this country ruled the waves you know, now everyone tells us what to do" suggest strong feelings but low levels of engagement with factual information. While campaign themes regarding controlling laws and borders were reiterated, when challenged there were stark misunderstandings of how the EU worked as a law-making body. Challenges were met with strident claims or dismissals, retreating to confirmation of their biases: "well I've seen prime ministers going cap in hand to Brussels, don't tell me that's the British way". A belief in what Britain should be, the nation that 'built' an empire, became a reference point demonstrating a desire to return to a golden age for the nation independent of the impossibility of achieving this that as was. Yet seldom was there an evidential link between loss of sovereignty and EU membership established. The power of the beliefs about what Britain should be, and the perceived opportunity to reverse history, 'to take our country back to how it was' is evidence that the contest had a powerful post-truth narrative running through it which captured the imaginations of many older voters who felt disconnected from 21st Century Britain. Onto the EU was projected all the negatives they felt characterized their experiences of modern Britain and thus leaving the EU was the change they believed would cure the ills of modern society.

Image cues and decision making at the 2017 UK general election
The younger voters in the 2017 UK general election referenced two motivating factors: their shock at the result of the referendum and their disappointment with the Conservative government and its continued commitment to austerity. Similar to the older Brexit voters, the election was seen as an opportunity to be heard. But in addition it was the perceived authenticity of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who they trusted to deliver a somewhat vague 'different sort of politics', that cemented their engagement and was instrumental in motivating them to cast their ballots.

The snap nature of the 2017 UK general election was an additional cause of disappointment among interviewees. Rather than a new prime minister seeking a personal mandate, these young people saw calling the 2017 election as a cynical move on the part of Theresa May to gain a larger parliamentary majority. This was a popular media trope, as was the fact that a larger majority would strengthen her position in the party and for Brexit negotiations (Asthana et al. 2017). But calling the election at a point when the Conservatives were leading in the polls, "the worst moment it could be called at" was seen as a cynical move, and one that worried the majority of these voters who were united in their opposition to May's approach to Brexit as well as domestic economic policy. The opposition to May seemed founded on informed engagement to some extent as interviewees argued "they say they're going to help the working class, but they don't"; "[She] says she wants to help black people, ethnic minorities or poor people then you don't really believe that". These statements suggest a few things. Firstly, interviewees identified themselves with the concerns of these minority groups, but more importantly they believed the May government claimed to share their concerns rhetorically only. Hence, and perhaps most significant in identifying evidence of post-truth beliefs, they defaulted to a position that politicians generally, and the Conservatives specifically, cannot be trusted to keep their promises. Despite the inability to give substantive examples of broken promises, they happily claimed promises would be broken. Yet Jeremy Corbyn was not seen as a politician that would break promises, he was believed to be trustworthy while May was not but there was no evidence presented to underpin the perceptions of the two leaders.

Another reason for disappointment and frustration was the association with the hard-Brexit approach of May. All young participants in this study voted in favour of staying in the EU, a position that theoretically should have aligned them with the Liberal Democrats. Despite Corbyn's long-term opposition to the EU and the fact he was frequently criticised for being disengaged from the remain campaign during the Brexit referendum (McSmith 2016) he was seen as the counter-balance to May's approach. While some participants argued that the fate of the UK and the EU was decided with the referendum, and therefore Brexit positions were not key in voting decisions in the 2017 election, others suggested Corbyn would better represent their views. So despite interviewees demonstrating a higher propensity to engage in the 2017 election, they demonstrated confusion about the choices available and what they represented. Largely they viewed the contest as bipolar, May versus Corbyn, but could not evidence why one was more trustworthy than the other. Post-truth phenomena appear to have played a role in the choices made.

Therefore while these younger voters did demonstrate a higher engagement with substantive policy issues and a degree of political sophistication, this does not fully resonate in their arguments for supporting Labour. While interviewees felt the Conservative party would not represent their interest, and they claimed they supported Labour based on the party's policies and manifesto, when their support was explored in-depth they did not demonstrate high levels of knowledge about the platforms of either party. When asked to name concrete policies that they supported, they found it hard to be specific. Yet they could all mention reasons why they liked and backed Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. This suggests two things. Firstly participants

could be giving socially acceptable answers; they felt they should decide on policies but in reality this is not the main reason. Secondly, it is possible that participants relied on cues and simple associations when deciding who to vote for. Indications that point to the latter as a decisive factor suggests Corbyn's personal appeal played a more significant role in the 2017 election while also offering indications that emotion-driven beliefs became more important than evidence based reasoning.

