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BULLSHIT AND LIES? HOW BRITISH AND SPANISH POLITICAL LEADERS ADD TO OUR INFORMATION DISORDER

Darren Lilleker  and Marta Pérez-Escolar 

Within what is known as the post-truth era, politicians strategically trade in alternative interpretations of data, make bold populist claims and on occasions be completely dishonest for party political gains. Such practices coincide with ever-declining trust in politicians and the democratic system, a phenomenon common to both Spain and the UK. We enquire whether public mistrust is deserved exploring the extent party leaders employ misinformation as part of their strategic communication. The paper analyses falsehoods made by political leaders as determined by major fact-checking sites EFE Verifica and Newtral in Spain, and the UK's BBC Reality Check and Full Fact. We categorise falsehoods as misinformation, alternative facts, bullshit or lies. Results show right-wing parties most responsible for all forms of falsehoods, or they are most likely to face analysis from factcheckers. Falsehoods are used by governments defending their policies, but also by oppositions to attack the government; especially alternative facts. The overwhelming majority of policy attacks based on false information are from opposition parties, particularly Spanish parties on the right. The flagrant use of bullshit and lies, while simultaneously calling out their more mainstream opponents for similar practices, poisons the notion of democratic pluralism and makes low public trust seem perfectly justified.

KEYWORDS Fact-checking; falsehood; lies; misinformation; political parties; trust

Introduction

Trust and truth have both turned into prized assets in democratic societies. Bok (1978) suggested: “whatever matters to human beings, trust is the atmosphere in which it thrives” (Bok 1978, 31). In fact, MacLeod (2015) posits trust is needed in any civilization, since it has an “enormous instrumental value and [...] intrinsic value.” In turn, MacKenzie and Bhatt (2020) argue lies are harmful “to those who have legitimate claims to know the facts, to democracy, to anyone who values truth and honesty” (MacKenzie and Bhatt 2020, 12). Hence, in this new digital era characterised by information disorders, apprehension and disbelief, trust and truth are increasingly more relevant for the stability of democracy than ever before (Herrero-Diz, Pérez-Escolar, and Plaza 2020).

A large amount of attention is paid to the circulation of disinformation online, with concerns about the role of foreign actors, conspiracy theorists or extremists and how to combat its spread, influence and societal impact (Pennycook et al. 2021). Concerns are also raised about the spread of misinformation by media and how over-dramatisation,

clickbait headlines and one-sided perspectives “poisons” the information environment (Baptista and Gradim 2021; Chadwick, Vaccari, and O’Loughlin 2018). Less attention is given to the extent politicians contribute to the mis/disinformation environment, which politicians are responsible for using falsehoods and in what context. It is not new to recognise some politicians do, on occasion, lie and may not face negative consequences for doing so (Armstrong-Taylor 2012). However, in an era when a US President will describe major news outlets as “fake news” when being critical of him, and his press secretary will talk of “alternative facts” when offering the perspective of the administration, one must explore if the phenomenon of political lying as a strategy is spreading.

This paper explores whether and when politicians lie comparing party leaders in the UK and Spain. Both nations have a range of parties from across the ideological spectrum and have become increasingly polarised in recent years (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020). Equally, concerns have been raised in both countries about the honesty of politicians and there being minimal consequences for open dishonesty (Gaber and Fisher 2022; Janezic and Gallego 2020). We focus on the outcomes of assessments by factchecking sites which test the veracity of key statements and explain in what way they cast doubt on the accuracy of claims. Through an assessment of when party leaders were found to have told a falsehood over a thirteen-month period we classify these by their severity. This paper thus explains which party leaders are found to tell the most falsehoods, the context and purpose of the falsehood and the forms falsehoods take. After conceptualising falsehoods within a discussion on trust we outline our methodology and findings and explore the implications from the study.

Political Trust in a Post-truth Era

The notion of post-truth defines a situation where people believe what they feel is true or would like to be true independent of the credibility of the source or the extent the statement is challenged. At one level post-truth describes a phenomenon where people trust in their own beliefs and common sense rather than seeking expert advice or knowledge (Van Zoonen 2012). At another it concerns the use of confirmation bias where new information is assessed based on whether it fits with preconceived biases, an important phenomenon when considering how post-truth fits within polarised political environments (Lilleker 2018). One of the more dramatic examples of confirmation bias driving behaviour was the attack on the US Capitol at the beginning of January 2021. After the 2020 presidential elections, Donald Trump repeated false claims of electoral fraud, stating he had won the “legal vote.” This conspiracy theory was accepted by many fervent supporters driving the most extreme to undertake a violent invasion of the Capitol building to force legislators to reject the election of Joe Biden. The invaders were mainly members of right-wing nationalist extremist groups, like the Proud Boys or Qanon, who firmly believed Trump’s false statements and rejected evidence that challenged their convictions. When polarised ideological ghettos magnify information disorders (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017) and reinforce outrageous behaviours, like the assault on the US Capitol, it is essential to start countering the spread of falsehoods to protect the integrity of democratic institutions (Pérez-Escobar and Manuel Noguera-Vivo 2022).

