

ERC Starting Grant 2024
Research proposal [Part B1]

Deception in Democracy: Political Lying Accusations and Their Effects on Democratic Citizenship

DEMO-LIES

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Host institution: University of Antwerp

Project duration: 60 months

In today's age of 'misinformation', politicians are frequently accused of bending the truth to their advantage. As citizens rely on accurate and accessible information to meaningfully engage with politics, political lying violates the contract between citizens and their elected representatives. Political lying accusations therefore have the potential to erode citizens' trust in and commitment to representative democracy as a system of governance.

While political lying accusations may be as old as politics itself, we know little about when accusations of political lying take root, how accusations of political deception are perceived by citizens, and what their effects are on citizens' democratic citizenship.

To shed light on the issue of political lying accusations and its implications for democratic citizenship this project: (1) describes the historical trends in political lying accusations; (2) identifies the conditions under which politicians accused one another of deception, and characterizes the attributes of both the accused and accusers of political lying; (3) studies citizens' perceptions of accusations of political deception by exploring the individual and contextual factors that influence these perceptions; (4) investigates the consequences for democratic citizenship by examining how exposure to lying accusations affects citizens' trust in democracy, their support for liberal democracy as a system of governance, as well as their active engagement with politics. The empirical analyses focus on 20 European countries and rely on an integrated multi-method approach including automated text analysis, qualitative interviews, observational and experimental surveys, and longitudinal survey evidence.

By addressing these critical knowledge gaps, this project will provide invaluable insights into the dynamics of political deception and its consequences for democratic citizenship.

Section a: Extended Synopsis of the scientific proposal (max. 5 pages, references do not count towards the page limit)

“Political liars are destroying democracy”, 21 February 2017, Salzburger Nachrichten

“Ministers lying to Parliament undermine democracy”, 17 October 2023, BBC

1. Motivation, Objectives and State of the Art

Accusations of lying are as old as politics itself. Already in the early democracies of Ancient Greece, political deception and accusations thereof posed a central challenge for democratic decision-making (Hesk, 2000). In recent years, accusations of political lying have taken centre stage in representative democracies worldwide. Some scholars and commentators speak of ‘post-truth societies’ in an ‘age of misinformation’ (Harsin, 2018; O’Connor & Weatherall, 2019), while others present anecdotal evidence that political lying has increased in recent years (Clemmitt, 2011; Osborne, 2005).

Accusations of political lying can represent sincere attempts to call out and expose others who bend the truth to their political advantage. At the same time, rhetoric in which politicians accuse others of lying can also be employed instrumentally to discredit opponents. In both cases, political lying accusations have the potential to harm and derail representative democracy. A relationship of trust between the represented and the representative is a prerequisite for legitimate political representation (Mansbridge, 2011; Rehfeld, 2009; Schweber, 2016). If citizens are under the impression that politicians are lying, this violates the social contract underlying representative democracy. Accusations of political lying can therefore damage said relationship of trust and lead to a decline in trust in and support for democracy. What is more, since partisans are likely to perceive accusations of lying through a partisan lens, political lying accusations have the potential to increase disaffection between political camps and augment polarization.

DEMO-LIES examines the prevalence, nature, and determinants of politicians’ lying accusations and studies how political lying accusations are perceived by citizens and what their consequences are for citizens’ democratic attitudes and behaviour. Doing so, DEMO-LIES introduces a **novel research agenda** within the realm of political representation. The project studies political lying allegations from a relational perspective. This **relational approach** to evaluating political lying accusations takes into consideration both the accused (*the target*) and the accuser (*the source*). This approach opens up avenues for the examination of **party-level attributes** of the target and source of accusations and the relationship between them. Furthermore, it offers a dynamic view of **citizen responses** to lying allegations. It enables inquiry into how citizen-level political identities and elite cues (of both the *target* and the *source*) interact in shaping both citizens’ perceptions of lying accusations as well as the repercussions of lying accusations for **citizens’ democratic attitudes and behaviour**. The project engages with four central research questions in four work packages (WPs):

