One aspect of political immorality has yet to prompt the kind of moral outrage that it should—namely, the pervasiveness of lies and deception in campaigns. As the presidential primary process rolls on, why hasn’t there been greater condemnation of candidates who lie?

In his essay “The Reinvention of Political Morality,” Thomas Edsall quotes a top operative in Mitt Romney’s campaign, who was trying to justify a recent campaign ad: [quote]
“First of all, ads are propaganda by definition. We are in the persuasion business, the propaganda business . . . Ads are about hyperbole, they are about editing. It’s ludicrous for them to say that an ad is something taken out of context. . . . All ads do that. They are manipulative pieces of persuasive art.” [end quote]

The ad under discussion here featured President Obama’s voice saying, “If we keep talking about the economy, we’re going to lose.” In fact, the President was quoting someone from the McCain campaign in 2008, but the quote was used in the ad as if the president were talking about himself. As Edsall remarks, “What was once considered sleazy becomes the norm.” A quick perusal of the website for the non-partisan fact-checking organization Politifact.com consistently finds a range of false, mostly false, or half-true assertions by candidates. So why are voters still embracing candidates who lie or deceive?

The most charitable explanation is that people believe that victory for their candidate ultimately promotes the public good, and therefore lies that help a candidate win are justified. Justifying lies on behalf of the public good has long been a staple of politics.

Another possible explanation is that lying simply doesn’t matter anymore. People tell lies all the time—between one and two lies per day, on average. So lack of outrage about politicians and their lies is simply a symptom of a moral failure to care about lying, or worse still, a failure to care about morality at all.

A third explanation is that people recognize that politics is about, for lack of a better word, bull, for short. Moral philosopher Harry Frankfurt writes that the bull artist pays no attention to the authority of truth at all. The difference between the liar and the bull artist, is that the liar recognizes and respects the truth, but chooses to lie for some other justification. The only thing that matters to the bull artist is whether speech is persuasive. Frankfurt believes bull is considered to be a much less of a moral violation than lying. The lingering question, though, is “why?” Perhaps we’ve simply come to expect that politics is a kind of language game of bull in which expectations of truth are simply suspended.

Another possible explanation is that some statements made in campaigns are less about the truth than about identity. Certain ideas simply become the central, unifying convictions—or ideology—held by people who belong to a given group, such as a political party, regardless of whether or not they are true. For example, it doesn’t matter whether tax cuts for the wealthy are the best way to create jobs. These views are simply core convictions of a certain group, and to belong to the group is more important than to be accurate.
A final explanation is that many people are simply ignorant of the fact that they are being lied to, and they are not motivated, for a variety of reasons, to investigate the truth. Perhaps they’ve so often heard, for example, that so-called Romneycare or Obamacare is a government run health care system that they simply don’t bother to investigate the claim. What *their* side says must be right; what the *other side* says must be wrong.

Multiple explanations for the lack of moral outrage about lying and deception are likely at work here. But regardless, the lack of concern about candidates who lie is troubling. It remains the case that telling the truth is a basis for the social bonds that hold us together. Further, as philosopher Sissela Bok writes, politicians could also show greater respect for voters and for our country by not depriving us of the opportunity to respond appropriately to the truth. Had we known President Johnson’s thinking about Vietnam during the campaign of 1964, for example, people might have voted differently. When it comes to solving our nation’s considerable problems, facts actually matter.

Politicians who lie may trick themselves into believing that they’re doing so for the good of the country. But to a large degree, their aim is self-interested power. Truth-telling in politics, they believe, is for losers. But *our country* has too much to lose, if lying doesn’t matter anymore. And we all will be better served if voters, and the media, hold politicians more accountable for their statements and start demanding honest debate, and honest candidates.

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