The challenge with preserving the integrity of the information environment, and the democratic institutions it serves, is public trust. When societies become ideologically and

affectively polarised, citizens are encouraged to take a side, that side then becomes a part of their identity and they invest their trust within those perceived as the champions of their cause (Cover, Haw, and Thompson 2022). Misztal (2013) argues humans have an innate need to locate sources they can trust implicitly, given many citizens feel politicians break promises and pursue self-serving policies (Hatier 2012) this leaves them open to manipulation by populists who offer true representation to the people (Urbinati 2019). Trust in politics thus seems to be, using Robbins (1998) analysis of interpersonal relationships as an analogy, to be at best damaged and at worst devastated. As Finkel's (2007) work proves when science "collides" with politics its veracity can be doubted. Politics, therefore, within a post-truth era, is found to be uniformly mistrusted and so many citizens will rely on their own intuition or find a source they can trust based on heuristics related to claimed values and rhetorical or symbolic representation. Such a situation is exacerbated when the falsehoods and disinformation which circulates is from politicians themselves and it is they, not just what some call "bad actors" (Von Drehle 2018) who corrupt public understanding of what is truth and what is false.

One way to preserve the integrity of the information environment is to censor content and exclude actors who perpetually disseminate falsehoods. Twitter, for example, suspended the official account of Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump) "due to the risk of further incitement of violence" (Twitter 2021) and to prevent him spreading further misleading statements. According to Newtral, a Spanish fact-checking media, Donald Trump had spread 29,508 false or deceitful statements in 1386 days (Baeza 2021). Similarly Parler, the social network used by pro-Trump extremists went offline after Amazon suspended it from its server hosting; Google Play and Apple also removed the platform from their app stores. Even Wikipedia was forced to publish a Universal Code of Conduct to provide a baseline of behaviour based on mutual respect, civility, collegiality, mutual support and good citizenship, condemning harassment, abuse of power, privilege, influence, content vandalism and abuse of the open source nature of the project (Wikipedia 2021). However, censorship can often fuel conspiracy theories and be used as evidence of exclusion of some voices, fuelling the notion liberal elites deliberately suppress more authentic voices to establish a hegemonic ideology over societies (Hellinger 2003).

Another solution to combat information disorders is fact-checking journalism. Factchecking gained prominence after 2016 when political speech was described as getting "wilder" and less anchored in fact (Graves 2013, 2), although the practice has its roots during Ronald Reagan's 1979–80 presidential campaign (Dobbs 2011, 4), when journalists began fact-checking his Republican candidacy for the US presidency regularly. The first case of debunking was found to be the result of a Channel 4 blog (Graves and Cherubini 2016) giving rise to further journalistic outlets skilled in fact-checking (Pérez-Escolar, Ordóñez-Olmedo, and Alcaide-Pulido 2021). A new kind of journalist specialised in verification has thus emerged. This professional, who works for media platforms such as Politifact, Pagella Política, FactChecker.org, Maldita.es, among others, has been attracting the attention of academics for several years. Elizabeth (2014) asserts fact-checking journalists "aim to increase knowledge by re-reporting and researching the purported facts in published/recorded statements made by politicians and anyone whose words impact others' lives and livelihoods." Elizabeth (2014) also explains these professionals seek verifiable facts and their "work is free of partisanship, advocacy and rhetoric." Nevertheless, fact-checking media include "openly partisan" business models (Graves 2013, 2) such as the progressive Media Matters which focuses on monitoring and combating "claims made by Republican

pundits and politicians” (Graves 2013, 2). Equally, the right leaning NewsBusters is a “conservative media watchdog group” that monitors and refutes statements made by Democrats (Graves 2013, 2). Hence, Graves (2017) is doubtful “about the effectiveness of factchecking” (2017, 519) and openly questions whether fact-checking projects can objectively evaluate the veracity of political claims. Nyhan and Reifler (2014) also explored political bias in the fact-checking process emphasising doubts about the capability of verification platforms to maintain objectivity and neutrality in debunking political information.

