

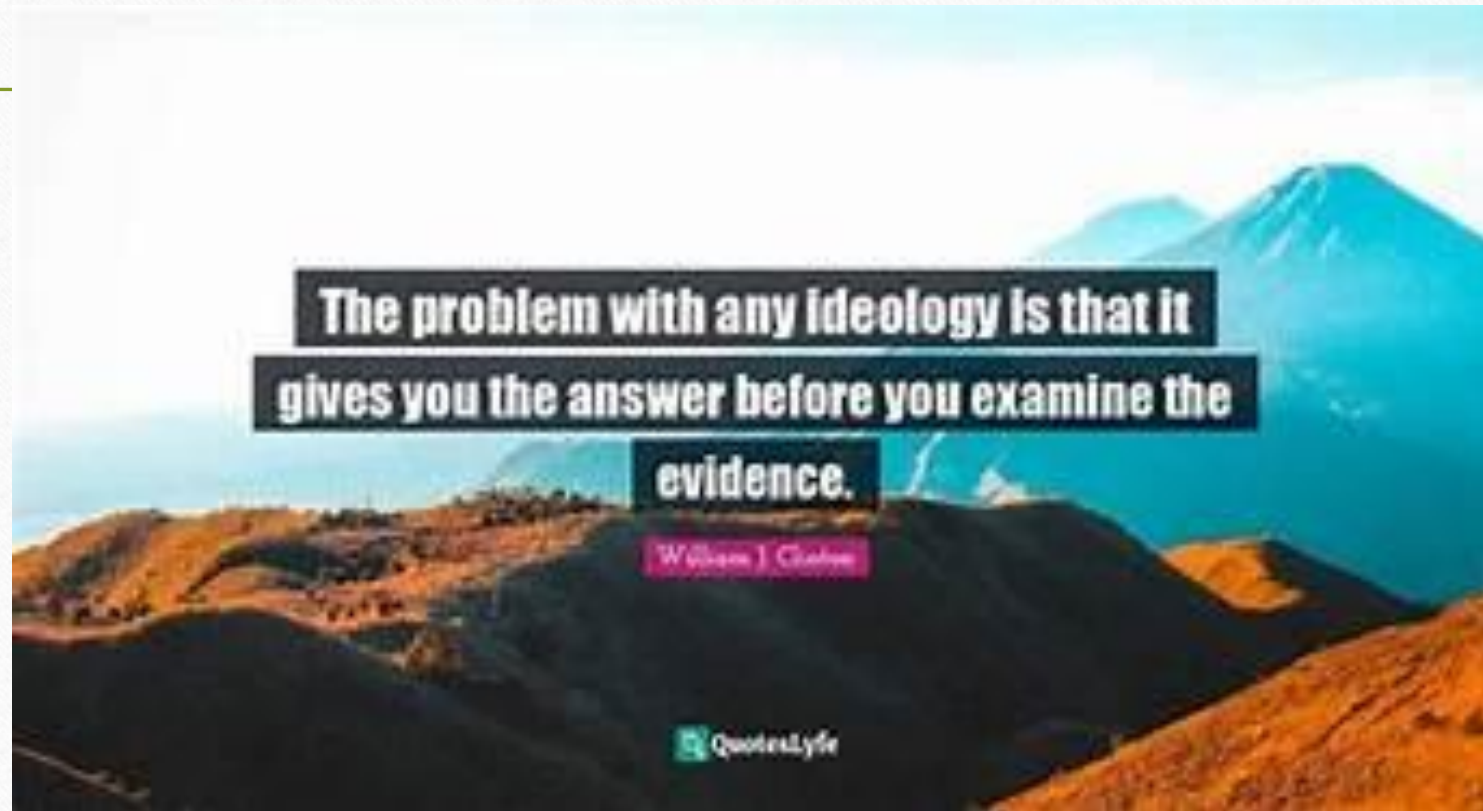
# Fighting for Truth

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OLLI Presentation Spring 2026

