

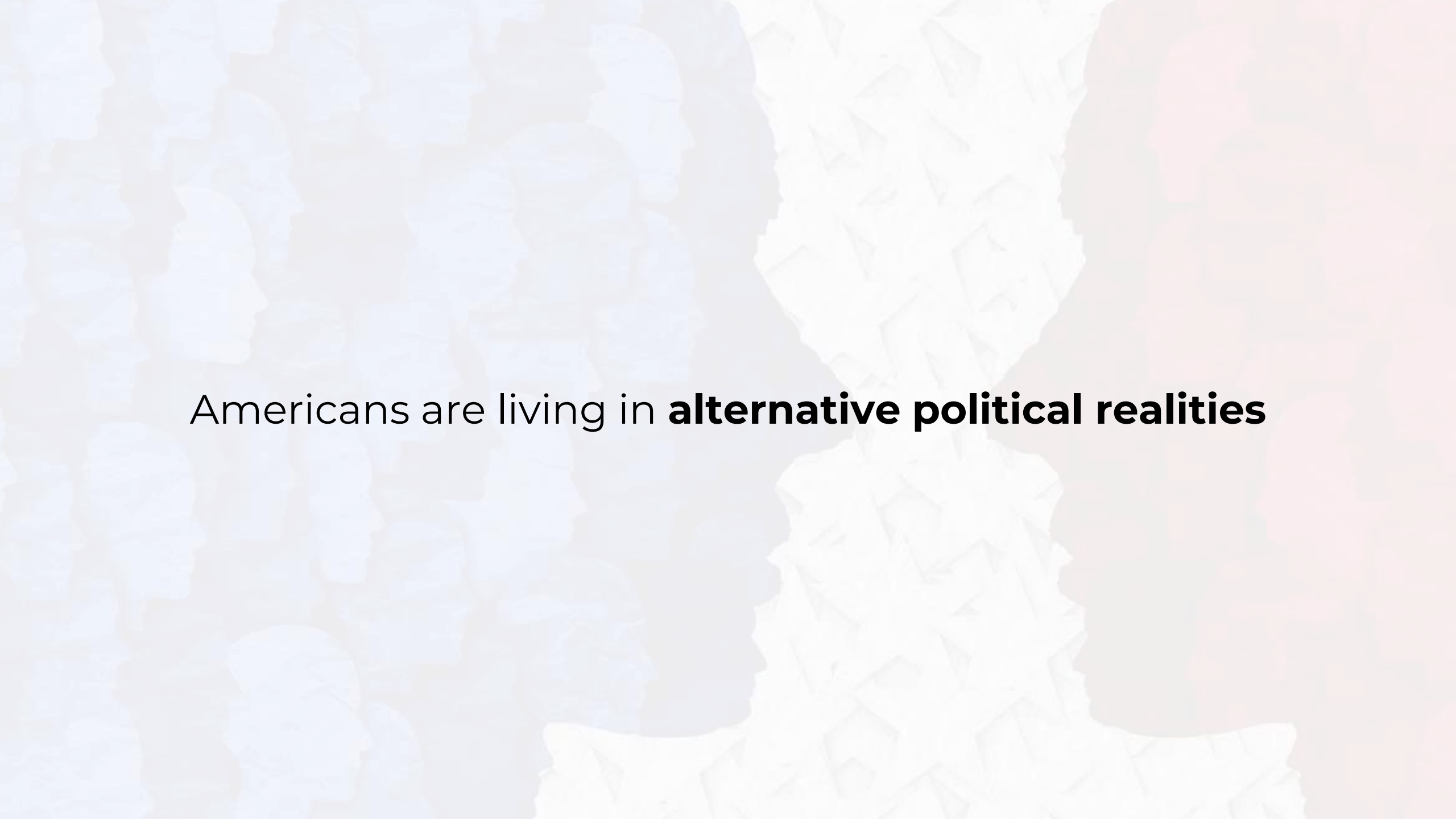


# **Partisanship, Misinformation, and the Future of Democracy**

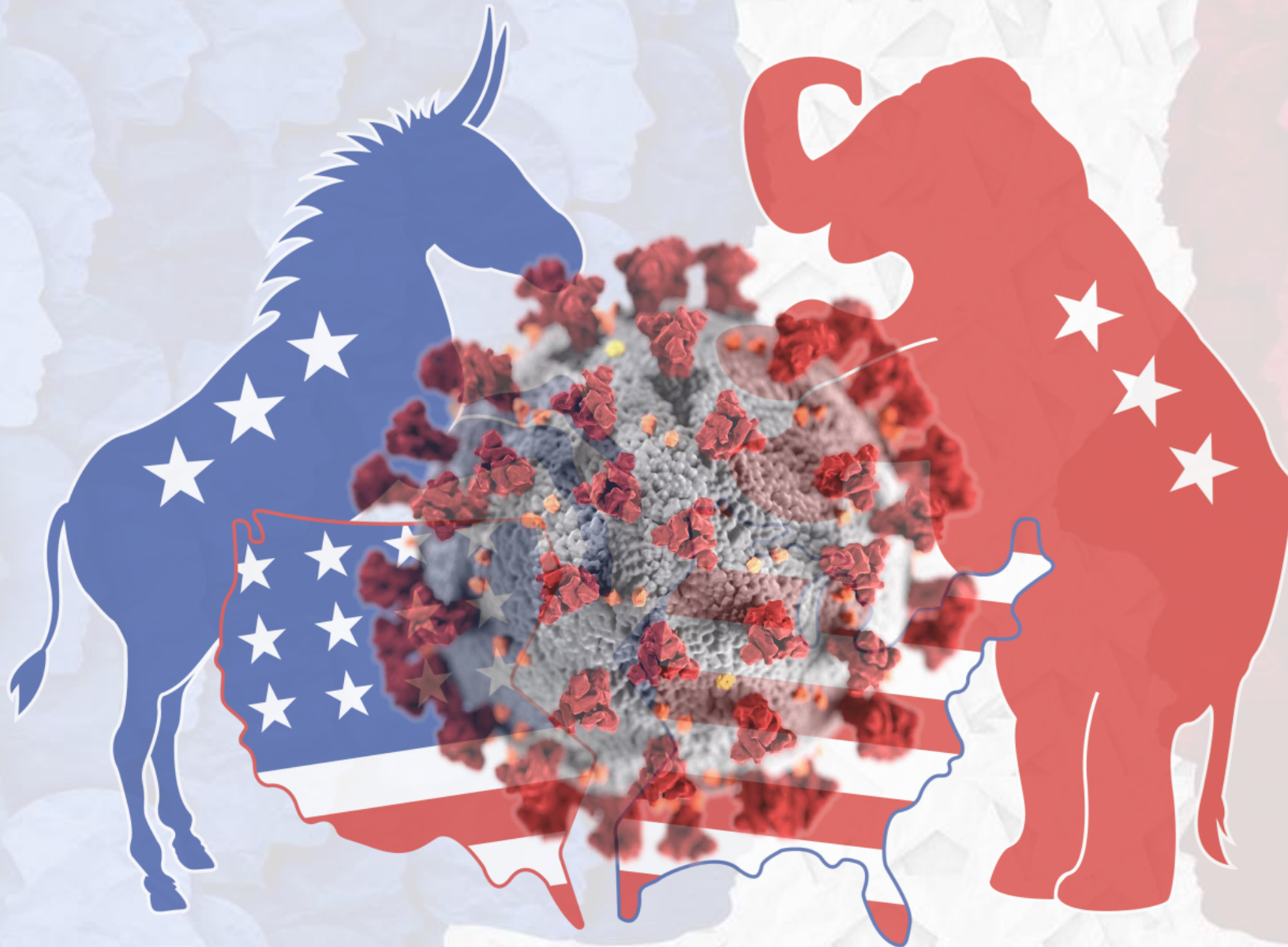
**Prof. Dr. Anton Gollwitzer**

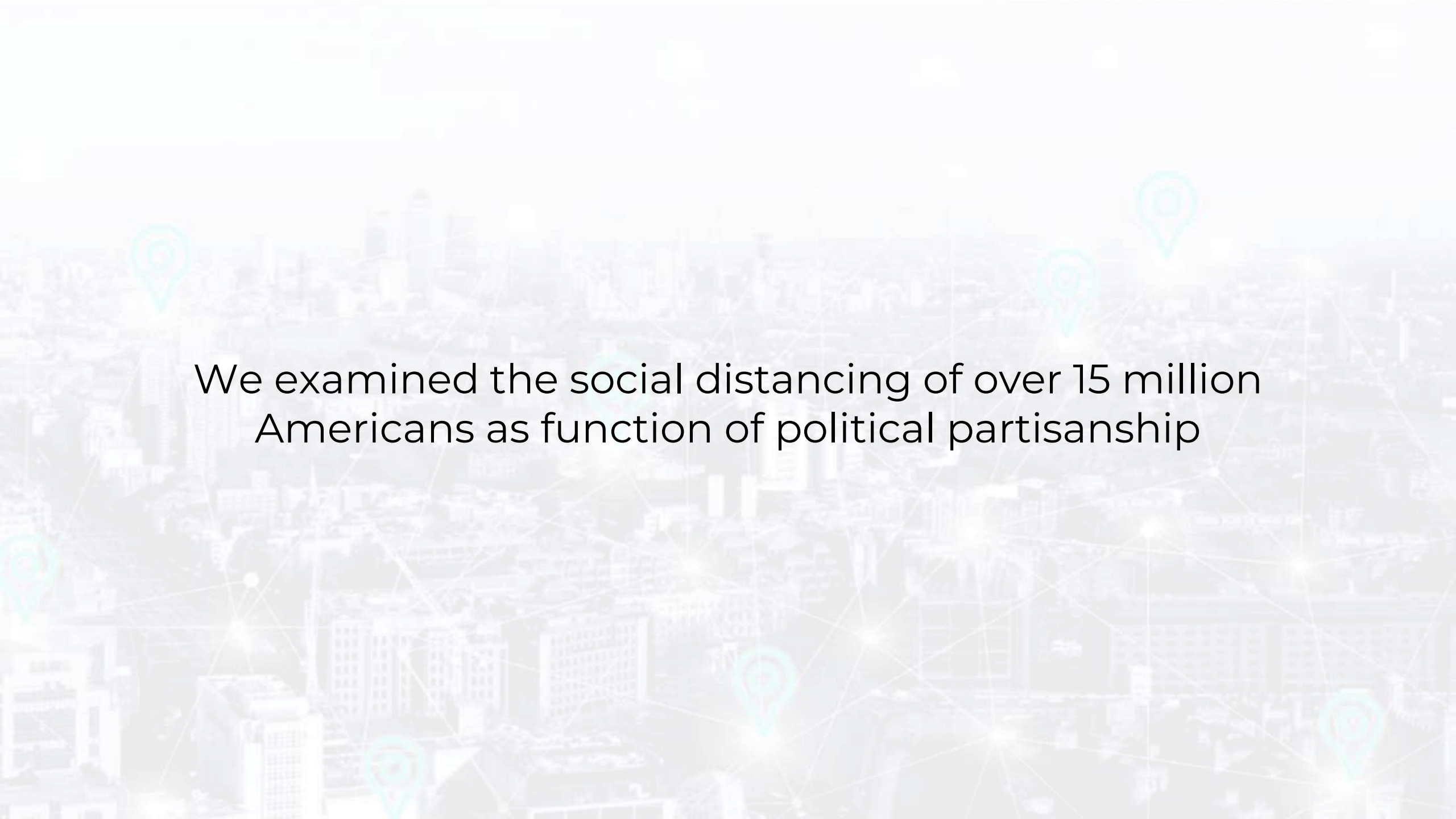
**BI Norwegian Business School &**

**The Max Planck Institute for Human Development**



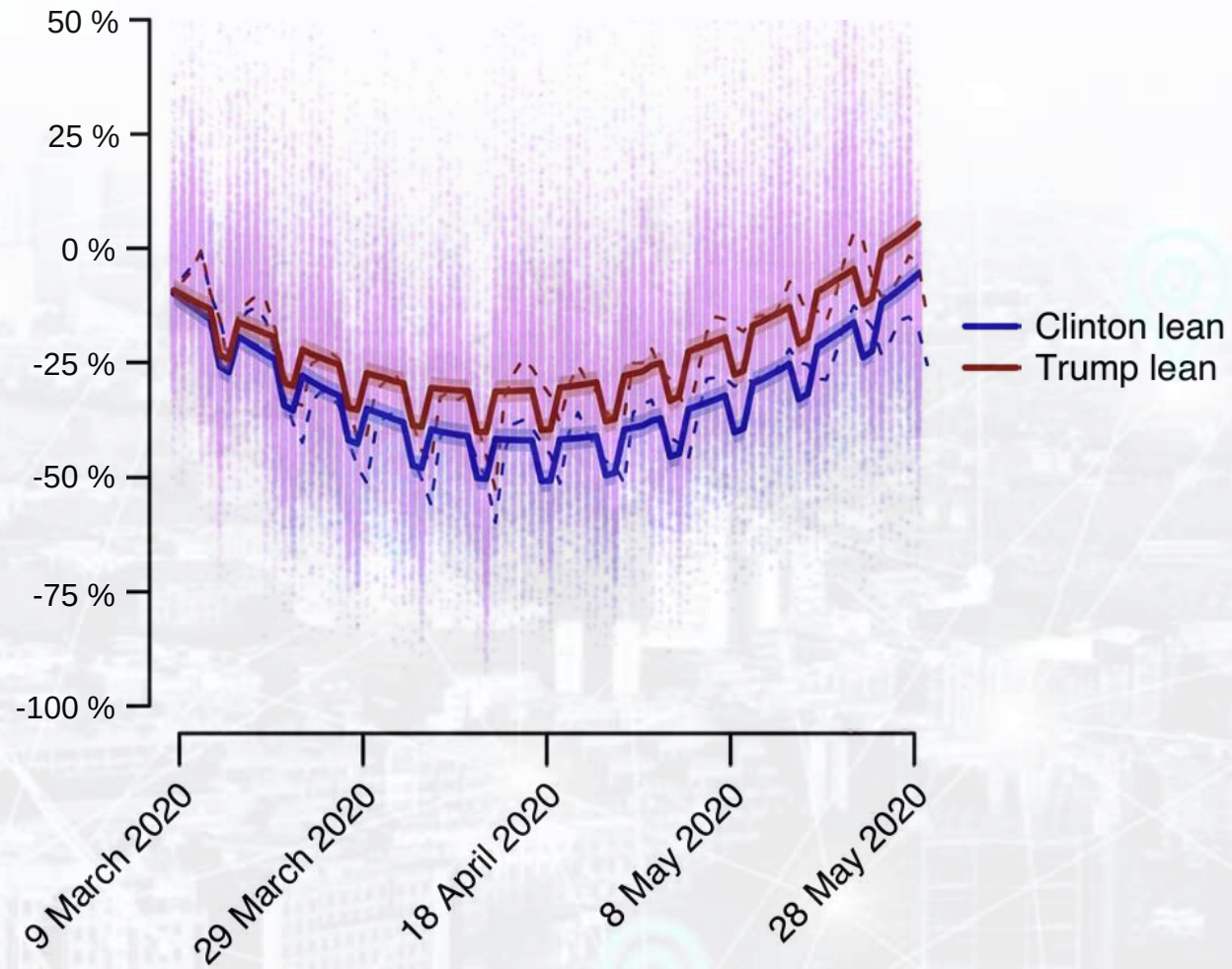
Americans are living in **alternative political realities**

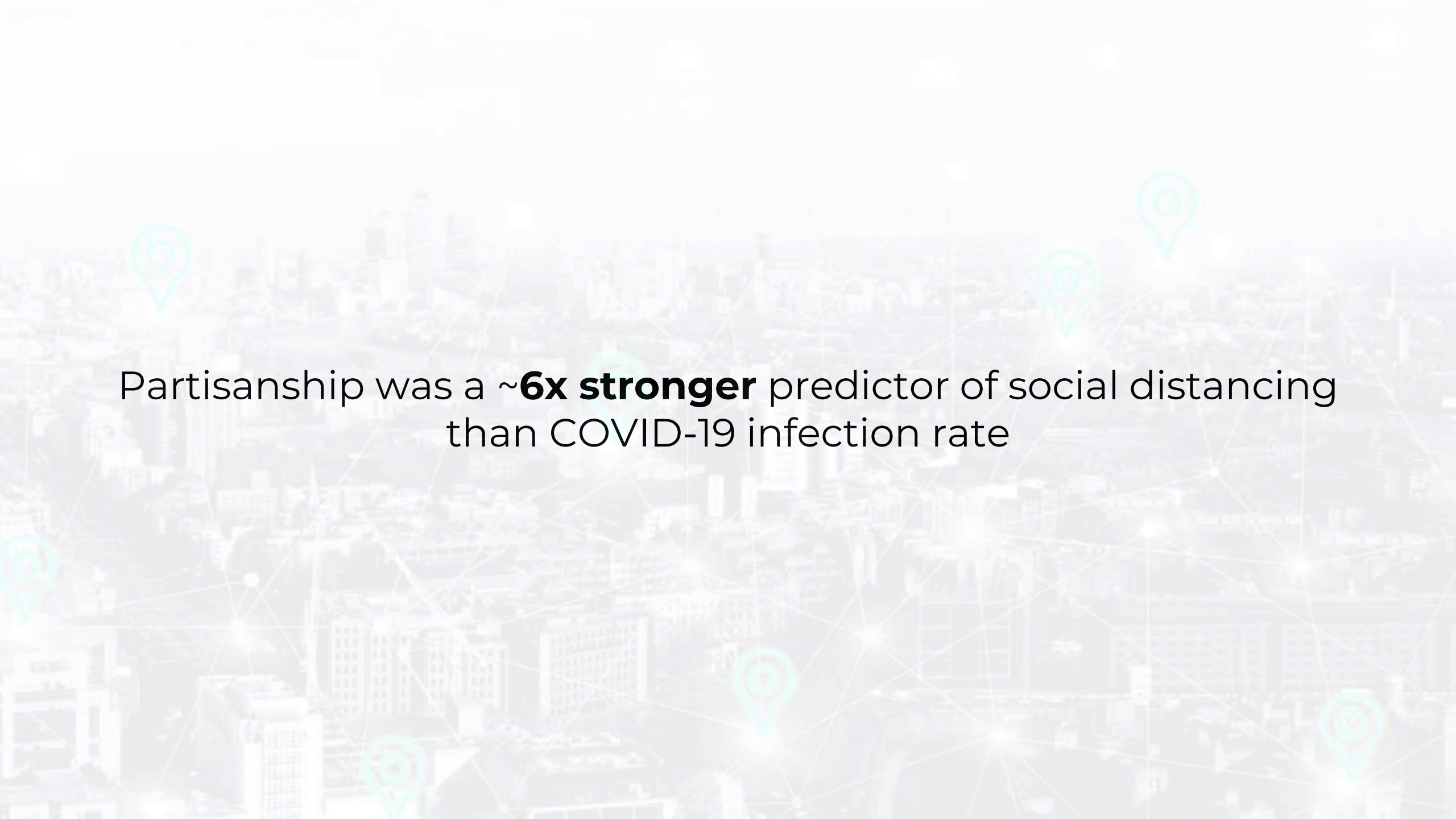