Despite the concerns raised by researchers, fact-checkers have paved the way for a new professional profile strongly engaged with traditional journalistic values, but also permanently connected with technological progress, as well as political and social change. In this sense, fact-checkers and traditional journalists refer to a profession that “necessarily implies issues of power, accountability and contestation in the production of truth claims and knowledge” (Zelizer 2000, 29). Thus, factcheckers are viewed as a necessary way to correct the challenges to democracy posed by post-truth politics (Birks 2019). Factcheckers have a long history in the UK. Channel 4 news set up the first Factcheck in 2005, focusing mainly on claims made during elections. In 2010 the BBC launched Reality Check and, largely due to dissatisfaction with the BBC’s reporting of claims during the Brexit campaign, in 2017 the independent Full Fact gained sufficient support through crowdfunding to be a player during the 2017 snap election. Factcheckers have thus been seen as key players in the media ecosystem, however largely they gain attention from media or commentators which then package and disseminate their findings within reports to the public (Chadwick 2017). While the UK factcheckers are non-partisan they remain limited by resources and are unable to check more than the most visible content from high-profile actors, which may include them being selective in terms of which facts they should check to earn wider media coverage (Tsang, Feng, and Lee 2022). However, they provide valuable information to the minority who are highly politically engaged and can influence the media agenda (Birks 2019, 106).

Context for Research

Spain and the UK have seen similar downturns in trust in political institutions over recent years, and both have seen the rise of populist parties and right wing movements. Both countries have a mix of independent and partisan media, high social media penetration, and both have established factcheck sites seen as independent and reliable. While UK elections are largely bipartisan and deliver stable, single party majority governments, trust in UK political institutions has reached an all-time low (IPPR 2021). In 2014 48per cent of respondents said politicians were purely “out for themselves,” this rose by 2021 to 63per cent. A March 2022 study by the Office for National Statistics showed 35per cent trusted the Conservative government, 34per cent trusted politicians generally and only 20per cent trusted any political party. Trust in government plummeted to 7per cent during the short-lived tenure of Liz Truss as prime minister September–October 2022. With only 32per cent trusting the media it seems many concerns associated with the post-truth information environment are proven correct (Lilleker 2018).

The divisive Brexit campaign, accompanied by various projections and promises, public awareness that Boris Johnson had been sacked three times from previous jobs for

lying and is documented as being dishonest (Bower 2020) will doubtless have contributed to the trust malaise. Yet Johnson was elected prime minister in 2019 with a significant 80 seat majority at a time when more people mistrusted (45per cent) than trusted (34per cent) him. By August 2022, when he was forced to resign following several overt lies, only 11per cent said they trusted Johnson compared to 76per cent who did not (YouGov 2022). The extent to which honesty matters is moot, Johnson was elected to end the impasse over Brexit and his lack of honesty seemed overshadowed by his positivity and self-confident image (Bower 2020). He enjoyed high poll ratings initially, which only waned when he stood by a senior aide who was revealed to have broken pandemic restrictions and his fall was exacerbated by revelations of parties at 10 Downing Street and the obvious obfuscation by Johnson and his top team over what constituted a party and what the rules actually meant (Baker and Lilleker 2022). The contest for the Conservative leadership which saw Truss win was highly negative and was set within a wider environment of negativity as the main opposition party, Labour, as well as Scottish Nationalists and Liberal Democrats, the two other major parties in parliament attacked the Conservatives on their 12-year record. Arguably this period has been fertile for disinformation to circulate having witnessed a constant battle of claim and counterclaim between the government and their opponents.

After the 2019 Spanish general election, the political landscape transformed from a primarily bipartisan system, dominated by the left-wing socialist PSOE party and the right-wing people's party (PP), into a pluralist and heterogeneous system. The PSOE won the most seats (120) but needed the support of other parties for Pedro Sánchez, the PSOE candidate, to be sworn in as prime minister. The result was a left-wing coalition government, between PSOE and Unidas Podemos a left-wing alliance between Podemos and United Left (IU are its initials in Spanish) who obtained 35 seats. Meanwhile, the far-right party Vox gained prominence and 52 seats in parliament. The conservative People's Party (PP) won 88 seats, and the right-leaning party Ciudadanos saw its support seriously decline and it attained only 10 seats. Currently, Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) is the Prime Minister of Spain. The Council of Ministers is structured into four Deputy Prime Ministers—three women from PSOE and the leader of the Unidas Podemos party, Pablo Iglesias—and 22 ministries. The current opposition political parties have formed a right-wing bloc comprised of PP, Ciudadanos and Vox. Beyond the national election, there have been two regional elections in Spain: in Andalucía and in Castilla La Mancha. Regarding the Andalusian elections, the former government was a regional coalition right-wing bloc formed by PP, Ciudadanos and VOX. However, after the 19th June 2022, the rightist PP gained power. In Castilla La Mancha, the PP lost control and after the 13 February 2022 a regional right-wing coalition government was formed by PP and VOX.

This period of political instability and changing voter allegiances sheds light on the importance of trust in political parties' and politicians' rhetoric. Former minor or fringe parties Podemos, Ciudadanos and VOX increased influence as the former dominant parties lost credibility. The new politics focuses on the reinforcement of identities and capturing power for segments of society. Communication is dominated by undermining the credibility of and refuting accusations made by opponents. This situation is emphasised when mainstream journalists act as overt representatives of ideological positions or political parties, using the power of mass media to damage the reputation of opponents as a political strategy (Mazzoleni 2010). As a consequence, the current Spanish information environment resembles a battlefield, where it is difficult to discern truth from falsehood, rather than a democratic debate characterised by critical thinking. This brief overview of

the recent political history indicates they invite comparison in terms of their information environment.