- WP 1. **PATTERNS:** *Has the prevalence and nature of political lying accusations changed over time?* Leveraging advances in natural language processing and natural language understanding, DEMO-LIES engages in large-scale automated text analysis to collect unique longitudinal data of political lying accusations in 20 national parliaments. This enables the mapping of temporal and thematic trends of political lying accusations. The newly collected database on political lying accusations will be made available to the academic community.
- WP 2. **DYNAMICS:** *Which political actors are involved, under which conditions are accusations of political lying made, and whose lying accusations are accurate?* Integrating data from WP1 with data on context-level and actor-level characteristics, DEMO-LIES conducts in-depth analyses of the actor-level, context-level, and accusation-level drivers of political lying accusations in parliamentary debates.
- WP 3. **PERCEPTIONS:** *How do citizens respond to accusations of political lying?* With a combination of qualitative interviews, observational and experimental survey evidence, DEMO-LIES studies under which conditions citizens accept or reject political lying allegations. The project explores and tests how political attitudes as well as group identity structure citizens’ perceptions of both the accused and accuser of political lying, and how the (in)accurate nature of the lying accusation moderates this relationship.

WP 4. **CONSEQUENCES:** *How does exposure to lying accusations affect individuals' democratic citizenship?* Triangulating evidence from qualitative interviews, survey experiments, and longitudinal survey data complemented with data collected for WP 1, DEMO-LIES investigates the consequences of political lying accusations for citizens' democratic citizenship. The project explores and tests how exposure to lying accusations affect citizens' satisfaction with the democratic process, regime support for representative democracy, as well as citizens' active political participation.

Rather than limiting the analysis to proven instances of *actual* political lying, this project studies political lying *accusations* for two reasons. First, not only actual instances of political deception, but also accusatory lying rhetoric has the potential to shape citizens' beliefs and democratic attitudes and behaviour. This is all the more true given that lying accusations can be used in a strategic and instrumental fashion as a valence attack. Second, we can only confirm for a subset of lying accusations that they correctly identify a lie, as the majority of lying accusations have not been verified. A focus on accusations of lying is therefore not only theoretically compelling, but also empirically feasible.

State of the Art

Despite the claim by commentators that political lying has increased in recent years (Clemmitt, 2011; Osborne, 2005), we know next to nothing about the prevalence and content of lying accusations by politicians, what explains why politicians accuse others of lying, how this is perceived by citizens, and what the consequences of lying accusations are for citizens' democratic attitudes and behaviour. DEMO-LIES sets out to answer these questions by studying the occurrence of political lying accusations on the elite level, and the reactions to lying accusations on the citizen level. However, neither the prevalence, the reception, nor the consequences of political lying accusations have been studied in political science. To explain why political lying accusations occur, how these are perceived, and what their implications for democratic citizenship are, the project therefore draws on related, adjacent elite-level and citizen-level research.

Elite-level research on political deception: Political theory and philosophy have focused on the normative question of whether and under which conditions lying by politicians can be considered ethical (Arendt, 1972; Bok, 1999; Machiavelli, 1993). Studies in behavioural economics have formulated formal models stipulating that lying or misrepresenting to truth can be a rational strategy for politicians to gain a competitive advantage over competitors (Armstrong-Taylor, 2012; Austen-Smith, 1992; Bucciol & Zarri, 2013; Callander & Wilkie, 2007; Davis & Ferrantino, 1996; Woon & Kanthak, 2019). A handful of studies have examined the characteristics of lying politicians, arguing that electoral competitiveness and partisanship affect the prevalence of lying (Armstrong-Taylor, 2012; Bucciol & Zarri, 2013; Janezic & Gallego, 2020). These studies focus on instances of political lying and its perpetrators themselves, thereby ignoring that politicians' (alleged) lies are made public through a communicative process in which a *source* accuses a *target* of lying. Moreover, there has been no research into the political conditions conducive to political lying accusations. What is more, while some fact-checking agencies, such as PoliFact, rate the accuracy of politicians' claims, we do not have systemic knowledge about which lying accusations accurately expose deception and which are mere political rhetoric to discredit components. Inspired by the negative campaigning literature (Maier & Nai, 2023; Nai, 2020; Walter et al., 2014), DEMO-LIES studies the **elite-level** and **context-level determinants** of political lying accusations. From a **relational perspective**, the project examines the party-level characteristics of and relationships between politicians *accusing* others of political lying and those *being accused*, as well as the true or false nature of the lying accusations, and the political and institutional circumstances in which such lying accusations take root.

