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Polis, politicians, polygraph. On the need to verify the political elites

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Abstract

This article discusses the potential use of lie detector tests in public life. It looks at what is already available and suggests ways to prevent dishonesty in areas such as government, the courts and politics. The focus is on mechanisms built into the human brain that facilitate the concealment of lies in politics and explains why solutions to counteract dishonest politics are ineffective. The article also presents arguments in favor of the thesis that the use of lie detection tools, including polygraph, can limit the pathological effects of these mechanisms in public life, particularly in politics.

Key words: politics, public service, deception, lie detection, polygraph, evolution of mind

Introduction: Lie detection in public life as a problem of contemporary democratic societies

Polygraphs are used in many countries in public service. There is extensive literature on the benefits and risks associated with this practice. One of the aims of this text

is to analyze them from the perspective of evolutionary and social psychology. The article also attempts to answer the question of whether testing candidates for the most important positions in terms of their truthfulness on issues important to citizens is a rational strategy. We focused in particular on the potential consequences of adopting such a solution for democracy. Another objective is to determine why the practice of testing candidates for key government positions, or those already holding such positions, using lie detection devices has not developed in democratic societies.

Detecting who is lying and who is telling the truth is usually difficult, sometimes even impossible. At the same time, mistakes in this area can be very costly. The cost is borne by people who are deceived by others. It can be particularly high when entire societies are misled by politicians and leaders through the mass media. It was probably the difficulty of detecting fraud and the lack of appropriate procedures for checking the mental and moral condition of leaders that were responsible for the greatest tragedies of societies that allowed themselves to be deceived by Machiavellian individuals (Florek, 2024). Perhaps the greatest conflict in history, World War II, would not have occurred if it had been possible to verify the truthfulness and morality of one man. As history shows, the spread of lies by those in power is a fundamental tool for enslaving the governed. One of many examples is the Soviet Union, about which Solzhenitsyn (1980: 533) wrote: 'In our country, the lie has become not just a moral category but a pillar of the State.'

It should therefore come as no surprise that when selecting individuals for important positions in the state, citizens are interested in their honesty. This is particularly evident when there are reasons to believe that candidates are not telling the truth on important issues. This was the case, for example, during the last presidential campaign in Poland in 2024. In the second round of elections, supporters of the competing politicians quite often accused the opposing candidate of lying. Both candidates were even called upon to undergo appropriate tests to verify their truthfulness on issues that required clarification: Rafał Trzaskowski was asked to undergo a drug test, while Karol Nawrocki was asked to undergo a polygraph test. Two MPs even brought the device to the parliament for this purpose (Bojakowski, 2024). Although neither candidate underwent the proposed tests, the idea of verifying the truthfulness of politicians, including by means of a polygraph, resonated very clearly during this campaign.

The legislation of many countries provides for the use of polygraph tests, for example in the recruitment of civil servants and public officials or in criminal procedures.

Such solutions have been used for years in many countries, although their scope is rather limited. Considering the disastrous consequences of entrusting key functions in the state to dishonest people who lie about important matters, it is difficult to understand why, as far as we know, no systemic solutions to this problem have been developed anywhere in the world, even though there are appropriate legal regulations in place for lower-level personnel. Recently, however, there have been calls, for example in the United States, for the development of such solutions (Dallek, 2010).

1. Lying and Lie Detection as a Driver of the Evolution of the Mind

It is impossible to determine precisely how the evolution of the human brain proceeded. However, it is possible to identify important factors that drove it. One of these is the development of language, which enabled both more efficient information transfer and disinformation. Lying became an important tool of intra- and extra-group competition in the fight for survival and reproduction. It is therefore not surprising that lying and misleading members of one's own group have been, and still are, forbidden and subject to negative sanctions in probably all moral systems that humans have developed. A liar can gain much at the expense of those who tell the truth, so the ability to detect a lie became a key adaptation. Proponents of the concept of „Machiavellian intelligence" argue that a kind of arms race involving the development of the ability to lie and detect lies is one of the most important factors driving the evolution of Homo sapiens' brain.

Gavrilets and Vose (2006) created a mathematical model of brain evolution consistent with the assumptions of the „Machiavellian intelligence" hypothesis and demonstrated its plausibility. Tooby and Cosmides (1992, 2007, 2008) believe that the specific architecture of the human mind evolved to determine who broke and who followed established social rules. Based on their social exchange theory, they argue that specific psychological mechanisms for social cognition evolved for this purpose, particularly those responsible for detecting, remembering, and punishing cheaters. Tooby and Cosmides believe that many other cognitive competencies, including those responsible for abstract reasoning, developed on the basis of psychological mechanisms for detecting cheaters.