The background of the slide features a grayscale aerial view of a city skyline, likely New York City, with numerous skyscrapers. Overlaid on this image is a network of thin, light-colored lines connecting various points, suggesting a social or data network. Several green location pin icons are scattered across the image, some appearing to be part of the network nodes. The text is centered in the middle of the image.

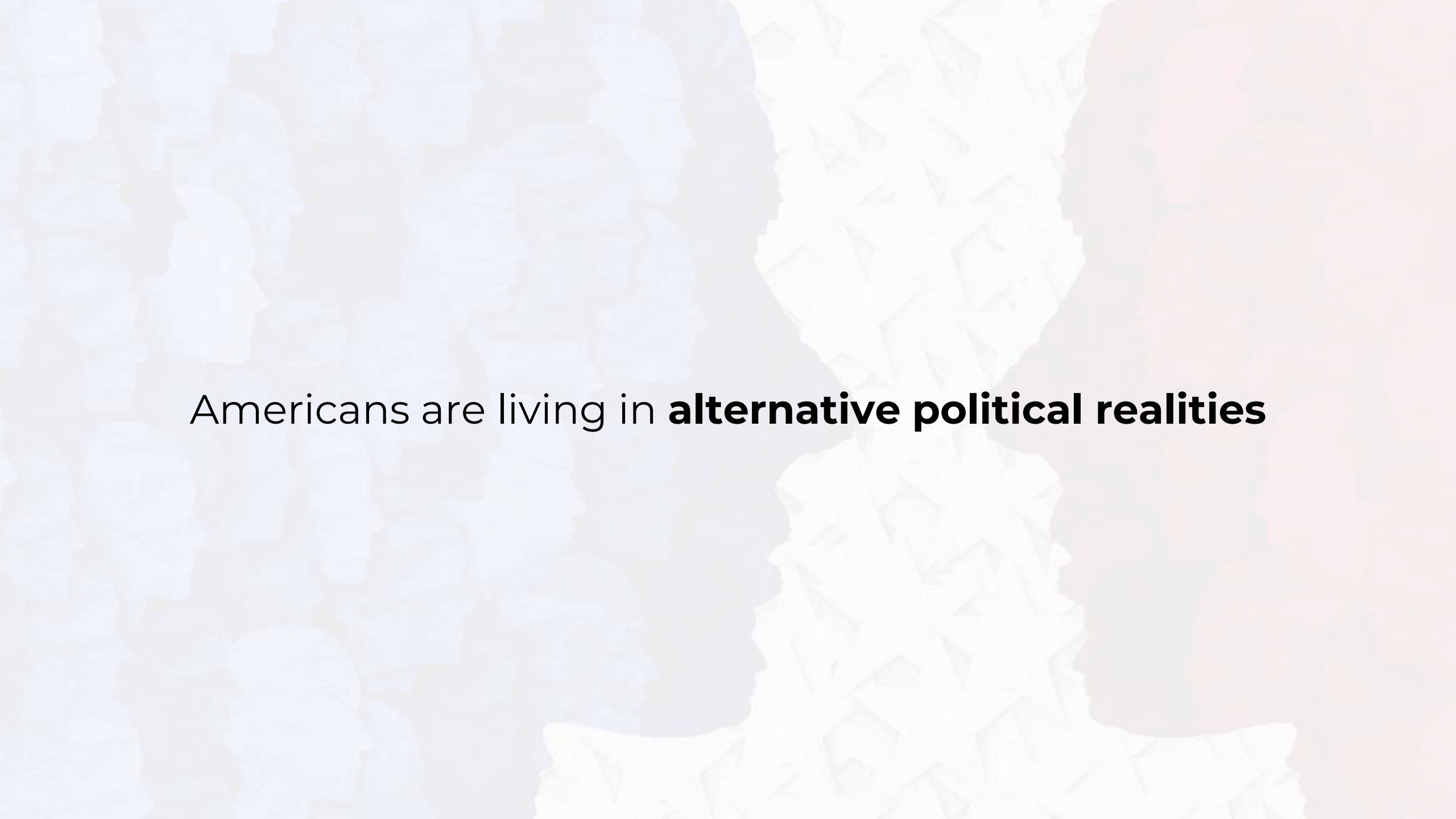
We examined the social distancing of over 15 million  
Americans as function of political partisanship