Methodology

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the nature, form and purpose of falsehoods within the communication of political leaders as determined by the major fact checking sites Newtral and Maldita.es in Spain, and UK BBC Reality Check and Full Fact in the UK. Consequently, the study addresses three key research questions:

1. What form of misinformation prevails in the political leaders' communication strategy?
2. Which party leaders are most involved in these political malpractices?
3. What are the main strategic purposes of making false or inaccurate claims by party leaders?

In addressing these research questions our data permits us to develop a framework to explain the use of misinformation as a form of strategic communication among British and Spanish party leaders. To this end, we conducted a quantitative study, in which two coders—the authors—classified the outcomes of fact-check reports on communication, in October 2022, from party leaders made public on the websites of Newtral, Maldita.es, UK BBC Reality Check and Full Fact as follows:

- Name of the leader and the party.
- Forms of falsehood. Falsehoods are statements presented as fact which are untrue (Farkas and Schou 2018). However, to classify every political falsehood as an outright lie is problematic as it depends not only on intentionality but provability (Mearsheimer 2013). Debates around the definitions and understandings of fake news, beyond its weaponisation to discredit media outlets, have examined various forms of expressions which are untrue but which at the same time are not necessarily proven to be lies (Anstead 2021). To classify false declarations of party leaders identified by these factcheckers we employed a grounded research approach. The approach taken was to examine the way factcheck sites determine the nature of a falsehood. Broadly their outcomes separated falsehoods into four types: errors, biased interpretations of data, statements for which there is no evidence, or statements for which there was counter-evidence. These align with literature which identifies such statements as misinformation, alternative facts, bullshit and lies. The latter two terms have highly emotive connotations, but we conceptualise them as grounded in scholarship and being discrete categories:

Misinformation. Misinformation is widely deployed in studies of misunderstandings of natural science and is often used to broadly denote any information that is false or inaccurate regardless of whether there is a deliberate intention to deceive (Southwell et al. 2019). For example, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic there was significant concern about the spread of inaccurate information due to not all facts about the disease being readily available or even known, or out of date information circulating and being taken as current (Ball and Maxmen 2020). These fears were compounded as claims were made regarding the severity of the disease as well as unproven cures advocated by the leaders of the US and Brazil, although these are classified in some papers as

misinformation we do not classify them as such. Rather we use this classification to describe either when politicians repeat false information from another source where there is no evidence they are aware it is false, or when they provide statistics which are inaccurate and later apologise. The latter category is the most prevalent in our classification. This category aligns with the notion misinformation is not relayed to deliberately deceive. We recognise in a political context this often means there are instances of politicians misleading audiences and being allowed the benefit of doubt, particularly when intention cannot be determined or is not seen as a concern for the researcher (Vraga and Bode 2020). However, when factchecking it is not always possible to determine intentions and therefore we follow the wording of the outcomes.

Alternative facts. Alternative facts, as a term, has been used as a political weapon and a form of defence (Barrera et al. 2020) and it is in the latter form we employ it conceptually. The debate over whether knowledge is objective or subjective goes back to classical Greece. Plato pitted “episteme” against doxa: facts against popular beliefs. Yet as Wight (2018) asks, is it truly possible to know anything beyond any reasonable doubt? He highlights a doctrine central to academia which stemmed from the writings of Nietzsche which argues alternative viewpoints and beliefs are of value to a society. This is certainly true in the context of pluralism. All parties can claim their ideological predisposition is correct and they offer a better programme for the future of society, which one is most convincing in the battle of ideas gains democratic power (Raeijmaekers and Maesele 2015). There is a long history of parties claiming the facts support their ideological interpretations of a particular situation, in particular over the running of the economy (Quinn and Shapiro 1991). Claims of fact are shown to be problematic for democracies, especially when the reality does not match the claim (Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2008), yet this is an immutable feature of pluralist democracy. Hence, we posit ideological interpretations should be viewed as alternative facts: biased interpretations of situations due to political and partisan predispositions. Research shows this is as much a feature of how citizens interpret politics as it is of party political communication and so is natural but problematic in the context of public trust (Bailey 2019).