Deception, or acting in such a way as to mislead others, can be done in many different ways: i.a. by falsifying documents, valuable objects, or pretending to be someone else. The most common form of deception, however, is lying. Research conducted by Bella dePaulo (2004), one of the most renowned deception researchers, indicates

that people lie on average twice a day. They lie slightly more often to strangers than to acquaintances. These lies are usually not harmless, sometimes told with good intentions, for example, by assuring someone that they look good despite the reality. Sometimes, however, these lies can ruin entire societies and countries, for example, when candidates for important office declares they are honest and have never committed a crime, even though in reality they suffer from antisocial personality disorder. Power-seeking psychopaths may claim to desire peace and prosperity for their citizens, even though they intend to start a war and are solely concerned with achieving their own selfish goals. The threat of voter deception is extremely real, as humans are very poor natural lie detectors. Experimental studies have shown that the average person detects lies only about 60% of the time, and experts fare only slightly better (Grubin & Madsen, 2005).

2. Detecting Liars in Public Life

Detecting that an individual is untrustworthy because they frequently deceive is more likely when we interact with them frequently. Figuring out who is a cheater was much easier than it is today in hunter-gatherer groups, small villages and towns, or even in the Greek *polis* where the idea of democracy was born. Robin Dunbar (2010) argues that the human brain is adapted to maintaining social relationships with around 150 people. In larger communities, the brain copes much worse. This makes it easier for dishonest individuals to create an attractive but false image of themselves in order to gain citizen support and, consequently, power. The development of media has made deceiving potential voters even easier.

Since the dawn of human history, lying has been perceived as an immoral and dangerous act. Therefore, various measures were taken not only to demotivate potential liars through harsh punishments but also to develop methods for detecting them. Before John A. Larson (Synnott et al., 2015) invented the polygraph in 1921, a device for detecting lies based on the measurement of somatic changes that typically accompany them, methods used were, to put it mildly, unreliable. It was believed, among other things, that a person subjected to torture would be more truthful, or that some higher power would come to the aid of an innocent person suffering to prove they were telling the truth. However, methods with some empirical basis were also used. In China, a person accused of lying was required to chew rice flour. If the flour remained dry after spitting out, they were considered to be lying. Similar methods, based on the fact that stress reduces saliva secretion, were used by inquisitors (Grubin & Madsen, 2005).

In the United States, the polygraph has been used for about a decade to examine intelligence officials (Synnott et al., 2015) and other government agencies (Cumming, 2007) to determine whether they have unlawfully disclosed classified information or are in relationships that carry such a risk. However, the validity of this practice and attempts to expand it to other groups have been questioned since the 1980s due to the polygraph's unreliability (Saxe, 1985). Because the device operates on the assumption that deception alters body function due to stress, it is inevitable that the device will fail due to the stressful nature of the examination, even for those who are telling the truth.

Back in the 1980s, Kleimutz and Szucko (1984) analyzed this problem and warned that using this method to enhance national security without considering the caveats stemming from psychological research could lead to abuse. Problems related to false lie detection led the U.S. Congress to pass legislation banning the use of polygraphs in private employment – the Employee Polygraph Protection Act (EPPA) – in 1988 (Rurbeck-Goldman, 2017). Government institutions have not abandoned this practice, but there has been a trend toward limiting it over the past decade (Synnott et al., 2015).

In Poland, there are legal regulations (Cempura, Kasolik, & Widacki, 2014) regarding the use of polygraphs in personnel selection and as part of recruitment screening procedures for certain services, including customs, counterintelligence, border guard, gendarmerie, police, and those working for internal security and counteracting corruption. There are no legal regulations permitting the conduct of such tests for employees of the Government Protection Bureau, which, according to the aforementioned authors, constitutes clear legislator negligence. The law also permits the use of polygraphs with the subject's consent in criminal procedures for evidentiary and dispositive purposes (ibidem).

Of course, in many other countries, the use of polygraphs is also permitted by law: primarily in criminal proceedings and by services responsible for the safety of citizens or performing other important state functions (Honts and Perry, 1992, Budaházi, 2012, Nikolovsky et al., 2024). Besides the polygraph, other methods based on measuring the body's psychophysical reactions are also used for lie detection. These include thermographic cameras, computerized graphometric examination, layered voice analysis, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), Eye Thermometer, Silent Talker, and Monoscanner (Budaházi, 2012). Some researchers suggest combining traditional interrogation techniques with fMRI to detect lies more effectively than before (Opancina, Sebek & Janjic, 2024). As Langleben et al.