By Dr. Rob Demski

# Ideology and Evidence



# Four Levels of Truth Claims

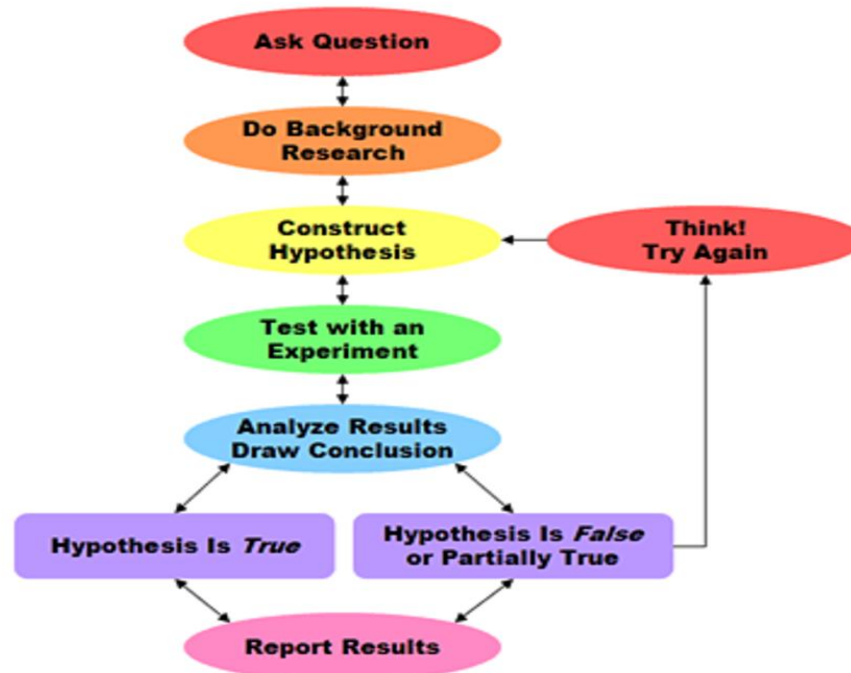
Collins, F. S. (2024). *The road to wisdom*.

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- Necessary Truths: universal & inescapable
- Firmly Established Facts: overwhelming scientific support, true in the aggregate
- Uncertainty: potentially true, supporting evidence currently insufficient
- Opinion: facts & evidence are irrelevant, subjective opinion

# Scientific Process & Truth Claims

## Scientific Method



# Two Rules of Reality-Based Institutions

Rauch, J. (2021). *The constitution of knowledge*.

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- 1. Fallibilist Rule: no one has final say on what is true
- 2. Empirical Rule: truth does not depend on who is making the claim

# Reality-Based Institutions

Rauch, J. (2021). *The constitution of knowledge*.

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- Research Universities
- Journalism
- Government Agencies
- Legal System
- Libraries & Museums

# Scientific Research Under Pressure?

NYTs: 5/22/25 NSF-grants-Trump-cuts

- NSF grants funded through May 2025:
- 

2015 – 2024 yearly avg = \$2 billion

2025 funding = \$ 989 million

- NYTs: Trump Cuts Science Funding to Lowest Level in Decade

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/05/22/upshot/nsf-grants-trump-cuts.html>

- Denial of reality-based findings:

<https://scienceexchange.caltech.edu/topics/sustainability/evidence-climate-change>

# Journalism Under Pressure?

- A reality-based information gathering institution
- Decline in trust is not universal:  
<https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/657239/five-key-insights-americans-views-news-media.aspx>
- Partisan increase: 3 reasons: <https://www.pew.org/en/trend/archive/fall-2024/media-mistrust>
  1. accelerating polarization
  2. new media platforms
  3. news industry declines
- Washington Post curries favor?

# Govt Agencies Under Pressure?

Election Commissions: Brennan Center for Justice: [www.brennancenter.org](http://www.brennancenter.org)

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- Function of election commissions
- How prevalent is voter fraud?
- Brennan Ctr website: <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/debunking-voter-fraud-myth>
- What functions does the myth serve?
- Other challenges to govt reality-based institutions

# Legal System Under Pressure?

<https://time.com/7272466/law-firms-trump-wilmerhale-jenner-block-paul-weiss-covington-burling/>

- WilmerHale
- Jenner & Block
- Paul Weiss
- Others pressured:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Targeting\\_of\\_law\\_firms\\_and\\_lawyers\\_under\\_the\\_second\\_Trump\\_administration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Targeting_of_law_firms_and_lawyers_under_the_second_Trump_administration)



# Libraries & Museums Under Pressure?

[museumsassociation.org](http://museumsassociation.org)