Bullshit. While a colloquialism with negative connotations, the term has entered academic discourse. As a critique of political discourse, bullshit was popularised in 1986 by Henry Frankfurt in an essay, later turned into a book (Frankfurt 2005). Frankfurt defined bullshit as speech intended to persuade, often employing claims of fact, but having no grounding in evidence or regard for truth. For Frankfurt, the bullshitter is an individual with complete disregard for being factual but caring only about their ability to win over the public. Frankfurt was careful to differentiate bullshit from lying. From his perspective the liar intentionally tells an untruth and evidence can be produced to prove they are a liar. The bullshitter, however, may potentially be telling the truth or some parts of their argument maybe truthful, but because it cannot be evidenced then it is impossible to say what is truth and what is fabricated. All that can be determined is there is no publicly available evidence to prove or refute their claim. The term is now recognised as a means of describing a host of political statements, be they slogans, pronouncements or even statements of fact, but which have no supporting evidence (Gligorić, Feddes, and Doosje 2022). Bullshit has become endemic, according to some, alongside the notion of post-truth, as politicians can make a claim which is then repeated across media but will go either unchecked or not publicly exposed as being empty (Ball 2017). Hence, we propose bullshit as a category of falsehood which involves making unverifiable claims with a total “indifference to how things really are” (Belfiore 2009).

Lies. Our final category is the lie which, quite simply, is a verifiable falsehood which evidence can demonstrate to be wholly inaccurate. Despite being wholly inappropriate within a democratic society, studies have boldly claimed blatant lies have been employed to court public support for specific political projects, parties or candidates. It is claimed outright lies were told by the Brexit campaign and during subsequent elections in the UK (Gaber and Fisher 2022) as well as the communication of US president Donald Trump (Kenski, Filer, and Conway-Silva 2018). Some studies define lying as black propaganda, communication designed to slur an opponent or to convince people to act against their best interests (Robinson et al. 2016). Lying by politicians is shown to have the greatest impact on public trust, whereas misinforming can be excused, alternative facts understood as part of politics and bullshit is difficult to prove and open to subjectivity on the part of the audience. However, lies only have a negative impact on the liar if they are called out by a source deemed as completely independent (Fridkin, Kenney, and Wintersieck 2015). Hence, some may interpret outright lies simply as alternative facts due to them employing confirmation bias because they are claims made by the candidate they feel closest to (Anstead 2021; Lilleker and Ozgul 2021). However, lies can be the most poisonous to the information environment and for public trust in institutions, although all forms of falsehood can be perceived by the public as evidence politicians are dishonest and out for themselves.

These categories are grounded in the way factcheck sites pass verdict on communication when determining it is false. Although these categories are discrete and largely based on simple indicators, an intercoder reliability test was carried out on a sample of 20 statements per country. Given that 100per cent agreement was found no further discussion or revision of the coding scheme was required. Employing these categories allows us to assess the extent political communication from party leaders is problematic for public trust and in what ways. Understanding what pronouncements by politicians are proven to be false and how those falsehoods are categorised is important for understanding the decline of public trust in democratic institutions. Following the inductive method—based on starting with a specific observation process, identifying general patterns, and ending with conclusions—the coders agreed on drawing the following general assessment variables:

- The form of communication: interview, speech, media article, online article or blog-post, social media post or tweet (a nominal variable, coded yes or no for each item). No blogposts or tweets received attention from factcheckers.
- What was the political purpose: defending policy, promoting policy, election campaigning, attacking an opponent's policy stance or an opponent's character (a nominal variable, coded yes or no for each category).

We also coded the parties for their position within parliament, government, or opposition (a dichotomous variable) and for their ideology using the Chapel Hill ratings on the general left-right scale for the parties factchecked. This resulted in a scale from 1 being extreme left to 5 being extreme right.

In doing so, the search processes, which began on 1 July 2021 and ended on 31 July 2022, returned $N = 300$ items across Newtral and Maldita.es, and $N = 166$ across BBC Reality Check and Full Fact. The items were pertaining purely to statements made by party leaders and classified as false in some way by the factchecker. We analyse the data using descriptive statistics only identifying patterns within and between the two nations, further statistical analysis was deemed appropriate due to the low numbers and the high number of

dichotomous dependent and independent variables, such as the presence or absence of components (Branton and Dunaway 2008).

Political Information Disorders

Falsehoods are a political (mal)practice constituting a metaphorical piece of grit in the machinery of western democracies, forcing members of the public to question the veracity of political discourse in general as well as by specific actors. Hence, in determining how falsehoods are employed strategically and how widespread their use is, we can speculate the extent such practices negatively impact public trust in particular in parties, their leaders and wider institutions of democracy. These important questions, which we offer indications of below, offer indications of the state of our democracies within an era when post-truth seems to have become the norm.

What Forms of Falsehoods Prevail and Who Tells Them?

Despite the concerns raised regarding Brexit and the Johnson premiership, we find the bigger range of parties and the competitive “battlefield” environment in Spain, as well as municipal elections taking place, led Spanish political party leaders to use more falsehoods than their UK counterparts (for numbers and percentages see Table 1). Partially this is increased by including regionalist and separatist Spanish parties factchecked as well as the greater number of different pieces of communication which included falsehoods identified by the Spanish factcheckers.