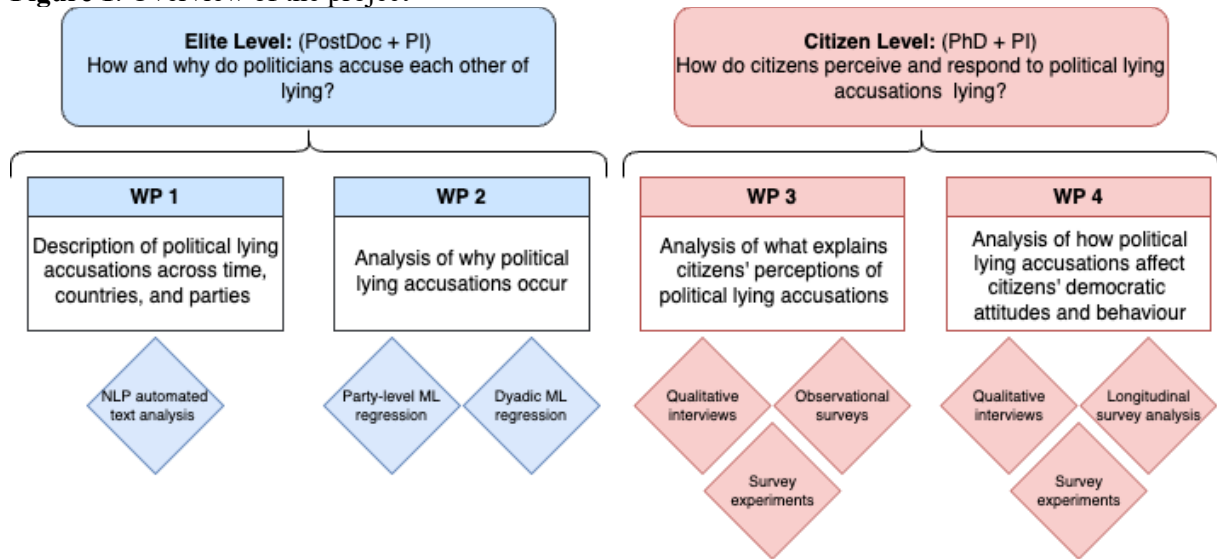
Citizen-level research on perceptions: Studies in social psychology have found that people are generally not very good at detecting deception by other people (Bond & DePaulo, 2006; Vrij, 2008; Vrij et al., 2017). Mattes et al. (2023) found that this also translates to the political realm: citizens have great difficulty detecting whether politicians are lying or not. Since direct lie detection is difficult, people often tend to rely on third parties when adjudicating whether a statement is a lie or not (Park et al., 2002). This highlights the importance of DEMO-LIES's **relational approach** to political lying