- Smithsonian funding threats
- George Washington plaque
- National Park bookstores
- DOD removes 600 books



# Other Challenges to Reality-Based Institutions

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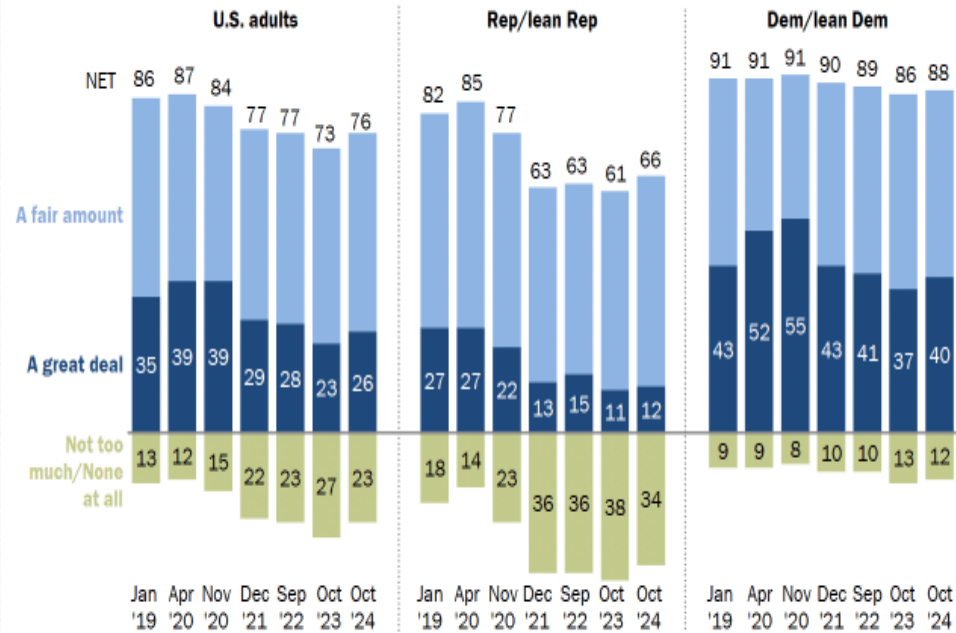
- Normalized lying & disinformation
- Some parts of the internet & social media
- Epistemic trolls
- Cancel cultures; left & right
- Authoritarianism

# Public Perceptions of Science

pewresearch.org/science/2024/11/14/public-trusts-in-scientists . . .

## Confidence in scientists remains higher among Democrats than Republicans

% who have \_\_\_ of confidence in scientists to act in the best interests of the public

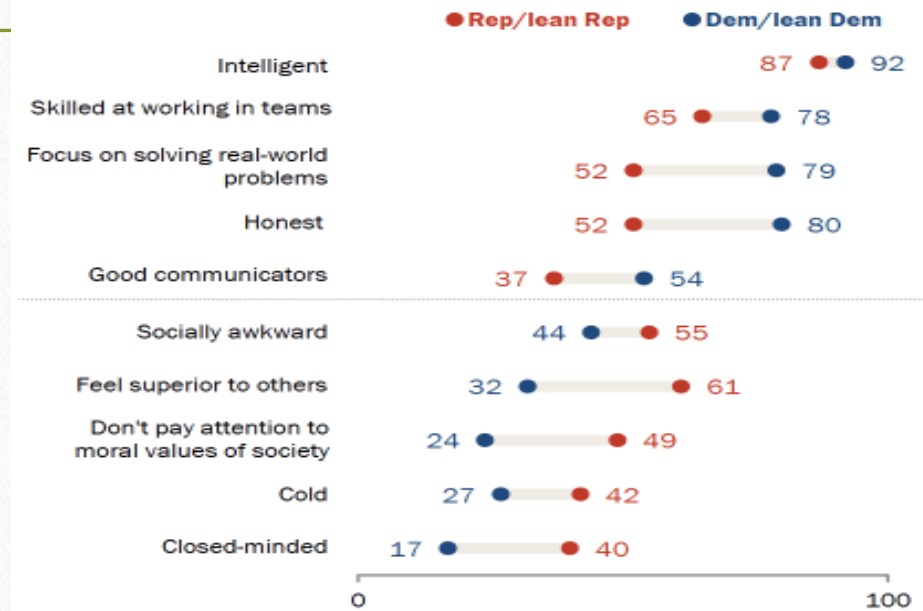


Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.  
 Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 21-27, 2024.  
 "Public Trust in Scientists and Views on Their Role in Policymaking"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## Republicans and Democrats differ in views of research scientists' traits, including honesty