Misinformation, where it is plausible a leader misspoke rather than deliberately misleading their audience is almost unique to the UK government. This is explained by prime minister Johnson making several inaccurate claims relating to a sum of money awarded people on low income to aid them cover their energy bills. He claimed the sum of £400 was awarded weekly when it was a single, annual payment. These are classed as misinformation as it is unclear whether this was in error or deliberate. UK factcheckers note he was corrected on several occasions, despite his obfuscation when corrected on camera on one occasion responding to the interviewer with the dismissive “whatever.” That sidenote aside, we find widespread use of alternative facts, often driven by ideological interpretations, as might be expected. However, the fact one third of falsehoods in the UK and two thirds in Spain were identified as either bullshit or lies shows deep problems with the veracity of political discourse in both nations.

TABLE 1
Overall prevalence of forms of falsehoods (absolute and relative frequencies by country)

Type of falsehood	UK		Spain		Total	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Misinformation	23	13	1	.3	24	5
Alternative facts	75	42	68	23	143	30
Bullshit	48	27	101	34	149	31
Lies	32	18	130	43	162	34
Total	178	100	300	100	478	100

Which party leaders were identified as producing the largest number of falsehoods and so the extent and nature of their contribution to information disorders in their respective countries shows interesting patterns (see Table 2) as well as an indication of both where and at upon whom the factchecking journalists concentrate their focus.

In the UK factcheckers focus entirely on the main parties with the Conservative government facing the greatest number of factchecks and overwhelmingly being proven to make the largest number of false statements. Claims of mis-speaking are largely the preserve of the UK Conservative government who, either due to high levels of scrutiny or being the least honest party in the UK stand alone in most categories. Labour, as the

TABLE 2

Types of falsehoods expressed by party political leaders in the UK and Spain (absolute and relative frequencies of untrue items by party)

Party	Types of falsehood				Percentage of total sample
	Misinformation	Alternative facts	Bullshit	Lies	
UK					
Conservative	22 (16%)	50 (36%)	46 (33%)	32 (23%)	30
Labour		20 (91%)	2 (9%)		5
Scottish National Party		5 (100%)			1
Liberal Democrats	1 (100%)				0.2
SPAIN					
Partido Popular (PP)		18 (17)	46 (43%)	42 (40%)	23
Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)		23 (42%)	12 (22%)	20 (36%)	12
VOX		1 (3%)	18 (58%)	12 (39%)	6
Ciudadanos	1 (5%)	4 (18%)	5 (22%)	12 (55%)	5
Junts per Catalunya		4 (22%)	6 (34%)	8 (44%)	4
Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC)		3 (17%)	2 (11%)	13 (72%)	4
Unidas Podemos		6 (38%)	2 (12%)	8 (50%)	3
Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya (PSC)		1 (8%)	6 (46%)	6 (46%)	3
En Comú Podem		2 (40%)	1 (20%)	2 (40%)	1
Barcelona en Comú		2 (67%)		1 (33%)	0.6
Catalunya en Comú			1 (33%)	2 (67%)	0.6
Candidatura de Unitat Popular (CUP)		1 (50%)		1 (50%)	0.4
Por Andalucía		2 (100%)			0.4
Unión Pueblo Navarro		1 (50%)	1 (50%)		0.4
Izquierda Unida				1 (100%)	0.2
Partido Popular Cataluña				1 (100%)	0.2
Partido Regionalista de Cantabria				1 (100%)	0.2
Adelante Andalucía			1 (100%)		0.2

main opposition. perhaps expectedly use alternative facts when interpreting data and on two occasions were called out for bullshit. However, this is part of an expected wide use of alternative facts across the major governing and opposition parties in both the UK and Spain. However, in both nations it appears the dominant, rightist parties are responsible for propagating the most egregious falsehoods and this is independent of whether they are in government (as in the UK with the Johnson-led Conservatives) or in opposition (as per the Spanish PP). These rightist parties are most likely to employ both bullshit and lies, the former one might expect to be a tactic for an opposition party but a governing party making non-evidenced claims—perhaps ones which do not reflect reality—is likely to have the most severe impact on public trust. This is problematic in the cases of the rightist UK Conservative government and the Spanish PSOE coalition government partner. That said, the Spanish governing coalition partners PSOE and Podemos are comparatively honest, particularly Podemos who are only called out for bullshit twice and proven to lie in eight statements. PSOE's record is not as positive but much lower compared to the major national opposition parties. In the Spanish case we can also note the prominence of the more extreme right parties Ciudadanos and VOX they, as well as the range of regionalist and separatist parties, are found to engaging in the strategic use of bullshit and lies. Such parties may be encouraging their supporters to employ confirmation bias and believe their false claims which will in turn strengthen their support for the parties and drive voter turnout and choice.

How Are Falsehoods Used?