accusations for understanding how such accusations are received by citizens. When evaluating allegations of political lying, citizens arguably process this new information in light of previously held political beliefs and views about the political actors involved. Individual-level research on **populist** attitudes (Akkerman et al., 2014), **technocratic** attitudes (Caramani, 2017), and **conspiracist** beliefs (Castanho Silva et al., 2017) highlights that citizens' views on politics and representation form a perceptual screen through which new information is evaluated. DEMO-LIES incorporates these perspectives to establish what determines citizens' perceptions of the frequency with which lying accusations occur. Research on **motivated reasoning** has moreover argued that when citizens are presented with new information, they often pursue directional goals in attitude formation, i.e., the aim of confirming previously formed biases (Druckman, 2012; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Previous research in the fields of communication science and political psychology has demonstrated that individuals' political identities and attitudes play a significant role in shaping their reactions to false and misleading messages (Arceneaux & Truex, 2023; Cook et al., 2015; Ecker et al., 2022; Jolley & Douglas, 2014; Swire-Thompson et al., 2020). Studies have moreover shown that correcting misinformation has proven to be challenging due to the presence of partisan-motivated reasoning (Brashier et al., 2021; Ecker et al., 2014). Despite these advances, we know little about when *accusations* of lying are accepted or discarded by citizens, given that citizens likely respond to cues from both the source and the target of the allegation. A relational approach is particularly crucial because not all accusations of lying are necessarily sincere appeals to the truth. Using an actor-based relational approach, DEMO-LIES therefore studies how citizens' political beliefs and partisan-motivated reasoning shape their reactions to political claims of deception, and whether partisan identity shapes how citizens respond to true and false allegations.

Citizen-level research on democratic consequences: The consequences of exposure to accusations of political lying for citizens' democratic citizenship have not been previously studied. It remains unclear how exposure to accusations of political lying affects citizens' **perceptions of the quality of democracy**, their **support for liberal democracy**, and their **political participation**. DEMO-LIES builds on previous studies in the fields of negative campaigning, scandals and corruption, and political incivility. Studies in these fields have explored their effects on citizens' perceptions of democracy and their engagement in political activities. These investigations have indicated that exposure to negative campaigns, scandals, and incivility can have adverse effects on political trust and satisfaction with democracy (De Vries & Solaz, 2017; Van't Riet & Van Stekelenburg, 2022; Von Sikorski, 2018). Furthermore, negative campaigns, scandals, and incivility have been found to influence citizens' propensity to participate in politics (Chong et al., 2015; Lau et al., 2007; Nai, 2013; Otto et al., 2020). Moreover, recent studies highlight a strong link between partisan and ideological polarization and citizens' views on democracy (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Krishnarajan, 2022). Ideological preferences are found to influence how people perceive (anti-)democratic acts, and individuals may compromise democratic principles for partisan motives (see also Saikkonen & Christensen, 2023; Simonovits et al., 2022). DEMO-LIES therefore studies how political lying accusations affect citizens' evaluations and views of democracy and their democratic engagement, and how these are shaped by partisan-motivated reasoning.

It is important to stress that political lying accusations should not be conflated with negative campaigning, scandals, or political incivility. While accusing another politician of lying is indeed a form of negative rhetoric, such allegations are not limited to electoral campaigns but are arguably part and parcel of daily political practice (Osborne, 2005). Additionally, while substantiated cases of political deception can lead to political scandals, insincere allegations cannot be classified as such. Moreover, while insincere accusations, used as a political strategy, could be considered a form of political incivility, truthful expressions of deception can be seen as rightful efforts to uphold democratic norms and values. Therefore, it is important to study political lying accusations in their own right.

Figure 1. Overview of the project



Work Packages and Methodology

DEMO-LIES investigates political lying accusations and their implications in four work packages (WPs) (see Figure 1). DEMO-LIES will be executed by the PI in collaboration with a postdoctoral researcher and a PhD candidate. The project relies on a mixed-methods approach, including Natural Language Processing (NLP) in large-scale text analysis, multilevel regression modelling, qualitative interviews, cross-national observational surveys, survey experiments, and cross-national longitudinal survey evidence.