## Percent Reduction in Movement

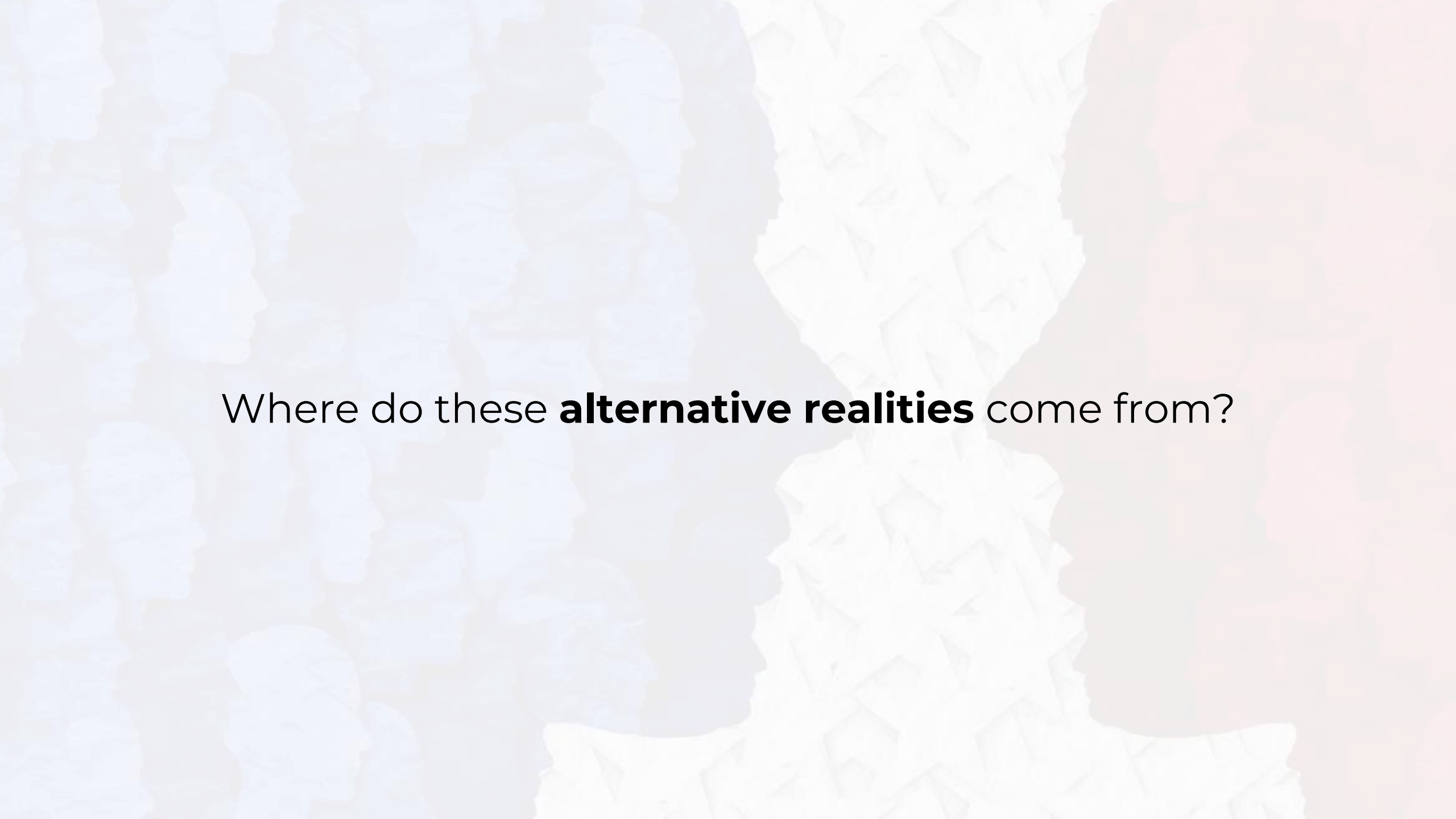


The background of the slide features a grayscale aerial view of a city skyline, likely New York City, with numerous skyscrapers. Overlaid on this image is a network of thin white lines connecting various points, suggesting a data network or social connections. Several green location pin icons are scattered across the image, adding a geographical or data-point context.

Partisanship was a ~**6x stronger** predictor of social distancing  
than COVID-19 infection rate



Americans are living in **alternative political realities**



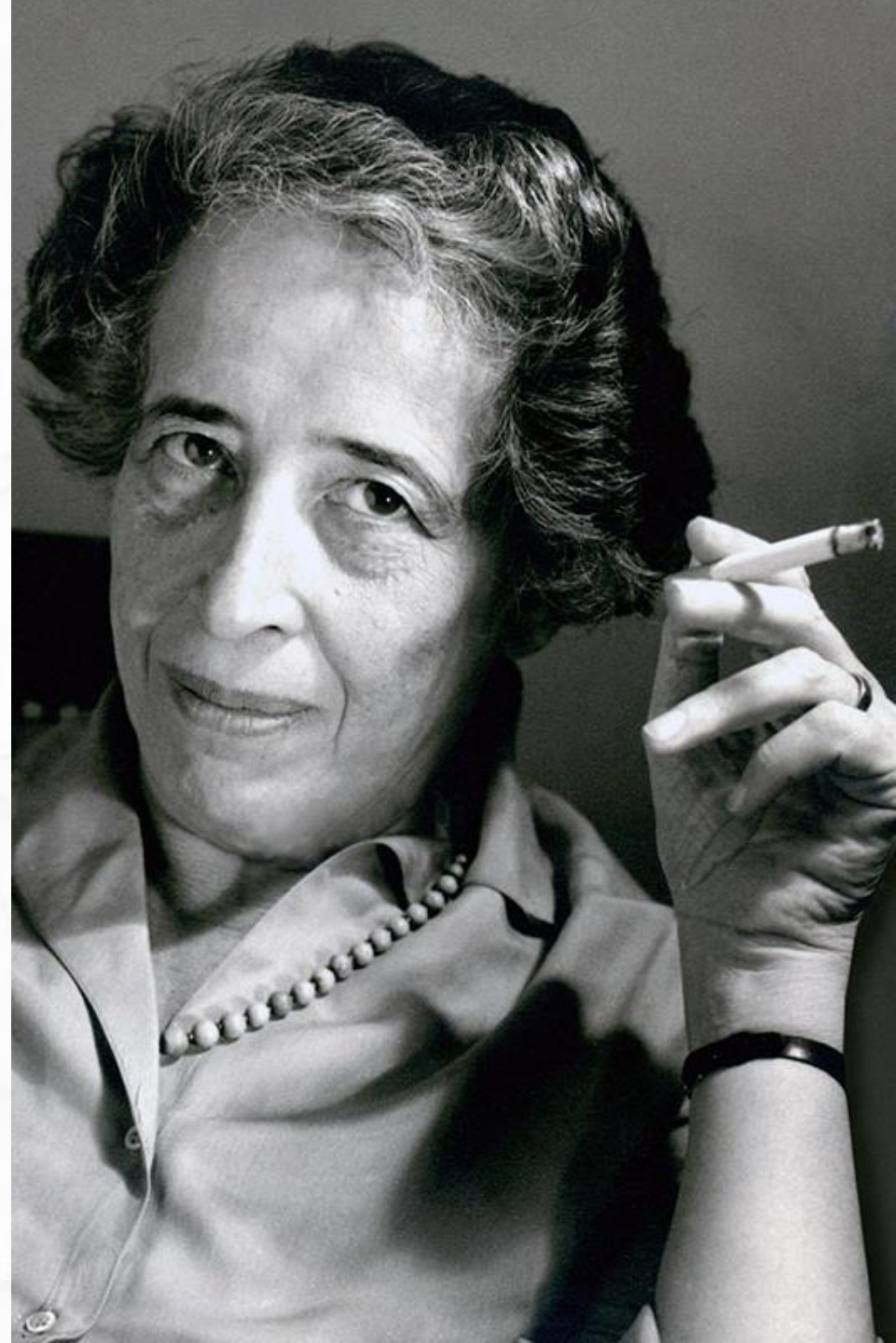
Where do these **alternative realities** come from?

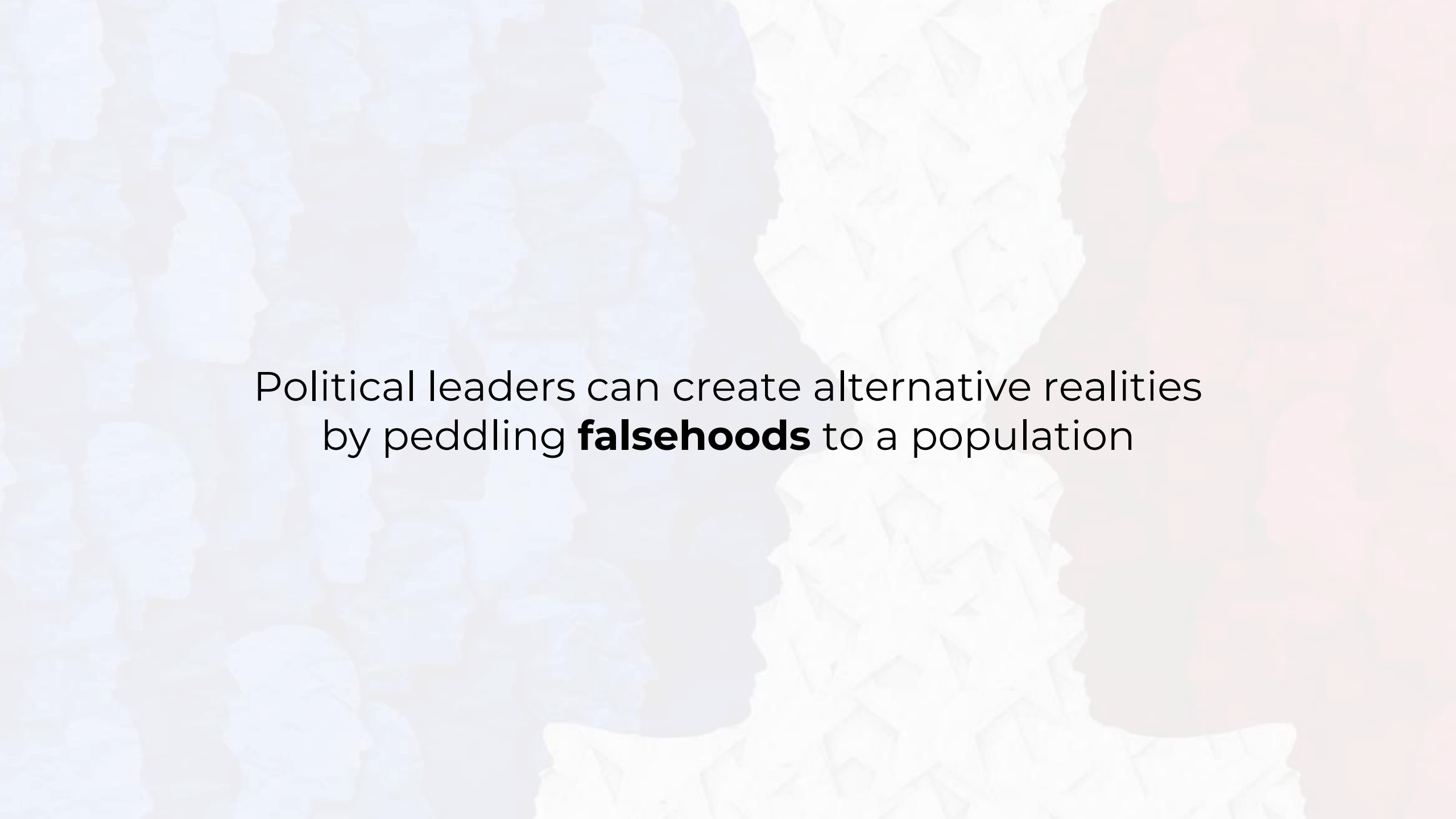


“The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) no longer exists.”

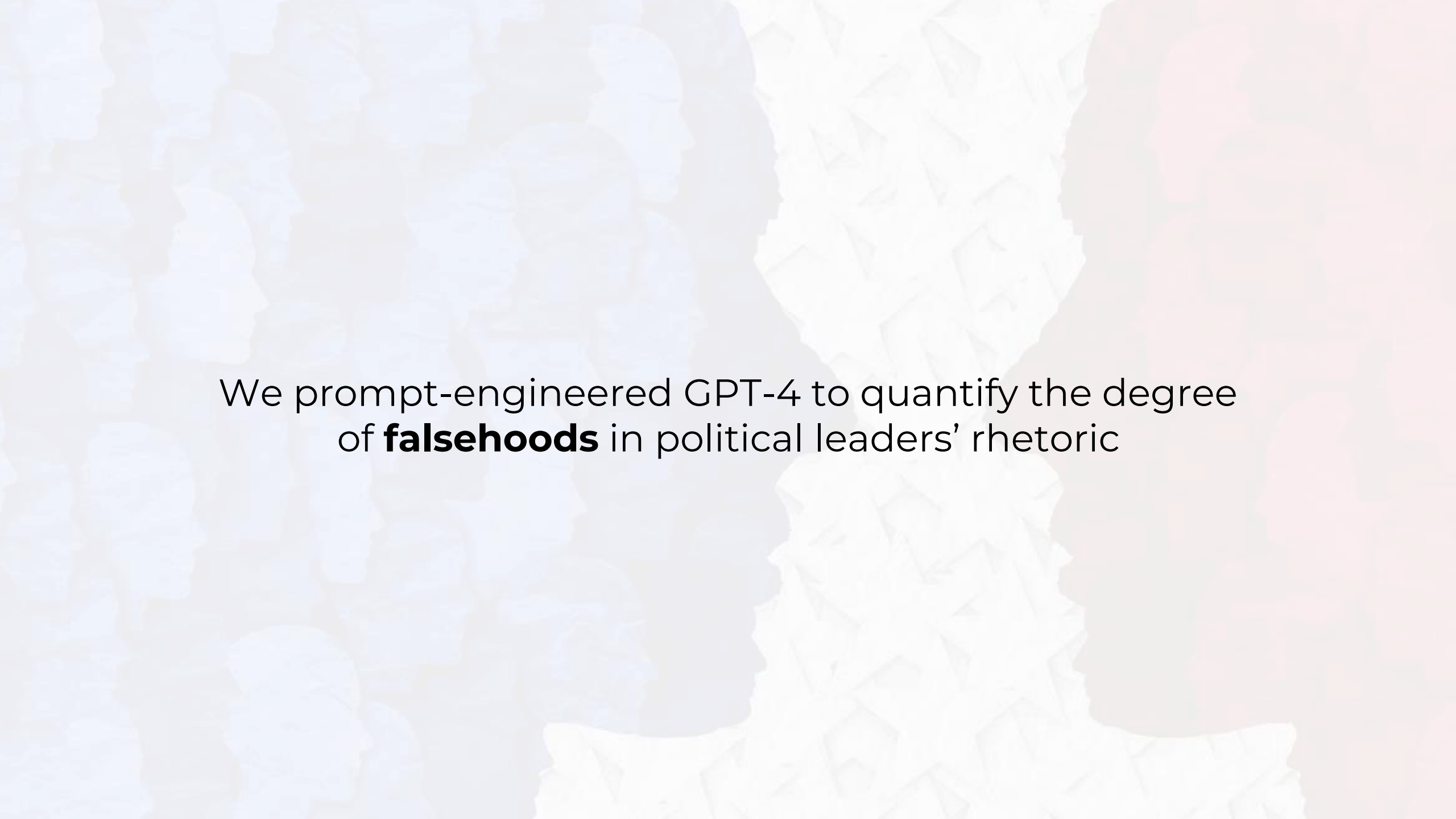
– Hannah Arendt

*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 474





Political leaders can create alternative realities  
by peddling **falsehoods** to a population