Voting based on the appeal of a leader is nothing new, Clarke et al. (2011) found that leadership evaluations are one of the main cues voters use to determine who to support in elections. Similar findings emerged during this study, and perceptions of the political leaders was a major topic ine every interview. Participants largely referred to PM May in negative terms, frequently mentioning that May as "not so strong and stable" or "weak and wobbly" (mocking the Conservatives' slogan "strong and stable"). Corbyn, on the other hand, was seen as authentic, ordinary and interviewees believed he deserved their support as he had made the effort to reach out to the younger generation. His links to prominent figures on the youth music scene, such as JME, AJ Tracey and Stormzy rallied behind Corbyn (O'Connor 2017), was referenced for example.

> "he actually interacted with them [young people], with rappers as well, who previously were completely disenfranchised… That was inspiring to see"

The echo chamber they gravitated towards was populated with videos by rappers endorsing Corbyn, and this was used as a shortcut to indicate his interest in the issues that concerned them. Other videos and images were referenced as evidence of Corbyn being "really was among the people", "down to earth" and a "normal bloke". These images created a perception of his "authenticity" and so his trustworthiness. Interviewees suggested that in his performances he demonstrated his honesty, May on the other hand was viewed as dishonest, a further cue to his honesty was that he was not seen as a 'politician': "he has not really been an experienced front bench politician... He just comes across as a bloke"

Across many of the interviews we found a combination of factors emerge. General feelings of aversion towards mainstream politicians, a mistrust of Conservatives and May particularly, and a positive view of Corbyn as a person. Being a politician was seen as a negative, with politics a dirty game (Bennett, 2008; Hay, 2007), Corbyn was seen as being an outsider. The support awarded him by other outsiders, rappers, close friends and those they follow on social media, were referenced as evidence of his 'of the people' status along with images of him 'among the people'. What was lacking was informed knowledge about his past or policies, apart from him being 'anti-war'; some wanted to go for a beer with him ignorant to the fact he is virtually teetotal. The perception of him might be wholly accurate but it was founded on weak evidence, images and videos and the endorsements of certain types of celebrity or peers. Hence beliefs were formed about the character of Jeremy Corbyn and the power of these beliefs chime with the concerns raised about the rise of post-truth politics. Similar to the student quoted at the start of the article, the interviewees sought a politician they could believe in, Corbyn's personality-centred campaign provided the cues they were seeking and

they appear to then project on him the attributes they wished a politician to have (see Baron, 2018, on projection)

Discussion
To what extent did post-truth, with beliefs being more important than facts, play a role in voter choice during Brexit and the 2017 general election? It is impossible to answer the question holistically, however we offer insights into the psyche of a small section of voters who, if in any way representative, appear to be driven far more by emotional attachments and bundles of beliefs than by reasoned evaluations of a range of facts. Older citizens who voted to leave the EU and young voters who voted Labour both expressed their motivations for doing so referencing simplistic arguments, with some misunderstandings, and offering little evidence to undergird the main arguments for their voting choices. In fact, at points there seemed a celebration that they lacked understanding and were able to rely on their beliefs. Some happily stated that they may not know about EU processes, or know much about Corbyn personally, but they knew what was wrong with society and could reference evidence that indicated their choice was correct. The problem is that evidence was nothing more than an image, a slogan or a headline. Trust in certain sources was also a theme, encapsulated in these two quotes: "That's the Guardian's line, but if you want to know what really happens you should read The Mail"; "the media lie all the time, you want to know the truth go on the Internet, that's independent". Such arguments highlight the search for confirmation bias and the use of media for affirmation of a viewpoint, they also highlight the role media play in disseminating post-truth narratives. But the reasons for this are not necessarily related to the cognitive ability of citizens, but rather their feelings of disaffection and disconnection. Citizens in such states seek outlets that speak to their feelings, give their concerns voice and offer them a solution. The conflation of concerns about the globalization of the high street, multi-culturalism and immigration and stories about high levels of migration from the EU built a neat if flawed narrative that shaped voting behavior. The Leave campaign simply reinforced these views and provided a push towards the voting booth. Similarly distrust of politicians, opposition to austerity and feelings of disenfranchisement drew support to the outsider, the perceived man of the people. A tactic employed by many populists which is found to be successful. The problem is the weak evidence base for the connections made between the desired outcome and the voter choice. In probing our interviewees' reasoning, we found greater evidence of what Kahneman (2011) described as system 1 reasoning; judgements based on gut-reactions and beliefs.