(2005: 262–263) point out: „[polygraph] specificity is limited because it relies on the correlates of peripheral nervous system activity, while deception is a cognition event with top-down control by the central nervous system (CNS). Experiments using CNS measures obtained by electroencephalography (EEG) or functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) provide hope for more accurate detection of deception by comparing the time course and topography of regional brain activity during exposure to cues designed to elicit truth and lie." The simultaneous use of multiple lie detection methods and AI to analyze polygraph data, particularly neural networks (Rad et al., 2023), raises the hope that these methods will become more reliable.

3. Examining the Truthfulness of Politicians – Selected Aspects from a Psychological Perspective

Lying is a phenomenon that many people associate with politics. Among such persons – along with perhaps many lesser-known figures – was Hannah Arendt. In the context of the scandal surrounding the misleading of American public opinion about the Vietnam War, she pointed out that truthfulness has never been considered a political virtue. Arendt (1971: 2) believes that „lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings." She argued that lies appear more credible than reality itself because the liar knows exactly what their audience wants or expects and can appropriately prepare their story „for public consumption." To lend credibility to their lies, important politicians can enlist the help of entire teams of people responsible for creating their media image.

Public debate also surrounds the issue of determining other important characteristics of those in positions of power, such as their mental health (Ingersol, 2023), and particularly disorders related to the violation of social and legal norms, such as antisocial personality disorder (Florek, 2024). Psychotherapists have indicated that among their patients who lied pathologically, over half had personality disorders – including 16% with antisocial personality disorder, 15% with various personality disorders, 13% with borderline personality disorder, and 7.5% with narcissistic personality disorder (Curtis & Hart, 2012). Owen (2008) writes about the concealment of serious mental health problems by US presidents from the public. Between 1906 and 2008, serving presidents struggled with bipolar disorder (Theodore Roosevelt, Lyndon B. Johnson), major depressive disorder (Calvin Coolidge, Woodrow Wilson, Herbert Hoover), breathing-related sleep disorder (William Howard Taft), and alcohol abuse (Richard Nixon; see Owen & Davidson, 2009).

According to Owen, even those not suffering from clinically understood and diagnosed mental disorders may develop „hubris syndrome" during their term. Its symptoms include, among others, an obsession with controlling socio-political reality, a narcissistic focus on image rather than problem-solving, an exaggerated, pompous presentation of one's achievements, an association of one's own benefits with state interests, and a belief in one's own power, infallibility, and being „above" the criticism of others (ibidem). It is increasingly suggested in the scientific literature that hubris syndrome should be formally recognized as a mental disorder by being included in the latest diagnostic systems. Selten (2023) even proposed seven diagnostic criteria (core symptoms) for the syndrome. As the author writes, „[...] there is sufficient reason to consider the hubris syndrome for inclusion in our classification systems. The recognition of the hubris syndrome as a valid diagnostic category and a danger to mankind will constitute an important step toward prevention" (Selten, 2023: 5891).

Dallek argues that „Since at least the late nineteenth century, U.S. presidents have engaged in substantial and unjustified deception in a variety of domains, and future presidents will continue to do so unless new mechanisms are created to ensure greater accountability and oversight" (2010: 9). Dallek believes that misleading the public through lies and omissions became a common practice among presidents after the Civil War. He distinguishes three areas to which this practice applies, among others: presidential health problems, public policy; particularly in foreign affairs and homeland security, and abuses and crimes of executive power. He abundantly illustrates the misleading of public opinion in all three areas by many American presidents. The aforementioned author also expresses the opinion that the violation of moral standards by those who win the presidential election stems from an extremely strong motivation to obtain office and the fear that adhering to these standards could hinder this goal. He asks the question, „Is an ethical presidency—one that can be defined as lawful and honest in its public dealings—possible in the twenty-first century?" (2010: 9). In response, he notes that perhaps the example of George W. Bush, whose concealment of facts brought more harm than benefit, will serve as a warning to future presidents. He also points to the role of the media, which is increasingly aggressive in exposing violations of moral standards, which may lead to a reduction in this phenomenon (ibidem).

One might question whether the practice of investigating the truthfulness of intelligence officers is rational. We believe it is. Moreover, we believe there are compelling reasons why the strategy of investigating the truthfulness of individuals holding key positions in the state or seeking top positions in certain matters should be

considered at least equally rational. When assessing the rationality of any strategy, it is crucial to assess its optimality in terms of achieving the desired goal. Therefore, determining the potential benefits and losses associated with implementing a given practice is crucial.