We prompt-engineered GPT-4 to quantify the degree  
of **falsehoods** in political leaders' rhetoric

Evaluated ~**26,000 U.S. Presidential speech excerpts**  
for their degree of falsehood

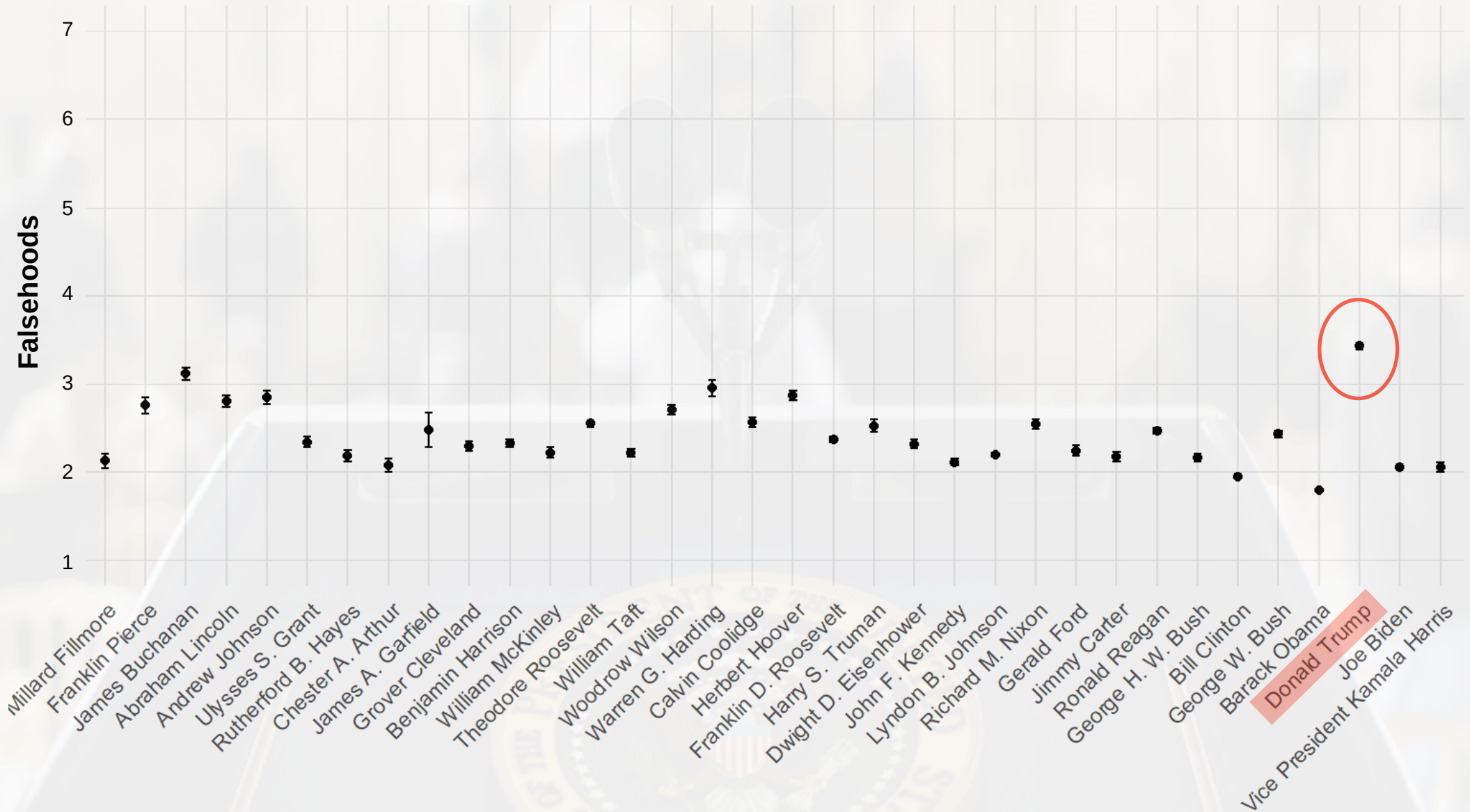
“Lawmakers in New York cheered with delight upon the passage of legislation that would allow a baby to be ripped from the mother’s womb moments before birth...”

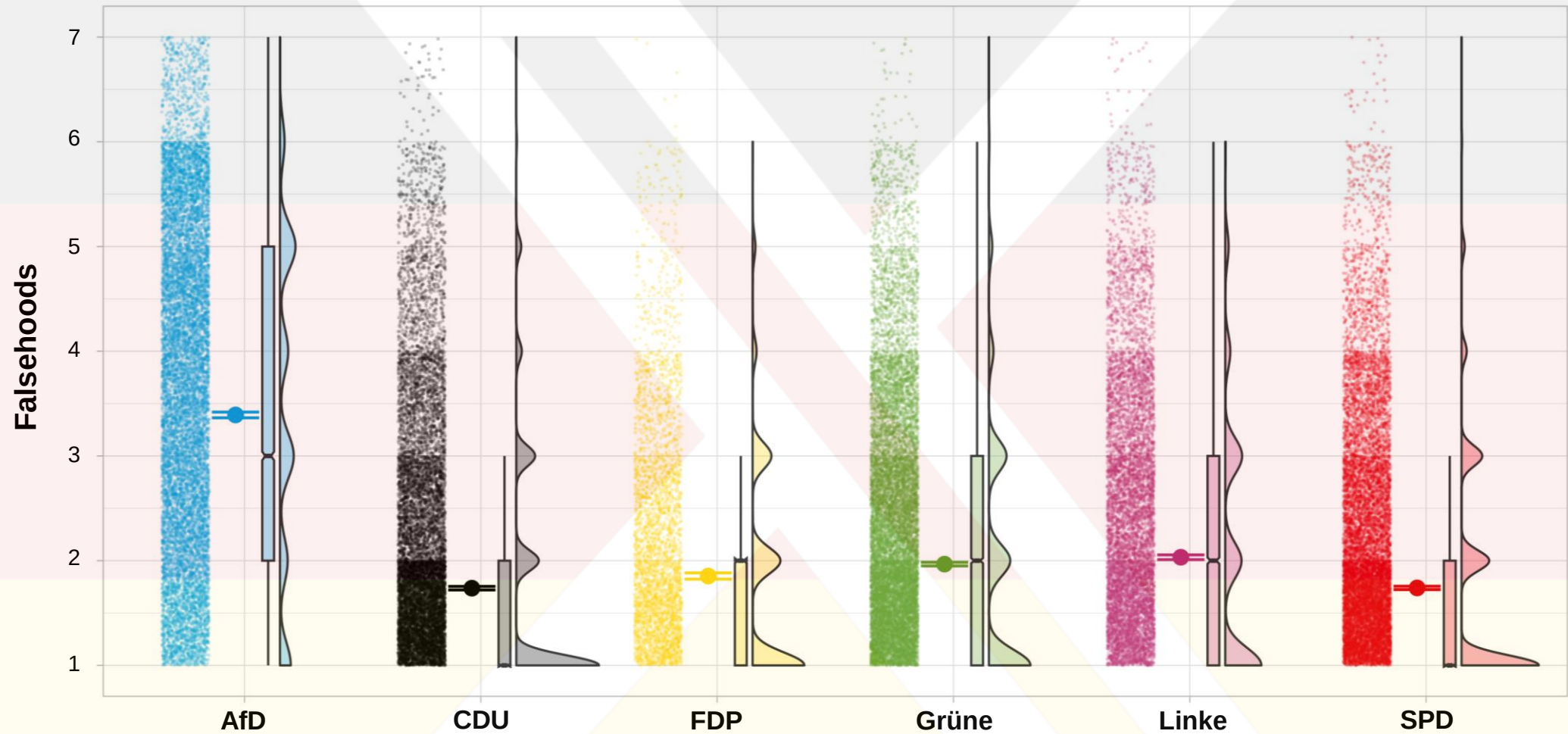
– Donald Trump (State of the Union Address, 2019)

Model-Response:

Score: 7

The statement reflects a very high degree of falsehood. It asserts extreme and inflammatory claims ("ripped from the mother’s womb moments before birth," "execute a baby after birth") that are not supported by real-world evidence...

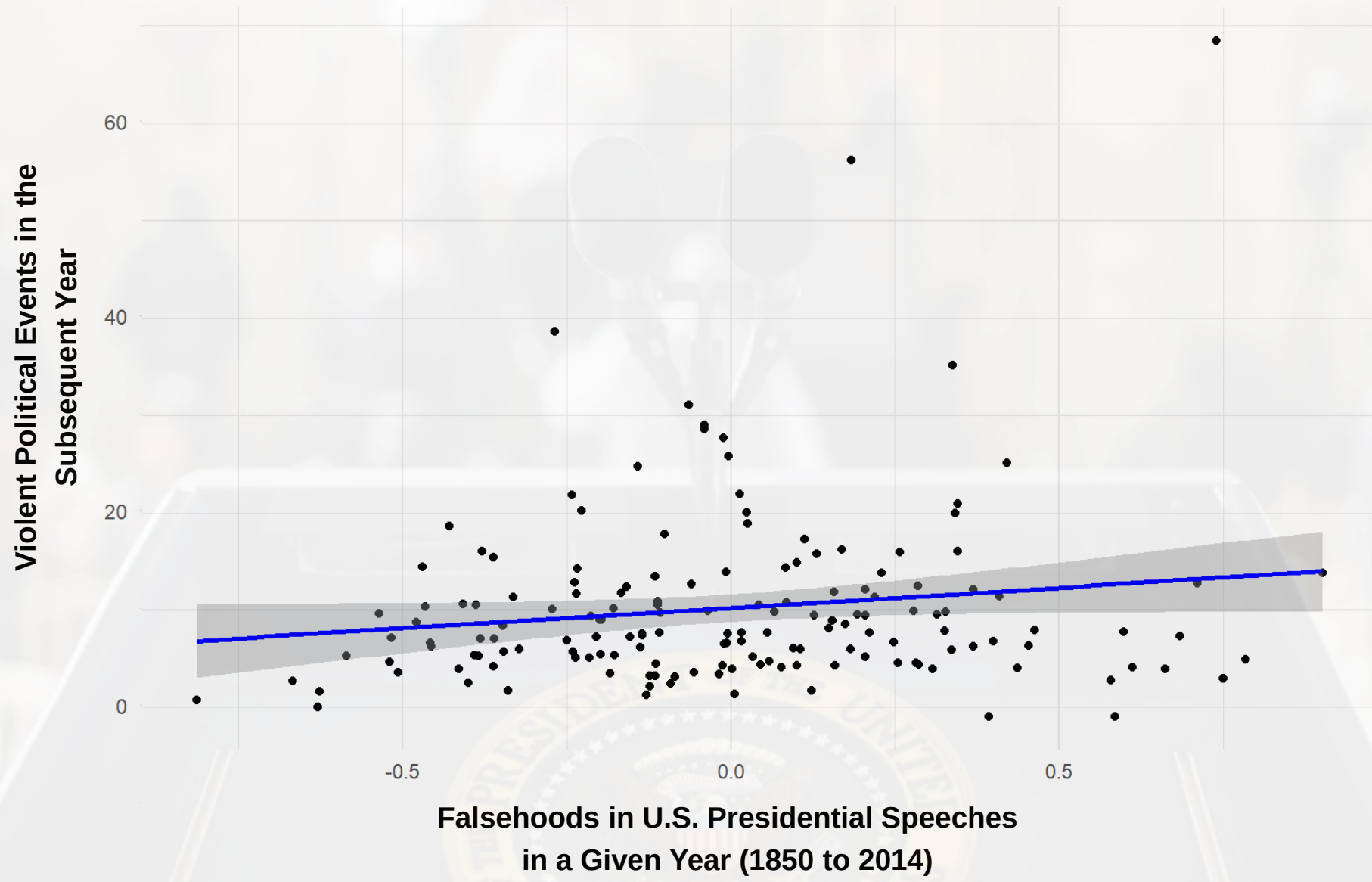




Do these falsehoods matter?