To understand the purposes of communication involving different forms of falsehoods we check for patterns, or their absence, across both nations (Table 3). Few clear patterns exist with the way falsehoods are deployed. Alternative facts are mainly used as a way of defending policy and attacking opposition policy in the UK, perhaps obviously as they relate to ideological spin. As noted, UK prime minister Johnson was responsible for misinforming audiences when defending grants given to support people on low wages with increased fuel bills and so is largely responsible for the relationship between these variables. Perhaps a positive finding is lies are unlikely to be used to defend policy but,

TABLE 3

Political purposes for utilising falsehoods (absolute and relative frequencies of untrue items by political purpose)

Political purpose	Nation	Types of falsehoods			
		Misinform	Alt fact	Bullshit	Lies
Defend policy	UK	11 (6.6%)	37 (22.2%)	25 (15.0%)	18 (10.8%)
	Spain	0	15 (5.0%)	7 (2.0%)	12 (4.0%)
Promote policy	UK	8 (4.8%)	14 (8.4%)	19 (11.4%)	10 (6.0%)
	Spain	0	22 (7.3%)	24 (8.0%)	43 (14.3%)
Electioneering	UK	0	0	0	0
	Spain	0	6 (2.0%)	2 (0.6%)	10 (3.3%)
Attack policy	UK	3 (1.8%)	23 (13.8%)	5 (3.0%)	4 (2.4%)
	Spain	1 (0.3%)	30 (1.0%)	65 (21.6%)	65 (21.6%)
Personal attack	UK	1 (0.6%)	4 (2.4%)	0	3 (1.8%)
	Spain	0	1 (0.3%)	5 (1.6%)	9 (3.0%)

consistent with Spanish opposition parties being found most prone to use strategic falsehoods there is a tendency to use bullshit and lies when making policy attacks and telling lies in order to promote policy.

Links Between Party Position, Ideology and Use of Falsehoods

The raw data on party leaders' use of falsehoods suggests correspondence with ideology. It is also important to understand whether falsehoods are used purely by opposition parties or also by governments. We find mixed patterns across the two countries. Government communication in the UK is more likely to include falsehoods than the opposition, with lies largely the preserve of the Conservative government. Alternative facts are used widely, this finding makes sense as both governing and opposition parties will place an ideological spin upon their interpretations of data. The UK governing party and Spanish opposition parties are found most likely to be found to utilise bullshit and lies in their communication. Ideology, however, is the most important predictor of the forms of falsehoods utilised. Only when looking at the use of alternative facts do we find equity across the left-right spectrum. Having a right-wing ideology appears to be a strong and significant predictor for using all forms of falsehoods, in particular for Spanish parties (Table 4).

How Are Falsehoods Disseminated?

One might expect parties to lie most when using their own media, especially social media feeds, and this might be the case. We find factcheckers tend to focus mostly on prominent appearances by party leaders and it is there they found the most significant failures in honesty. Amalgamating all falsehoods (Table 5) we find policy statements and media articles defending policy are highly likely to contain falsehoods, as are interviews when attacking the policies of opponents. Spanish party leaders also use social media posts to make false claims when making policy attacks.

Such practices are problematic as speeches and official statements are likely to be further disseminated by news media, therefore any falsehoods will spread through society when included in headlines and news items. Furthermore, parties often extend the reach of these forms of address by posting extracts to their social media platforms, if a falsehood aids the persuasive capacity of the message, it is likely to be included. The outcomes of factchecks are unlikely to appear alongside original media articles and will never be promoted by a party strategically peddling falsehoods. Hence false information can circulate freely and unchallenged and impact citizens' attitudes.

Discussion and Conclusions

Despite being outside a period of a national election, we find politics is highly competitive and truth is highly contested throughout the election cycle. Falsehoods appear routinely embedded in party leader's communication strategies. Obviously, party leaders make a significant number of statements and speeches, give a lot of interviews and parties post to their social media profiles multiple times per day. Only a small number are found to contain false claims; however only a small number are factchecked. Despite the obvious caveats, we posit there is a problem with the communication of politics

TABLE 4
Party position and ideology and the use of falsehoods (F and %)

Party position Ideology	Nation	Misinformation		Alt-Facts		Bullshit		Lies	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Governing party	UK	22	13.3	50	30.1	46	27.7	32	19.3
	Spain	0	0	29	9.6	14	4.6	28	9.3
Opposition party	UK	1	0.6	25	15.0	2	1.2	8	4.8
	Spain	1	0.3	39	13.0	87	29.0	102	34.0
Left ideology	UK	1	0.6	21	12.6	2	1.2	0	0
	Spain	0	0	21	7.0	15	5.0	24	8.0
Right ideology	UK	22	13.3	54	32.5	46	27.7	32	19.3
	Spain	1	0.3	47	15.7	86	28.6	106	35.3