The data is of course limited, it was a small sample of self-selecting volunteers who conformed to a broad categorization. One might expect such volunteers to have higher levels of engagement and sophistication firstly, as they were willing to take time to talk about their voting behaviour. Some did argue that they wanted to explain themselves, feeling some sections of the media were portraying them as stupid or gullible. However, despite the caveats, we found interesting evidence that pointed to the validity of many of the arguments surrounding post-truth. That voter decisions were based on inferences drawn from communicational cues as opposed to detailed analysis of a range of information. At key points during the interviews, there was a uniform inability to provide evidence of in-depth

knowledge about the factors at stake during each very important contest. At points this lack of knowledge is evidenced by the repetition of soundbites: "taking our country back" or "not so strong and stable" for example. At another level it is their failure to offer detail or specifics when challenged on substantive issues and for older voters to be defensive if their reasoning was questioned. Both of these suggest these voters conform to the concerns raised by critics of post-truth politics. While it is impossible to get a clear sense of how perceptions were built up over time, especially for the older Brexit-supporting voters, as well as whether partisan biases led younger voters to distrust a Conservative leader more than the Labour alternative. However the sense is that simple memetic communication forms were used both for confirmation bias as well as to reinforce perceptions and that these were more prominent in their memories than more detailed evidence relating to the case presented by either side during the contests. The referencing of these peripheral cues suggests they were important and thus helped form beliefs about the outcomes of a contest if a vote was cast a particular way. Of course using this as a general criticism of these voters invokes an idealised version of a good citizen, one that is informed and rational but which may never have existed. However, if the drift is towards a reliance on intense emotional reactions incurred by the juxtaposition of simple images presenting the case for each side, then we are moving to a situation where election outcomes will be increasingly informed by simple and slick marketing, by the claim that appears believable, made by the person deemed most trustworthy, but without a clear evidence base for making those judgments.

The evidence suggests these voters, and many similar to them, made cognitive connections between normative beliefs about British society, past and present, and peripheral cues circulating during the course of the campaigns. Put simply they drew inferences from the post truth political communication landscape in order to inform their choices. Reinforcement bias led them to select reject or simply ignore some arguments, while accepting others without serious evaluation, in the search for an outcome that offered hope. This highlights the issue at the heart of the post-truth phenomenon. The disconnection from political institutions and low trust in politicians can be exploited by individuals and organisations that present themselves as being more in-touch with the public mood, more authentically of the people and outsiders to the political system. Obama, Modi, Trump and Macron each used such devises to win their respective contests, so did many pro-Brexit campaigners. Corbyn came close and caused a political earthquake. Corbyn's fans can retain their belief that the situation would be better had he won. What we see in what some call the post-truth era is slick marketing attempting to sell political ideas via myriad channels, often with the source disguised, to citizens when they not cognitively prepared to give an argument careful thought: here we might think about the political meme that appears on a Facebook feed being scrolled through during the daily commute. In the modern age of electioneering, big data analysis and market testing can highlight what phrases and promises will resonate most and deliver votes. What has been bluntly referred to as a 'do/say anything to win' strategy concerns making claims, however false, in order to secure votes (ElSheikh, 2018). When messages can be microtargeted to voters via social media, under the radar of opponents, election observers or investigative journalists, it is unclear what it is that citizens see, believe and so are influenced by. But those candidates who exploit voter dreams and fears, build campaigns that rely on peripheral cues

and reinforcement bias, risk damaging the core principles of democratic institutions. Citizens, like the student the article opened with, will search for the truth claim they feel most believable. If they later feel disappointed with the outcome they will become more sceptical. It is likely they will withdraw from engaging with politics, until the next believable claim reinvigorates their interest. But if interests are more likely to be piqued by memes, promoting distrust of the status quo and promoting a nebulous change, and that leads to a vote for an outcome that is undeliverable it is likely to increase scepticism. Citizens, media and political campaigners need to increase their vigilance, ensure their work promotes democratic values, if not political campaigns will be seen as the ultimate post-truth environment to which few pay attention.

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