*Opinion:* Are We  
Having a Moral  
Panic Over  
Misinformation?



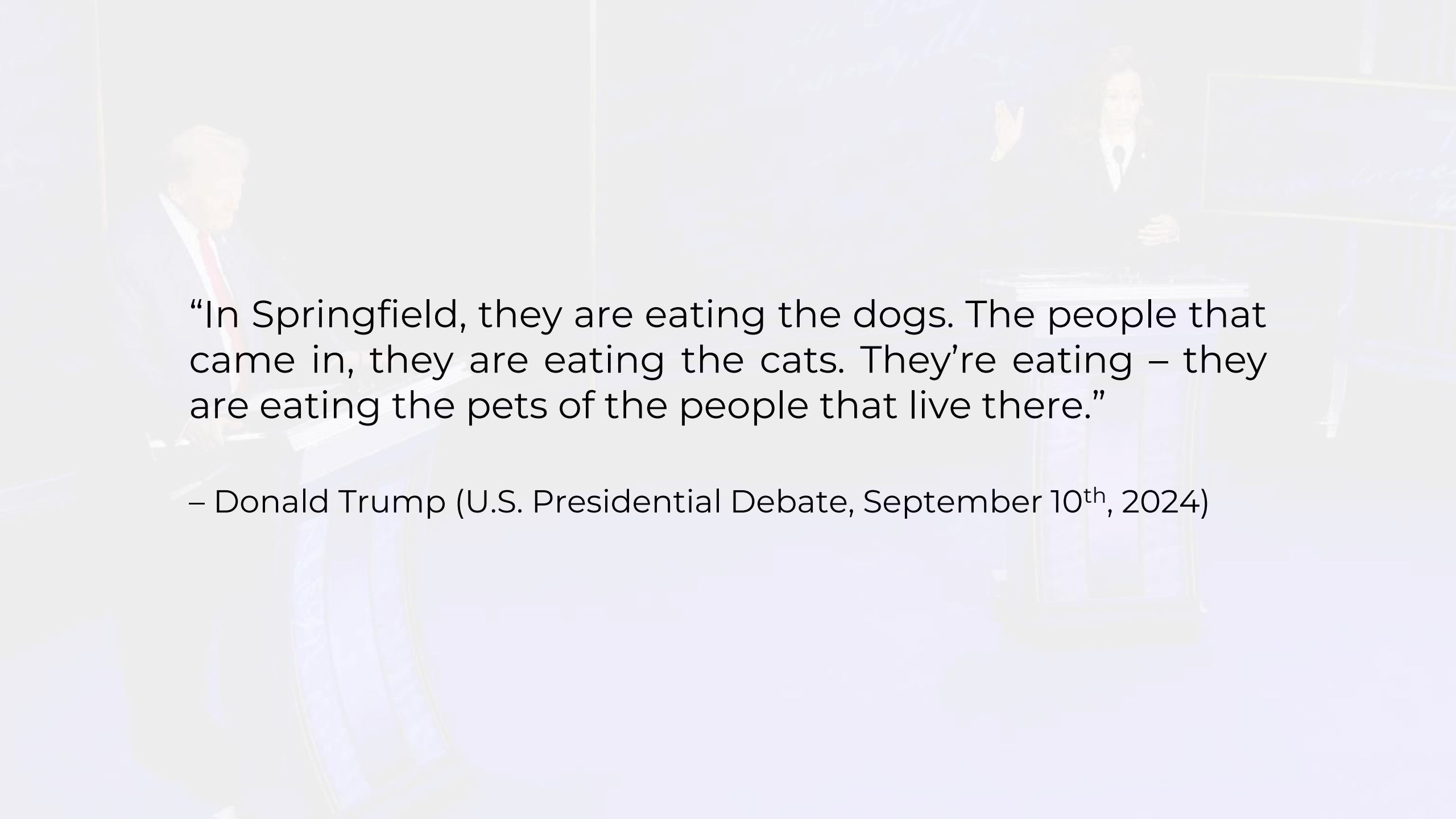


Falsehoods in German Politicians' Tweets



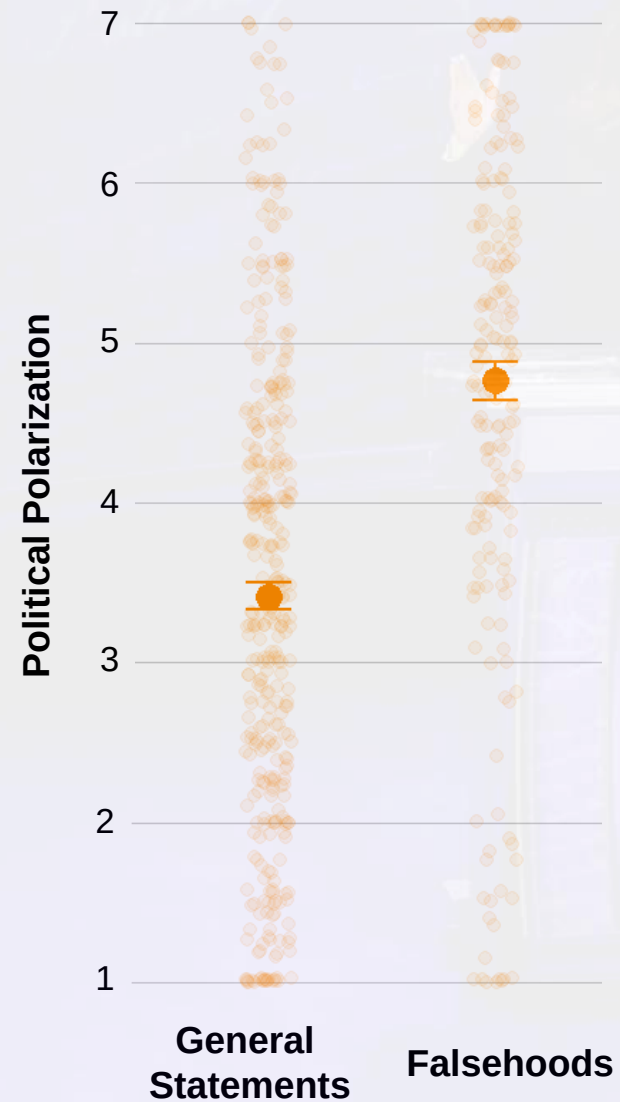
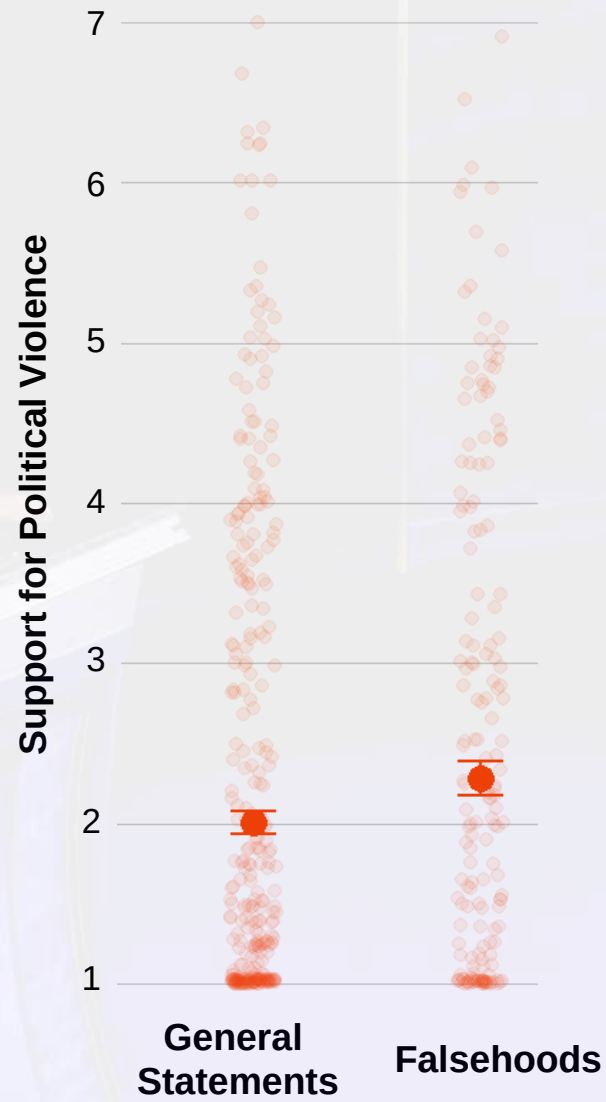
Violent Rhetoric in Replies to Those Tweets

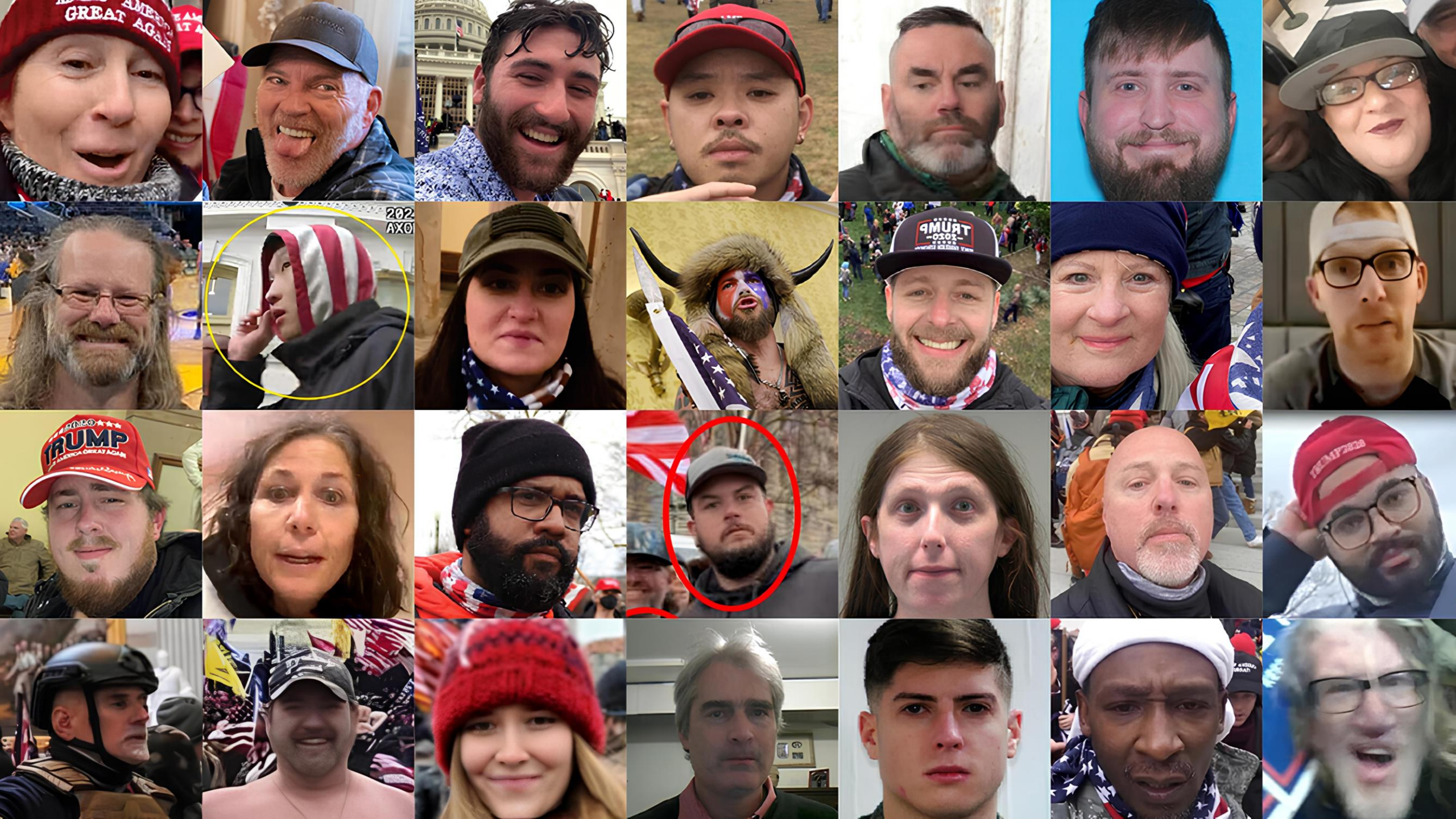




“In Springfield, they are eating the dogs. The people that came in, they are eating the cats. They’re eating – they are eating the pets of the people that live there.”