Work Package 1: Automated Text Analysis

Accusations of lying in politics seem ubiquitous, yet we know little about how prevalent accusations of political lying are and how this varies over time and between countries. WP 1 maps and describes the prevalence and nature of political lying accusations made during national parliamentary debates. Taking a relational approach, WP 1 maps both the *accusers* and the *accused* of political lying. Analysing these accusations in **parliamentary debates** is valuable, as these provide a direct and unfiltered source of information about lying accusations by and against politicians. Media sources tend to be influenced by the ideological leaning of the outlet (Puglisi & Snyder, 2011), and they often overreport negative attacks (Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). In contrast, parliamentary speech acts are vital tools for political communication and position-taking by Members of Parliament (MPs) (Proksch & Slapin, 2015). Access to corpora of parliamentary debates is also free and readily available. WP 1 employs advanced **multilingual computational linguistics** and **natural language processing (NLP)** techniques to identify accusations of lying in parliamentary debates (Joulin et al., 2017; Marrero et al., 2013; Vaswani et al., 2017). This involves **manual annotation** by human annotators and **supervised machine-learning models for detection, named-entity recognition, and relation extraction** (Mochtak et al., 2023). Additionally, the accusations are analysed for their topical/issue grounding with the help of **topic modelling, keyword extraction, and semantic clustering** (Grootendorst, 2022; Zhang et al., 2020). These data will, for the first time, give insight into the use of lying accusations by politicians and enable comparisons across time and countries.

Work Package 2: Party-Level and Dyadic Multilevel Regression Analysis

WP 2 investigates the determinants of political lying accusations, differentiating between actor-level, context-level, and accusation-level explanations. Aggregating data from WP 1 to the **party-year level**, complemented with data on political parties' characteristics (incl. governing/opposition status, electoral success, political ideology, and populism), WP 2.1 examines with **multilevel models** which political actors are accused of political lying and who the accusers are. WP 2.1 tests the expectation derived from the negative campaigning literature that MPs from both incumbent and populist parties are more likely to be *accused* of lying, while MPs from ideologically extreme parties and opposition parties are most likely to accuse others of lying (Maier & Nai, 2023; Nai, 2020). WP 2.1 also studies **party dyads** of

parties' sending and receiving accusations to study the effect of relational variables such as ideological differences, electoral success asymmetries, and previous lying accusations between parties. WP 2.2 examines the context-level determinants of political lying accusations using **multilevel models**. Specifically, it is expected that both institutional characteristics (incl. electoral systems, party discipline, and parliamentary rules and norms) and dynamic context variables (incl. electoral competitiveness, fragmentation, and societal affective polarization) affect the occurrence of political lying accusations. Using **NLP tools** to match relational pairs of accusation matches from WP1 with data from fact-checking agencies, WP 2.3 explores the extent to which lying allegations expose actual political lying or are instead a mere political ploy. Furthermore, actor-level explanations of (dis)confirmed lying accusations will be tested, testing the expectation that MPs from parties that are populist, ideologically extreme, or in opposition are more likely to have been correctly accused of lying while being less likely to correctly accuse *others* of lying.

Work Package 3: Qualitative Interviews, Cross-National Surveys, and Survey Experiments

WP3 studies under which conditions citizens perceive accusations of political lying to be accurate indications of lying and under which conditions they affect electoral support. Three explanations of political lying accusation perceptions are empirically examined: a) individual-level characteristics; b) source and target characteristics (i.e., the 'accuser' and the 'accused'); and c) accusation-level characteristics. Using new **observational survey evidence**, WP 3.1 describes (1) to what extent citizens believe political lying accusations occur, propagated by and towards which parties, and about which kinds of issues, and (2) tests which individual-level characteristics drive these perceptions. The expectation is that citizens' populist attitudes, technocratic attitudes, and conspiracy beliefs affect perceptions of prevalence and that partisan identities shape perceptions of which parties are more frequently accused – as well as accuse others – of lying. Using **qualitative interviews** and **survey experiments**, WP 3.2 examines how citizens' affective evaluations of the actors involved (as *accused* and as *accusers*) drive the perception that the allegations are accurate reflections of political lying and how this affects electoral support. Using a partisan-motivated reasoning framework (Taber & Lodge, 2006), WP 3.2 studies how group identities in a context of affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019; Wagner, 2021) and negative partisanship (Bankert, 2020) shape perceptions of lying accusations. Subsequently, WP 3.3 differentiates between corroborated and uncorroborated claims of political lying, and examines how fact checks of political lying accusations can attenuate motivated reasoning and affective partisanship in lying perceptions using **survey experiments**.