TABLE 5
Forms of communication including falsehoods and their purpose

Form of communication	Nation	Political purpose									
		Defend policy		Promote policy		Election		Attack policy		Personal attack	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
<i>Policy statement</i>	UK	61	36.7	28	16.9	0	0	4	2.2	2	1.2
	Spain	20	6.7	41	13.6	7	2.3	48	16.0	3	1.0
<i>Interview</i>	UK	21	12.6	4	2.4	4	2.4	14	8.4	1	0.6
	Spain	18	6.0	8	2.6	8	2.6	45	15	3	1.0
<i>Speech</i>	UK	5	3.0	1	0.6	1	0.6	11	6.6	3	1.8
	Spain	13	4.3	8	2.6	8	2.6	91	30.3	8	2.6
<i>Online article</i>	UK	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1.2	0	0
	Spain	0	0	1	0.3	1	0.3	2	0.6	0	0
<i>SMS post</i>	UK	2	1.2	0	0	0	0	4	2.4	0	0
	Spain	3	1.0	1 (%)	0.3	1	0.3	23	7.7	4	1.2
<i>Media article</i>	UK	7	4.2	0	0	0	0	2	1.2	2	1.2
	Spain	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

which is increased by those at the very heart of the operation of democracy: party leaders. Our analysis reveals falsehoods are used to promote party policy, to attack the policies of opponents and to defend oneself from criticism. While the most egregious forms of falsehoods come from rightist political parties, we posit there is a relationship between the use of falsehoods and the general malaise in trust in democratic institutions. Within what has become known as the post-truth era, politicians are found to strategically trade in alternative interpretations of data, as expected, but also to make bold claims based on limited or no evidence and on occasions be completely dishonest for party political gains. At the minimum, such practices coincide with the sharp decline in public trust in politicians generally.

Research shows the more the public are unsure whether they can believe the claims made by politicians the less likely they will trust politicians, engage with electoral politics and believe democracy is working for them (Torney-Purta, Barber, and Richardson 2004). Trust in the democratic system, from government to individual leaders, has declined in both Spain and the UK. This decline could be linked to the extent party leaders employ falsehoods as part of their strategic communication. The fact politicians employ falsehoods, and factcheckers shed light on their dishonesty, the more likely the public will lack confidence in the statements they read and hear. It is thus no surprise some assess political communication against their own common-sense reasoning or, due to the prevalent employment of alternative facts, may believe their side is more truthful. Worryingly, parties that often claim to be true representatives of the people, right populists, in Spain, are among those most likely to spread falsehoods. The results of the 2023 election, which showed PP and Vox winning 35.9 per cent of the votes, and PP earning a 12.3 per cent swing to them, leading indicates that there is no electoral penalty for being called out for misleading statements. The fact they use bullshit and lies, while simultaneously calling out more mainstream opponents for similar practices, poisons the notion of democratic pluralism. Such a situation places citizens in the position of not knowing if they can really believe anything said by a politician.

Within a context of low trust, democracies can become polarised around the alternative facts, bullshit and lies peddled by party leaders. Polarisation increases the perception political opponents are existential threats, reducing the possibilities of reaching a shared and collective understanding and achieving consensus. Citizens can protect themselves from manipulation by visiting factcheck sites. But, if low trust extends to the media, trust in factcheckers can also become polarised. When falsehoods circulate we cannot criticise citizens for being at best sceptical and at worst cynical when receiving political communication. While our research is limited due to us relying on the operation of factcheck sites. It is impossible for us to be confident they scrutinise the communication of all parties equally. Similarly, we simply follow the outcomes of the verdicts they make on communication applying our own system for categorising falsehoods. Factcheck sites have limited resources and often pursue stories to generate engagement (Birks 2019). The advantage is, however, they provide simple and clear assessments of communication and their assessments informed and worked well with the four forms of falsehood we developed for our typology.

We found the categories of misinformation, alternative facts, bullshit and lies provided a means of scaling factcheck outcomes and grading them according to their potential impact on public trust. We recognise the categorisation requires accepting a specific definition of misinformation, which can be used as a blanket term. Similarly, using the

conceptual definition of bullshit (Frankfurt 2005), may act as a distraction. However, based on our coding of factcheck outcomes, we feel it important to offer a way of categorising and grading falsehoods. The outcomes of factchecks are judgements of the extent a statement may or may not be wholly accurate. We offer our categorisation and grading strategy as a means to better understand the nature and severity of strategic falsehoods in political communication. Studies which incorporate countries with differing media and political systems and political cultures and periods covering high profile elections would extend understanding of the strategic use of falsehoods and also may involve extending or amending our categorisation. Understanding their deployment and developing research is important. It sheds light on the nexus of issues relating to public trust, engagement and participation. Falsehoods are a major cause of information disorders that weaken the democracy values of mutual respect, tolerance and equality. It took a global pandemic for trust in scientists to be strengthened, it is difficult to see how the trust issues within the political communication environment can be corrected when party leaders are a source of disinformation.

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