– Donald Trump (U.S. Presidential Debate, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2024)





The background features a light pink color with a faint, stylized illustration of two hands, one on the left and one on the right, holding a globe. A complex network of thin white lines is overlaid on the globe, resembling a web or a neural network. The text is centered over this background.

Very difficult to change political leaders' rhetoric

Targeting a different level:  
Attenuating the **spread of falsehoods**



A large-scale intervention on misinformation sharing

## Warning Labels



## Media Literacy Tips

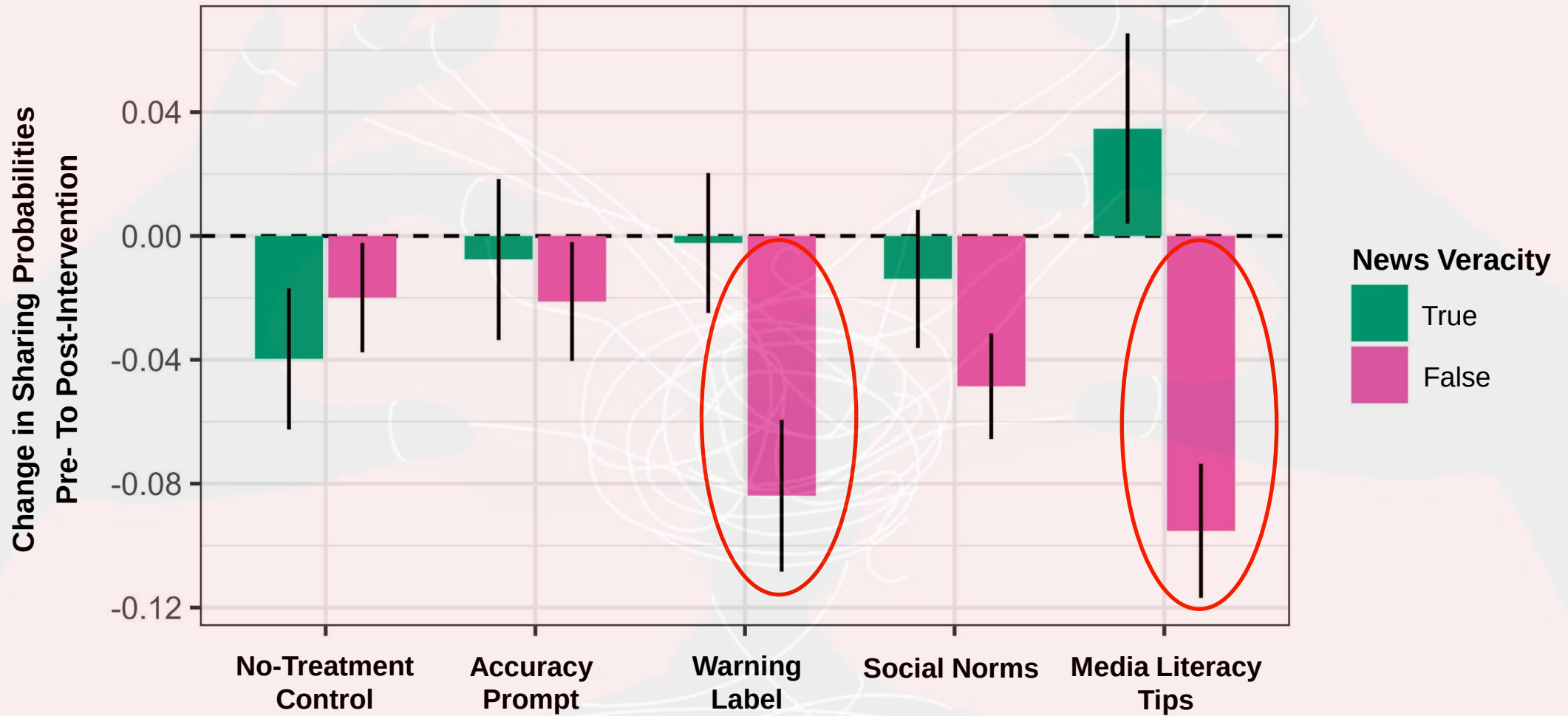
### Tips to Spot False News:

#### 1. Be skeptical of headlines

False news stories often have catchy headlines in all caps with exclamation points. If shocking claims in the headline sound unbelievable, they probably are.

#### 2. Look closely at the URL

A phony or look-alike URL may be a warning sign of false news. Many false news sites mimic authentic news sources by making small changes to the URL. You can go to the site to compare the URL to established sources.





Other effective solutions include applying AI misinformation classifiers and banning repeat offenders

Yet, social media companies **resist these solutions**

**BREAKING**

## Meta Moves to End Fact-Checking Program

The social networking giant will stop using third-party fact checkers and instead rely on users to add notes or corrections to posts. It is likely to please the Trump administration.

3 MIN READ



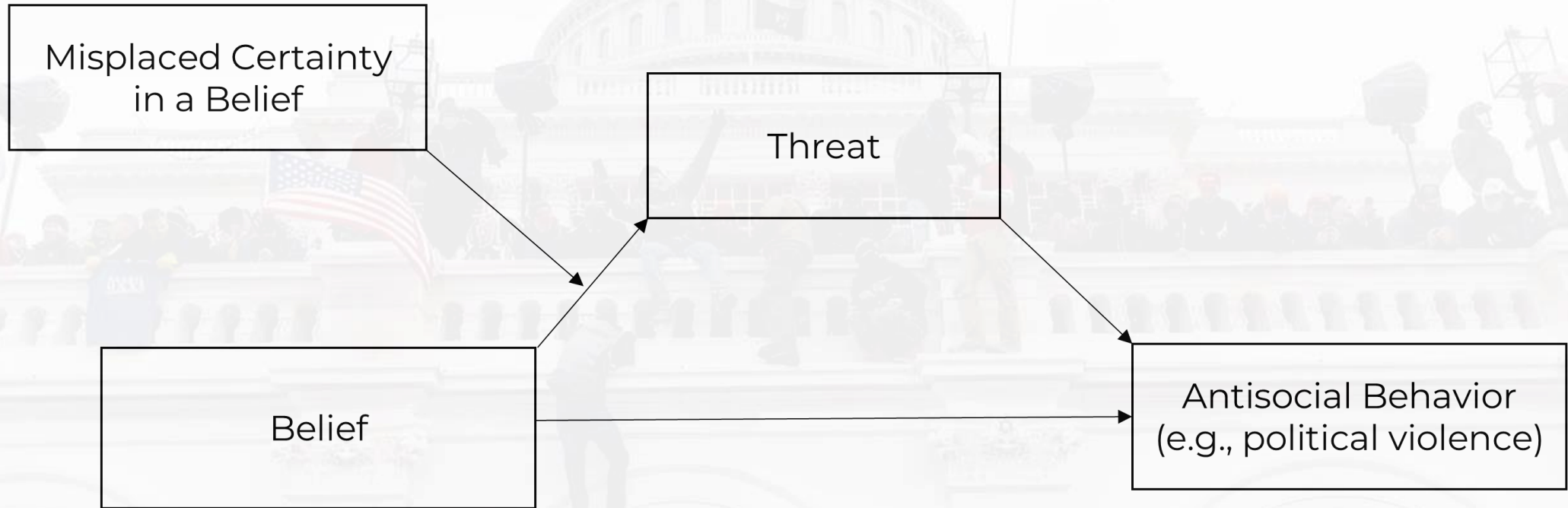


The background image is a faded, semi-transparent photograph of the United States Capitol building in Washington, D.C. Overlaid on this image is a large, light blue graphic of two hands reaching upwards, palms facing each other. A network of thin, white, curved lines connects various points across the image, creating a web-like pattern that suggests a complex system or ecosystem. The overall color palette is muted, with the blue of the hands and the white of the lines providing contrast against the faded background.

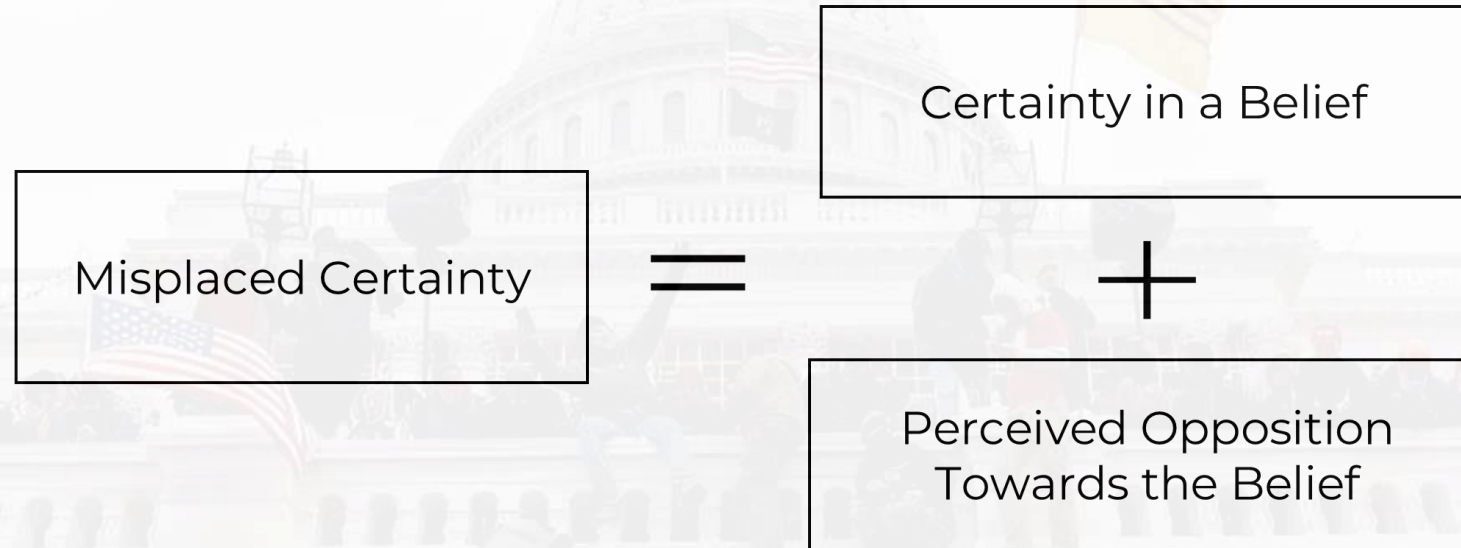
Very difficult to change the misinformation ecosystem

Targeting a different level:  
Attenuating the **harmful outcomes** of falsehoods