Work Package 4: Qualitative Interviews, Longitudinal Survey Analysis, and Survey Experiments

WP 4 examines the effects of political lying accusations on democratic citizenship. It assesses the impact of these accusations on satisfaction with democracy, political trust, support for democracy, and political participation. WP 4.1 explores the effects of lying accusations on citizens' evaluations of the *functioning* of democracy using **focus groups** and **in-depth interviews** and tests whether lying accusations affect political trust and satisfaction with democracy using **longitudinal cross-national survey data** (from CSES, ESS, and WVS) matched with **data on accusations from WP 1**. In WP 4.2, the effect of lying accusations on support for democracy is studied by conducting time-series cross-sectional analysis on WP 1's data complemented with **Bayesian latent trait measurement models** for democratic support (Claassen, 2020) as well as using **survey experiments** with a **multidimensional measure** of support for liberal democracy as dependent variable (Claassen et al., 2023; Zaslove & Meijers, 2023). Finally, WP 4.3 studies the effects of lying accusations on political participation. To do so, **WP 1 data** is combined with **longitudinal cross-national survey measures** of institutionalised and non-institutionalised political participation. Moreover, an *intended behaviour measure* of political participation (Boonekamp-van Lit & Meijers, 2023; Carey et al., 2022) is implemented after WP 4.2's survey experiment to assess the causal effect of lying accusations on citizens' self-reported tendency to engage themselves politically.

Country Case Selection

The project's geographical scope encompasses a wide range of European democracies, and includes the United States for comparative purposes. WP 1 and WP 2 measure political lying accusations in parliaments of **20 representative democracies** (19 European countries plus the US). The cross-national

longitudinal survey analyses of WP 4 (combined with WP 1 data) are also conducted for these 20 countries. The new (observational and experimental) surveys in WP 3 and WP 4 are fielded in six democracies: the Czech Republic, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and United States. DEMO-LIES' country selection ensures diversity in terms of region, electoral systems, party systems, democratic experience, and the presence of anti-establishment actors. While not all of these country-level characteristics are independent variables of interest, their variation allows for an exploration of their moderating effects.

Risks and Feasibility

DEMO-LIES is designed to be an ambitious yet feasible research project. Some potential risks apply to WP 1, which in turn may have repercussions for WP 2 and WP 4. In WP 1, the innovative text-as-data approach employs natural language processing (NLP), which may encounter performance issues. To mitigate this, we will explore various machine learning architectures and pre-trained models, taking advantage of the dynamic NLP landscape, including resources like the HuggingFace Hub. Intercoder reliability is another concern in the annotation process, which will be addressed by training and calibrating human coders, along with implementing a rigorous monitoring protocol. Lastly, matching lying accusations with fact-checking data is a complex NLP task, requiring extensive experimentation and calibration to optimise this process. As a contingency plan, WP 2.3 could rely on fact-checking agencies' data only if NLP matching proves infeasible.

My experience in political science research methods, including automated text analysis (Meijers & Rauh, 2016; Meijers & van der Veer, 2019a, 2019b) and multilevel modelling of time-series cross-sectional data (Meijers, 2017; Meijers & van der Veer, 2019b; Meijers & Williams, 2020), makes me well-suited to lead this project. I also have extensive experience in designing and conducting representative surveys (Meijers et al., 2023; Zaslove et al., 2022; Zaslove & Meijers, 2023) and survey experiments, such as conjoint experiments (Bremer et al., 2023) and vignette experiments (Meijers, forthcoming; van der Velden & Meijers, 2023). Additionally, I have a strong track record of academic collaboration and supervising young researchers, enhancing the project's feasibility.

Dissemination

This project will produce 10 peer-reviewed academic articles, which will be sent to top-ranked political science journals and will be made available for open access. WP 1's data will be published as a separate dataset, and all other research data will be made publicly accessible through reputable repositories. Additionally, blog posts corresponding to each article will be written, with the intent of publishing them on platforms such as the LSE Politics blog. Finally, DEMO-LIES will produce a popular science book aimed at an international audience on accusations of political lying in politics and its implications for democratic politics.

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