% who say each of the following statements describes most research scientists well



Note: Respondents who gave other responses or did not give an answer are not shown.  
 Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 21-27, 2024.  
 "Public Trust in Scientists and Views on Their Role in Policymaking"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

# Authoritarianism vs. Democracy

Stanley, J. (2018). *How fascism works*.

Authoritarian  
Leadership  
Style

SlideSalad.com



# Truth in the Hands of Authoritarians

Synder, T. (2017). *On tyranny*.

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- 1. Open hostility to verifiable reality
- 2. Endless repetition
- 3. Open embrace of contradiction
- 4. Self-deifying claim

# Weaponizing Common Sense

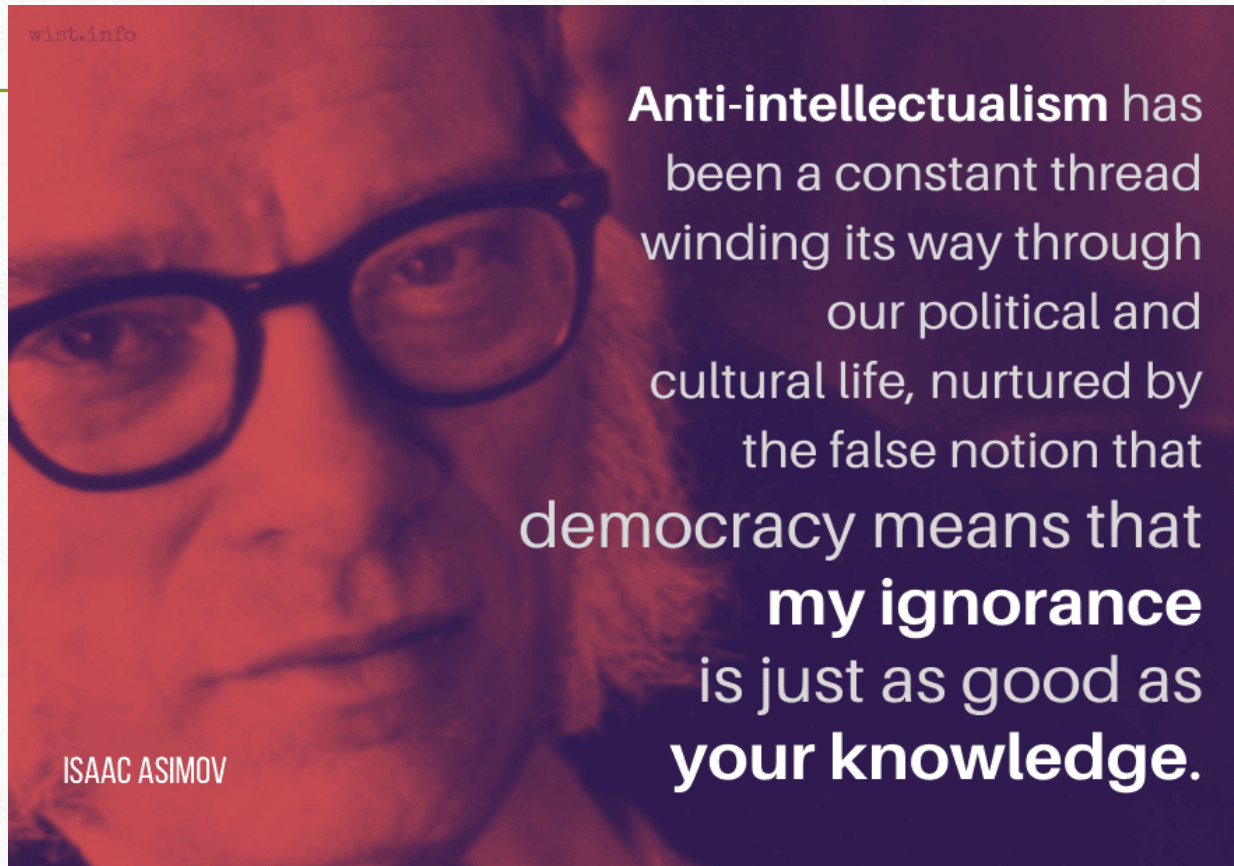
Rosenfeld, S. (2011). Common sense: A political history.