# A Theoretical Model: When False Beliefs Lead to Antisocial Outcomes



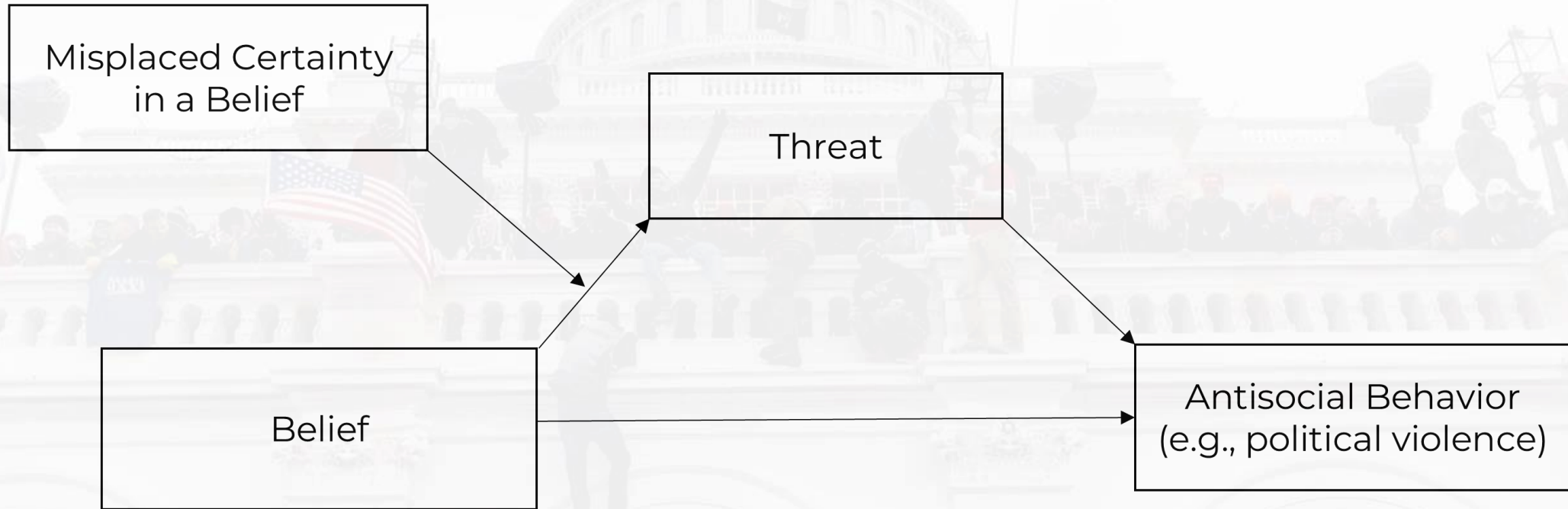
# A Theoretical Model: When False Beliefs Lead to Antisocial Outcomes



Epistemic Structure of Misplaced Certainty:

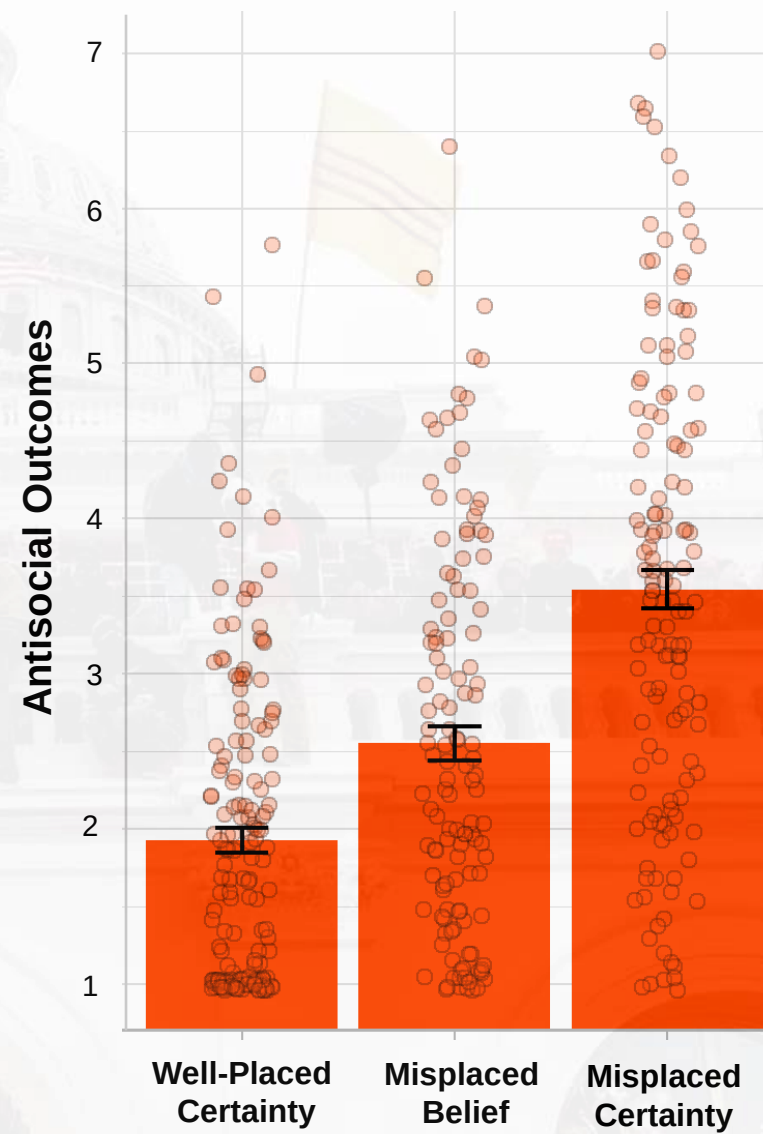
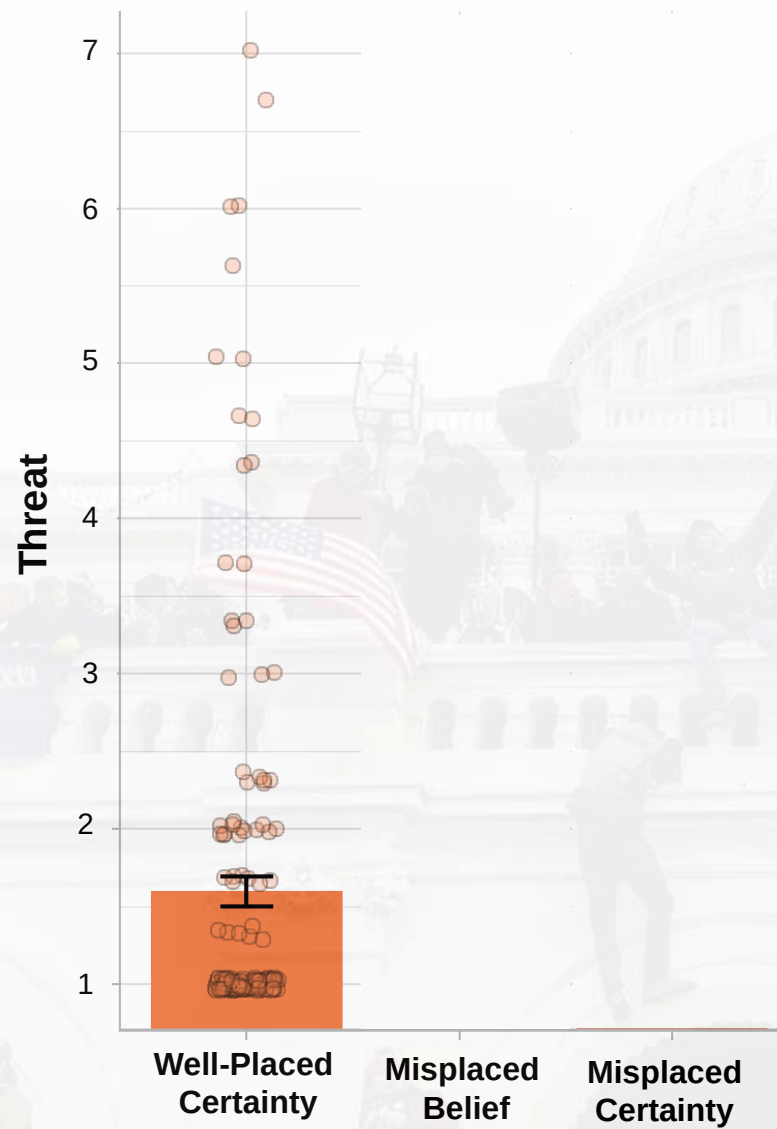
“I’m certain of X, but X lacks evidence and/or is judged by others as unknowable or wrong”

# A Theoretical Model: When False Beliefs Lead to Antisocial Outcomes





Over 10 studies and >5,000 participants provide  
empirical support for this theoretical model



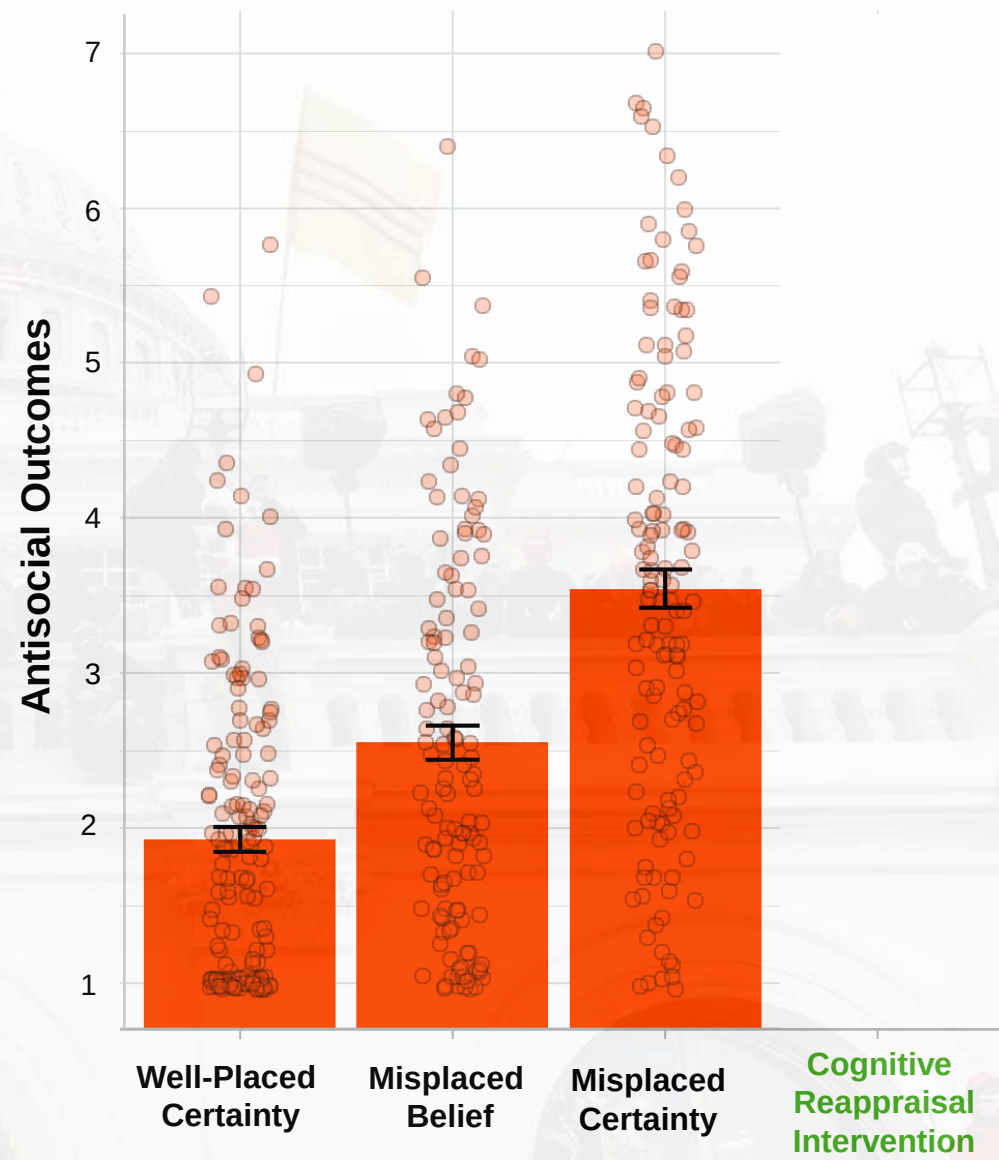
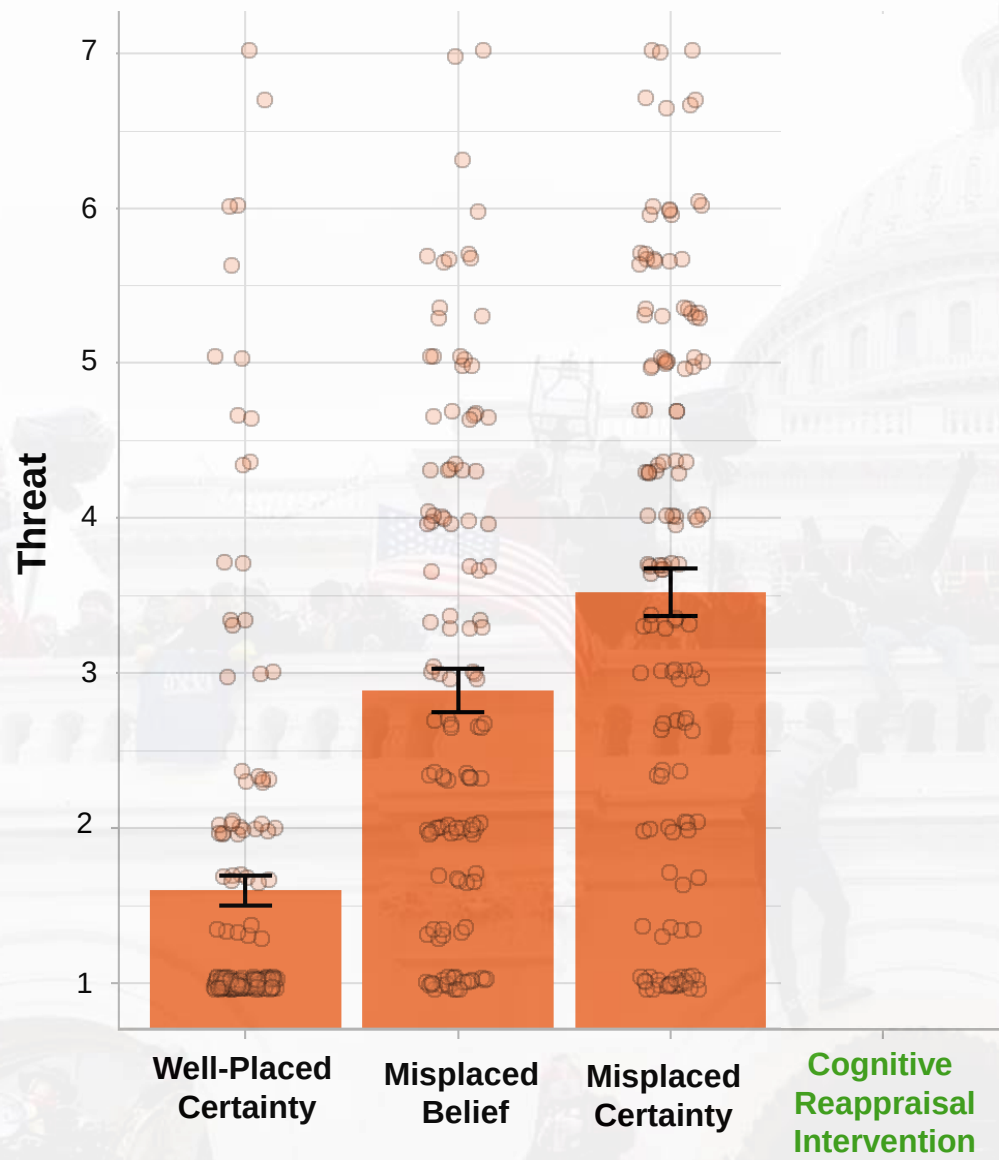