Assuming the use of a truth testing strategy for key issues involving top government officials, let's examine the potential losses. On the one hand, we have the threat of hindering or preventing access to office for an honest person who fails a truth test. This causes a socially disadvantageous situation in which the office may be filled by someone with a lower level of competence. However, it can be expected that the differences in competence will not be significant, given the large number of potential candidates for important positions, and therefore, the losses to the community should not be significant. Furthermore, it can be assumed that a person who tends to react with high stress during a polygraph examination will react similarly in a situation of serious threat to the country in which they hold power.

The issue of monitoring the US president's health and informing the public on this matter has been debated for many years. The March 16, 2024, editorial of the renowned journal The Lancet is titled „Fitness to lead: the health of US presidents." The authors point out that in 2017, a proposal was made to establish a panel of experts (doctors, lawyers, former presidents, and vice presidents) to assess and report on the president's health. However, this proposal received little attention and, apart from debate, yielded no practical results. However, similarly to Lawrence K. Altman, one of the most prominent representatives of medical journalism, publishing in The New York Times, the authors of the aforementioned text note several problems related to the procedure for an independent and transparent assessment of the president's health, including: how to determine potential political or medical biases of doctors? Would they be required to declare their political party affiliation? Would members of the independent panel personally examine the leader, or would they rely on disclosed information? What should be done if experts disagree? These are important issues, of course. However, bearing in mind that President Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered the disclosure of his 1955 heart attack and then easily won re-election, one must fully agree with the editors of The Lancet that „honesty remains the least complicated, if not also the best, policy" (2024, vol. 403: 997).

The potential losses resulting from the lack of procedures for examining the truthfulness of individuals holding important offices in key matters are widely known and, in some cases, reach the catastrophic proportions. Therefore, if we compare the harm of potentially hindering access to office for an honest but stress-prone person

with the potential harm to millions of people – including the extreme loss of their lives – the result of this cost calculation is obvious.

It is difficult to understand why many countries allow or even mandate lie detector testing for employees of secret services or government agencies, yet do not apply similar practices to those elected to hold key state positions. We believe that the claim that it is worthwhile to verify the truthfulness of those seeking the highest offices in the state, at least with respect to critical issues such as their health and moral condition (e.g., a serious illness that may prevent them from holding office, or a history of serious violations of the law, particularly treason or collaboration with foreign intelligence), requires no further argument. Rather, it requires an explanation as to why candidates for important offices are not vetted in this regard.

4. The Scandal of Overconfidence

Leaving aside the legal, historical, and perhaps philosophical issues responsible for this state of affairs, we will focus on the psychological mechanisms that, at least to some extent, allow us to understand why the demand for research into those holding the highest offices—including their credibility and truthfulness—has not yet gained widespread support; and, with a few exceptions, is not even raised in the public sphere. It seems that there are at least three important reasons for this state of affairs: the reluctance of legislators, the lack of appropriate tools, and the passivity of citizens.

The first two concern issues rather barely related with psychology. However, in this regard, if Arendt (1971) and Dallek (2010) are correct in their assertion that deception is an almost standard strategy in the political sphere, then it is not surprising that politicians lack sufficient motivation to combat it. Assuming that politicians' truthfulness is not so bad, the reason could be sought in the realm of legal philosophy, and in particular in the justified fear of restricting passive electoral right. However, there is no doubt that in the case of important state offices, this right is more severely restricted than active suffrage, for example, in the case of the presidency, on the basis of age; or—looking at US law—place of birth. A clear premise for such restrictions is therefore concern for the qualities of the person holding this important office, including mental and personal competence, patriotism, and loyalty.

Perhaps the reluctance of legislators is motivated by the lack of appropriate tools for assessing truthfulness. If this is indeed the case, one can hope that this problem will gradually be resolved with the development of increasingly reliable methods

for detecting lies. However, it seems that methods with sufficient effectiveness exist, as the tools currently in use have been deemed effective enough by many legislators that—as we have shown above—their use in important areas of social functioning is permissible in many countries.

