

Lynch, Michael, (2025). *On Truth in Politics: Why Democracy Demands It*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2025. 264 pages. ebook, \$20.97.

Politics today is beset by twin crises. As is widely discussed among political observers, the quality of democratic institutions has declined in many cases around the world. Simultaneous with the erosion of democratic institutions, our shared perception of events is disintegrating. Our beliefs about what is true reliably grow further apart each news cycle. Contrary to the saying, we are apparently entitled to our own truth as well as our opinion.

These complementary trends suggest a connection between democracy and truth. On the surface, though, it is not clear what the connection might be. In fact, truth and democracy are commonly held to be in tension, or irreconcilable. Privileging one seems to require devaluing the other. As history's many religious wars and totalitarian movements attest, those who believe that they have discovered the objective truth are disinclined to debate the matter in democratic fashion. On the other hand, privileged democratic procedure seems to dispense with any commitment to objective truth; in pluralistic political competition, popularity would appear to be the highest democratic value regardless of truth.

While this tension remains unresolved, all that is left for politics is the pursuit and exercise of power. This is all perfectly amenable to modern authoritarians, who are happy to lie and propagandize the notion of truth into oblivion while they also claim popular support through pre-arranged elections. Backed into the corner, where do defenders of democracy turn?

On Truth in Politics is philosopher Michael Lynch's ambitious attempt to demonstrate that democracy and truth are two sides of the same coin: separate but interconnected. The three chapters of Part I argue that the democratic process is necessarily one of truth-seeking. Three chapters of Part II do much of the heavy lifting of his thesis by defending the metaphysical

position that there are such things as political truths. The concluding chapter urges against defeatism, contending that we can restore consensus on the value of democracy and truth.

Lynch takes a philosophical approach. Drawing on Dewey and Rawls, he defines democratic politics broadly as reasoned argument among equals intended to make progress in meeting the political challenges of a community. Inherent in this activity would be respect among agents and the freedom to challenge authorities when they are wrong. Reasons must be supported by evidence in search of the truth. Cynics will reply that there is no truth in politics, only ungrounded moral assertions. Ordinarily, this question would lie in the domain of arcane philosophical debate. In the present context, however, when political commitments can determine judgments about the reality of objective aspects of the natural world—viruses and the climate, for example—this is not an abstract concern. Everything has become political.

Lynch handles the question of what political truth is by centering the same reasoned debate that defines democracy. Truth, in the end, is what ongoing honest democratic politics determines it is. It can change over time, but only for good reasons arrived at through a democratic process, not through imposition. Our cynics will call this circular nonsense that simply defines truth as democracy and vice versa, getting us nowhere. A superficial reading of Lynch would say that the truth is whatever we decide it is, robbing it of meaning.

This would be a mistake. The key lies in the “honest” part of democratic politics. There are true and false statements about the world and political truth must be grounded in these. Given the human propensity toward bias, democratic politics must rely on the practices and institutions that keep us honest when we reason—Lynch calls it “epistemic infrastructure”—rather than the virtues or expertise of any particular people. This infrastructure resides in the publicly shared expectations for professional behavior in the institutions designed to find the truth—education,

science, law, journalism, and so forth. Political truths are those propositions that survive ongoing scrutiny of good faith reasoning. This will never lead to unanimity but does bound our political propositions and disqualifies simple inventions designed only to serve only political ends.

Clearly, Lynch's democratic principles are often violated in real-world democracies. We can only aspire to his vision of truly democratic politics. This is difficult enough even when the majority of society accepts the foundations of our epistemic infrastructure—when we at least agree that there is a truth to be found and proceed from there.

Ours, though, is an era in which rejecting the plain truth itself has become a political tool and an identity marker; our prosaic word “lying” cannot even capture the enthusiastic embrace of the impossible fantasies that dominate today's public discourse. Vandals are tearing down our epistemic infrastructure in front of our eyes and telling us there is nothing we can do about it. If allowed to finish the job, the nihilistic ruins they leave behind will require a reconstruction effort likely to span generations. When facts in front of our faces are unembarrassedly denied, defenders of reason can be left bewildered. Lynch offers a much-needed statement and defense of both the reality and the central place of truth in politics. Given the subject's practical implications in politics and in the academic pursuit of truth, the volume will speak to those in fields from philosophy and history to political and other social sciences. It is unfortunate that it is unlikely to impress those who have discovered that the truth was overvalued from the beginning.

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