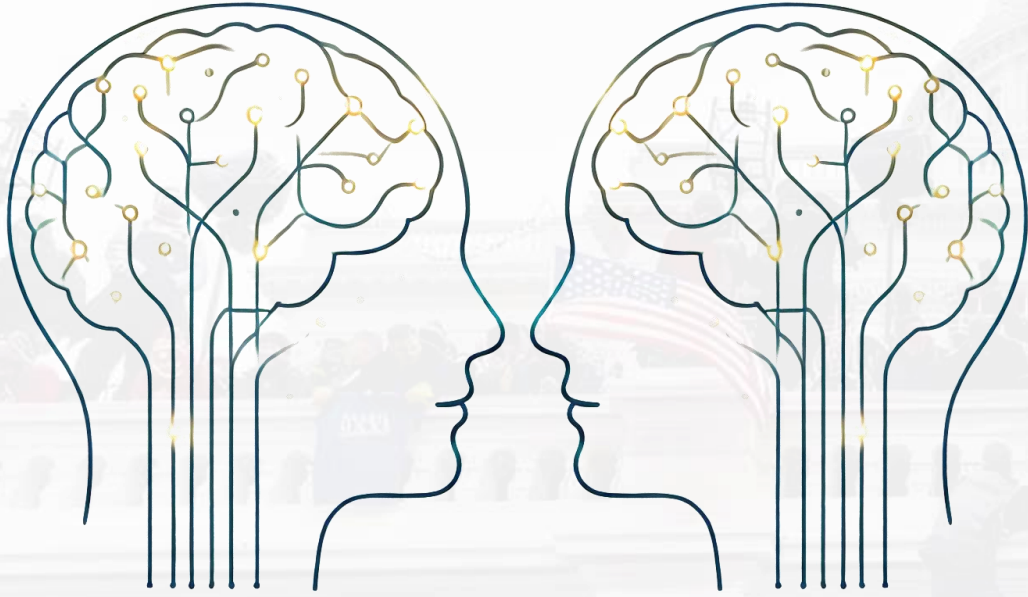
Based on this theoretical model, we developed interventions to  
**attenuate** the antisocial outcomes of false beliefs



# Cognitive Reappraisal

Changing how one thinks about a situation  
to alter its emotional impact

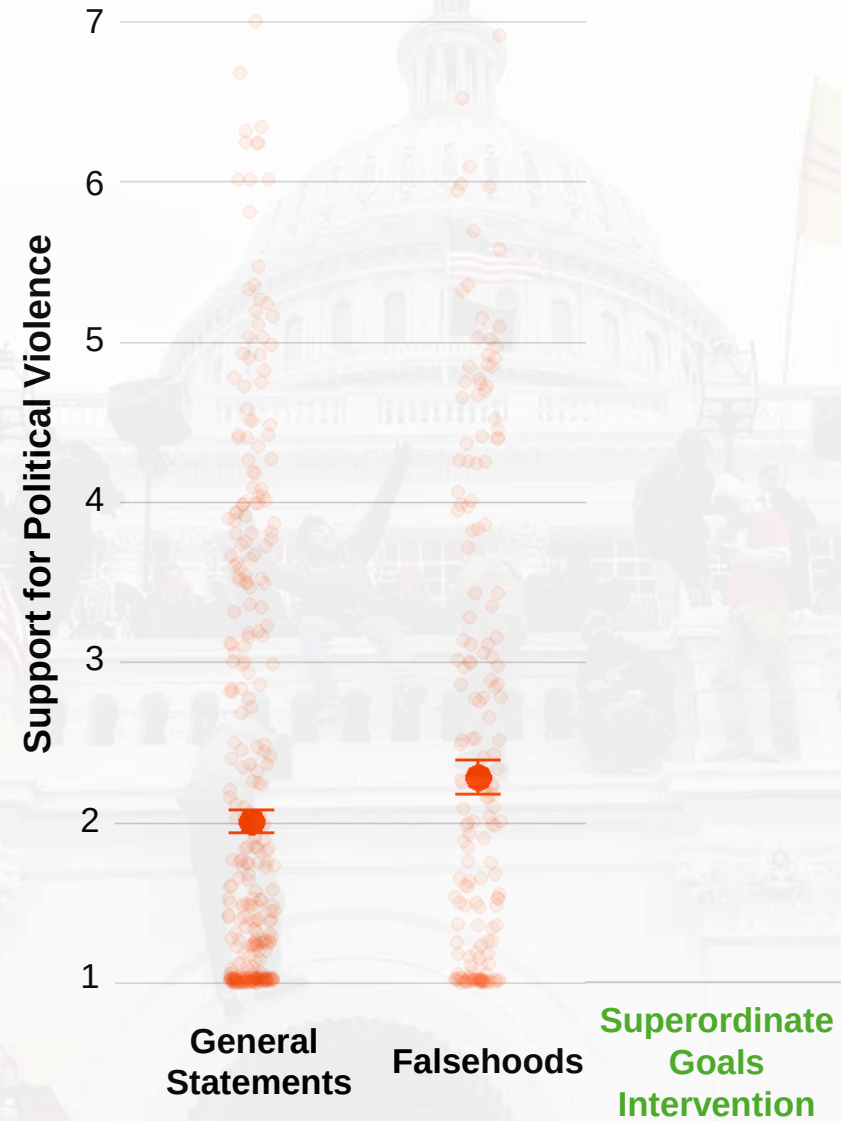




## Superordinate Goals

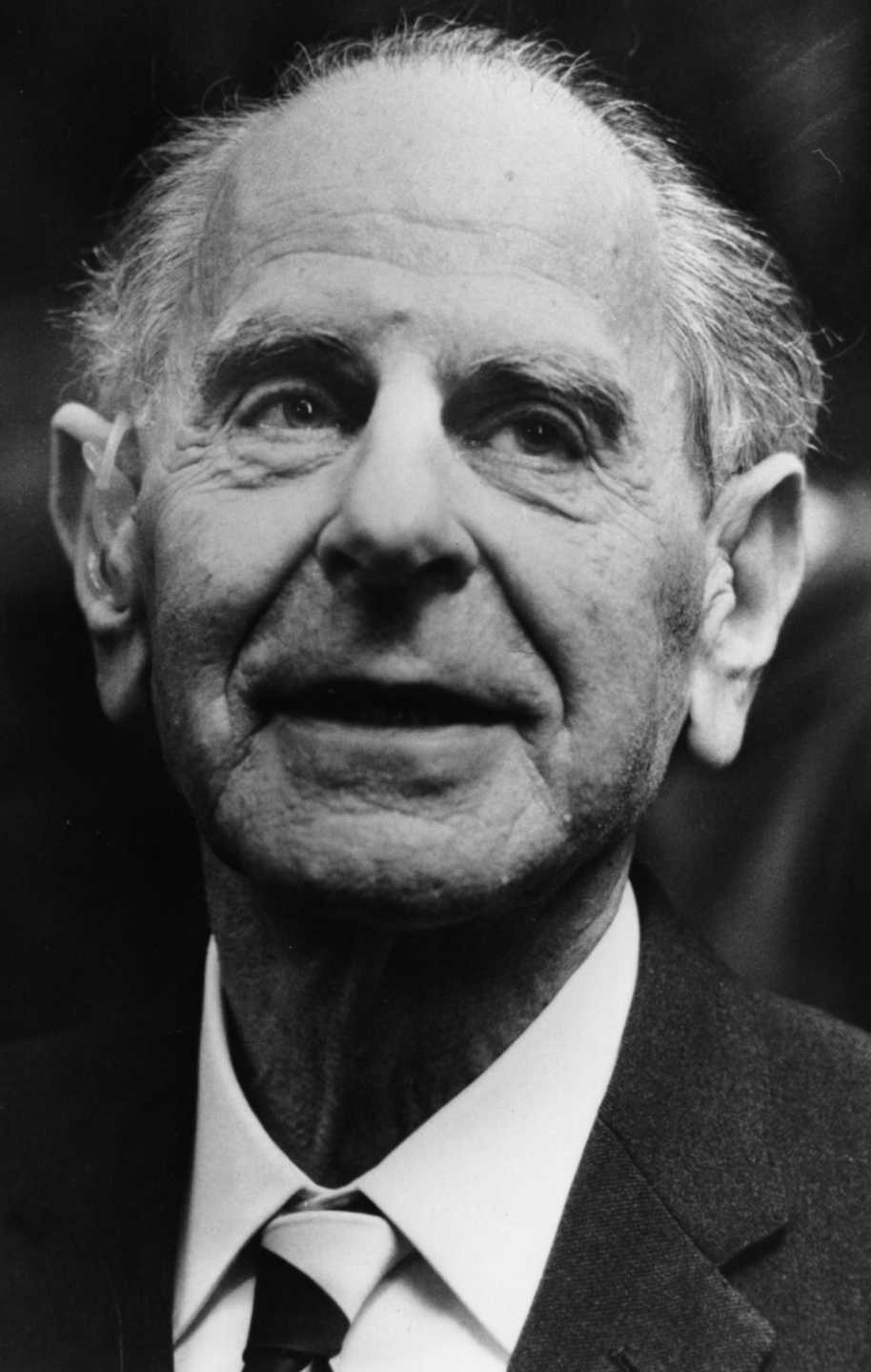
Individuals of conflicting groups  
recognizing their shared goals and values





# Take-Aways

- Alternative partisan realities exist and have severe consequences
- Political leaders' rhetoric fuels these alternative realities
- Falsehoods spread by political leaders encourage political violence
- Warning labels and media literacy tips can reduce misinformation spread
- We can limit the harm of false beliefs by preventing people from acting on them



# The Paradox of Tolerance

Karl Popper

For too long, we have fallen into the trap of treating misinformation as 'free-speech' despite its clear potential for harm



Norwegian  
Business School



<https://www.antongollwitzer.org/>