

Why People Believe the Lies Donald Trump Tells

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Over breakfast a few months ago, a friend, Jim, began to repeat some major Trump lies about President Obama, immigrants and the economy. Jim is college educated, a very successful businessman, and very nice. The others and I sat there speechless as Jim rambled on with “facts” uttered by Trump that were demonstrably false. I left breakfast shaking my head at his belief in these Trump lies.

I’ve spent a lot of time trying to understand why so many people, like Jim, believe the lies Donald Trump tells. Every election brings exaggerations and spin, but no major political figure in recent American life has pushed the limits of falsehood the way Trump has. Like many people who stand outside his orbit, I often hear one of his boldest false claims and catch myself wondering: *How can anyone possibly believe this?*

The easy answer is to dismiss his supporters as gullible or misinformed. But in my view, that explanation doesn’t get to the heart of what’s really going on. The truth is more complicated and more human.

Belief has never been just about facts. To understand why Trump’s constant lying resonates with millions of people, you have to understand the deeper psychological, social, and epistemological structures that shape how any of us decide whom to trust.

Ultimately, this may be less a story about Trump himself and more a story about how belief works in an age defined by fragmented information and declining trust in institutions.

1. People Believe Trump’s Lies Because They Believe in Trump

For Trump’s most loyal supporters, his statements are not treated as isolated truth claims; they function more like affirmations of loyalty. Once someone sees Trump as their champion—someone who fights for their identity and status—his words take on symbolic meaning rather than literal meaning.

Facts lose their grip once identity steps in. When Trump speaks, his supporters hear something like, “I’m on your side.” That emotional connection outweighs fact-checks, charts, or expert corrections.

If a statement helps reinforce the bond they feel with him, if it signals that he understands their grievances, it feels emotionally true, even when it is factually false.

This isn’t a malfunction of human cognition; it’s how group loyalty has worked for most of human history.

2. Lies That Feel True Outperform Truths That Feel Remote

Trump has a knack for telling lies that mirror people's emotional experiences, anxieties about economic insecurity, frustrations with cultural change, resentment toward elites, fear of losing status. Some lies, especially those about immigrants, speak to some white people's concern that in 2042-2044 white Americans will become a minority.

A claim doesn't have to be factually accurate to succeed; it just has to capture an emotional reality people already feel. When Trump says "the system is rigged," many hear a description of their own lives—whether or not his explanation matches reality.

A lie that resonates emotionally is far more persuasive than a truth delivered in the dry language of policy.

If a claim matches someone's internal emotional landscape, it often doesn't feel like a lie at all.

3. Entire Media Ecosystems Now Exist to Sustain His Narrative

Misinformation isn't just about someone getting a detail wrong. The deeper issue is that many Americans now live inside sealed media environments where:

- Trump's claims are treated as obvious truths
- Corrections are dismissed or never appear
- Counterevidence is framed as elite propaganda
- Trump himself is cast as the only trustworthy narrator

Within such an ecosystem, believing him is not irrational. It is predictable.

Belief depends on exposure. You cannot question a fact you never encounter.

4. The Collapse of Institutional Trust Opens the Door to Alternative Realities

A core part of Trump's political strategy has always been undermining trust in institutions, journalists, courts, scientists, agencies.

Once someone believes those institutions are corrupt, the entire way they assess truth changes. In that context, Trump's statements feel more trustworthy than corrections from sources they've been taught to distrust.

Belief stops being about evidence and becomes about **who** is perceived as honest.

When institutions lose legitimacy, strong personalities often replace them.

5. Conspiracy Logic Offers Simple Comfort in a Chaotic World

Many of Trump's lies borrow the structure of conspiracy theories. They provide:

- a clear villain
- a clear victim
- a simple story
- a moral frame
- a sense of hidden insight

Conspiracy thinking doesn't thrive because it's logical. It thrives because it's comforting. It imposes order on overwhelming events.

Believing that invisible enemies are working to undermine Trump, and by extension his supporters, creates a worldview where everything has purpose and nothing bad happens randomly.

It places Trump at the center as a besieged truth-teller, which can be deeply emotionally satisfying.

6. Fact-Checking Often Strengthens False Beliefs

Challenging a deeply held belief can feel like an attack on someone's identity. Trump anticipates this by labeling all criticism as hoaxes, witch hunts, or attacks from corrupt elites. That framing turns corrections into confirmation.

If the "establishment" is out to get him, then fact-checks simply prove the point.

This creates a self-sealing belief system: doubt becomes disloyalty, and rejecting corrections becomes an act of strength.

7. Trump Sounds Honest to People Who Want Him to Be Honest

Although Trump speaks in fragmented, emotional, improvisational bursts, and with evidence of cognitive decline, many people find that style more authentic than polished political speech.

He expresses anger and resentment without filters. His tone feels raw and unmediated. Many people mistake **emotional authenticity** for **factual authenticity**.

Humans are wired to trust the *way* something is said long before we verify the accuracy of the content.

The Real Question Isn't Why People Believe Trump's Lies, It's How Belief Works

Trump is not the origin of this dynamic; he is a catalyst. He taps into mechanisms that already existed:

- identity-driven reasoning
- emotional truth overpowering factual truth
- polarized media environments

- eroding trust in institutions
- conspiracy logic as psychological comfort
- resistance to correction
- confusion between emotional sincerity and factual accuracy

People believe his lies not because the lies are inherently persuasive, but because they fit into an entire crisis of trust and meaning that predates him, and will continue after him.

If we want to understand political belief in the 21st century, we can't reduce falsehood to bad reasoning. Belief is social, emotional, and identity-laden.

Trump's great political skill is not lying. It is understanding the conditions in which lies turn into stories, stories turn into identities, and identities harden into what feels like unshakeable truths. This is how I am able to understand why, at breakfast, my friend Jim enthusiastically repeated Trump's lies. I knew that if I presented him with facts, it would be fruitless. So, I just smiled and continued to eat my French toast.