In this situation, the most likely explanation seems to be civic passivity. If citizens' rights are not clearly violated, they are not sufficiently motivated to take action. From a biological perspective, the standard strategy for action toward other organisms is neutrality (Miller, 2001). Motivation to take action arises when entering into, or avoiding, interaction with another organism can contribute to increased inclusive fitness (Hamilton, 1964), or—to simplify somewhat—affect its chances of survival or reproduction. The human brain relatively easily detects such situations when another human, usually nearby, might provide assistance, threaten it, or become its sexual partner. Due to evolutionary delay, manifested by the brain's maladjustment to the new environment, it is much less able to detect the significance of another human's actions within the situational context generated by cultural institutions. These include, among others, those related to the delegation of power, such as parliamentary elections. In their case, they do not interact directly with important people, so the perceived possibility of influencing them seems limited. Even activating the phylogenetically newest brain regions, the frontal cortex, which enables thinking and decision-making, can only slightly alter the strength of the motivation to take action against those in power and their candidates. In current democracies, the power of a single vote is relatively small, which translates into low cognitive engagement in electoral decision-making and potential electoral passivity. This may be compounded by the belief that it is difficult to obtain reliable information about candidates due to access only to their campaign images. In the case of other actions that could change the status quo, such as launching a legislative initiative or initiating civic movements, moving beyond a neutral strategy is even less likely. Taking such action would entail too high a cost for the individual compared to the potential gain, considering the chances of success and the potential impact on their well-being. Taking a stand against those in power obviously carries an even greater cost and a high risk of suffering a significant loss, given that rulers usually wield considerable power.

Unfortunately, for at least several decades, the process of citizens' alienation from politics has been intensifying in various societies. The spectacular collapse of the great 20th-century utopias, which resulted in unimaginable suffering for millions, certainly contributed to this state of affairs. Paradoxically, the increasing power of the media and public debate over abuses of power do not increase civic participa-

tion, but rather intensify the sense of distance between „ordinary people" and the ruling elites. Trust in political elites is also weakened whenever those who make the law themselves violate its rules. This leads to the recognition that double moral standards are a widespread phenomenon, and consequently to normative chaos and an increased level of anomie (cf. Bornand & Klein, 2022). Slogans about voting for the „lesser evil" have long been prevalent in public spaces, calling into question the validity of elections. The criteria for selecting those in power were rational in small groups or traditional communities, whose members not only knew the candidates' qualities and life histories but could also constantly monitor their actions and decisions. In a world of large, anonymous populations, such oversight is, of course, an illusion. 21st-century societies seem not only disillusioned with trust in politicians but also devoid of hope for positive change in this area. Unfortunately, this is not a optimistic conclusion in the context of developing a civil society. A high level of political alienation can lead to extremely destructive behavior. The feeling that those in power are not fulfilling their promises, failing to meet the needs of citizens, but rather driven by selfish motivations, leads to lack of understanding of social norms, helplessness, and a diminished sense of meaning in life. Desperation can lead to the adoption of radical views and actions not only directed against the establishment but also those that may harm uninvolved and innocent individuals (Florek, Gulla & Piotrowski, 2019). Citizens' sense of loss of control and lack of understanding of political events may also result in support for authoritarian solutions (Neerdaels et al., 2024).

Conclusions

If the above analysis of the current state of affairs is accurate, is there any chance of overcoming the impasse in testing politicians' truthfulness using scientific methods? We believe this is possible if those entering politics demonstrate initiative and are provided with appropriate institutional conditions to verify their credibility and truthfulness (Florek, 2024). First and foremost, it is necessary to determine what questions voters would like to ask individuals holding or running for important offices. One might assume that these questions would concern the morality of their past actions, health status, and intentions in areas that cannot be otherwise verified (e.g., a clean criminal record does not exclude someone from committing a crime). However, this is merely speculation. To determine what average citizens would actually like to learn, appropriate survey research would be necessary. Determining this and creating an appropriate set of questions could motivate politicians to vol-

untarily submit to such testing, as they would have a reasonable basis for believing that a positive test result would translate into gaining or regaining public trust.

It is reasonable to assume that individuals who agree to and pass such credibility tests will thus gain at least a slight advantage in the eyes of the electorate over those who refuse. Gaining even a slight advantage could, in the long run, lead to the widespread adoption of this practice and the creation of an entirely new political elite (Florek, 2024). The very prospect of answering questions important to citizens/voters under the conditions of a polygraph or similar examination would likely be a deterrent for those with much to hide, which would likely limit their participation in public life.

It should be emphasized that detecting fraud is important not only in case of those seeking high-profile public office. It is even more crucial for those already in office. If only because – as Lord Ashton aptly noted – power can corrupt, which is also confirmed by the results of psychological research (Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001; Wojciszke, 2011).

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