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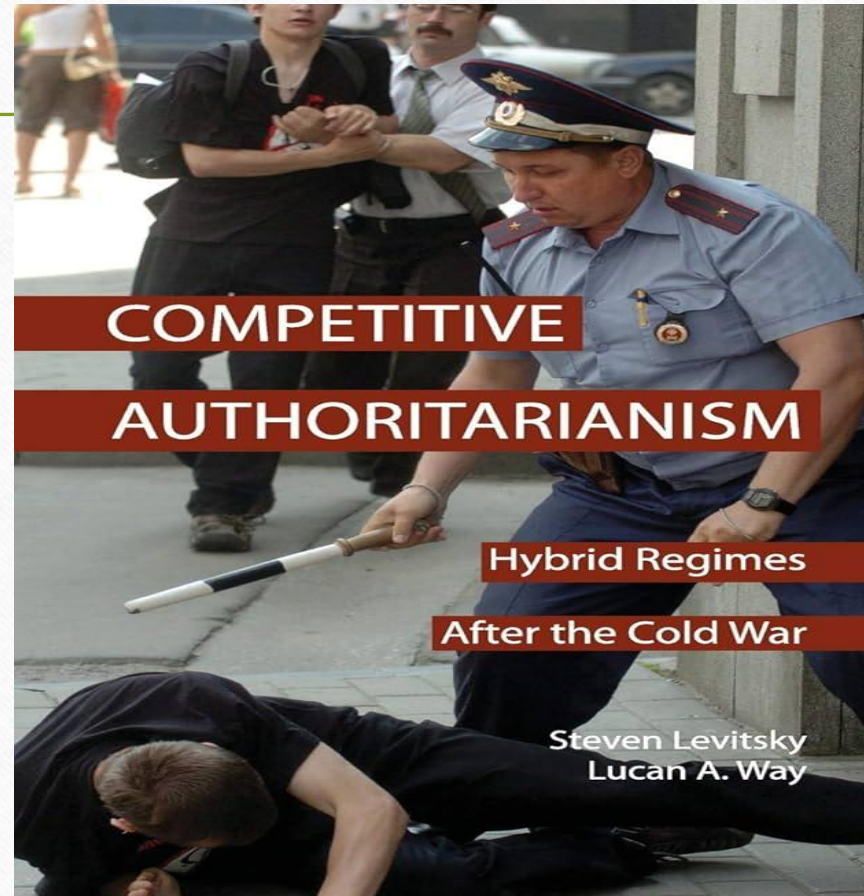
# Anti-intellectualism & Expertise

Jacoby, S. (2009). *The age of American Unreason.*



# Authoritarianism in Democracy?

Levitsky, S. & Way, L. A. (2002). *The rise of competitive authoritarianism*.



# Patrimonialism in Democracy?

Hanson, S. E. & Kopstein, J. S. (2024). *The assault on the state: How the global attack on modern government endangers our future.*



# Democracy Needs Evidence-based Institutions

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- For good policy development & oversight
- For having a civilized political debates & critical thinking
- To foster innovation & economic growth
- To settle civil & criminal legal disputes
- To preserve the culture & history of its people
- To ground ideologies in the truth claims of the actual world

# Evidence-Based Institutions Need Democracy

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- Both institutions have the same values and needs
  1. Openness, debate, critical inquiry
  2. Exploration of a wide variety ideas, solutions, approaches
  3. Wide collaboration and participation
- Endangering one institution endangers the other

# American Democracy Compared

ourworldindata.org Democracy Index 2024

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- U.S. score = 7.85 [1 to 10], 27 countries score higher  
Norway = 9.81, Denmark = 8.28, Canada = 8.69, Uruguay = 8.67, Russia = 2.03
- 1. free& fair elections = 9.17
- 2. enjoy civil liberties = 8.50
- 3. political participation = 8.89
- 4. preference for democracy = 6.25 [2006 = 8.75]
- 5. have functioning govt. = 6.40 [2006 = 7.90]

In Conclusion:

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