

# The Year of Post-Truth: the forecast is far from rosy

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What was the most significant event of 2016 for scientists? For physicists, perhaps the detection of gravitational waves by the Ligo experiment, a stunning confirmation of a key prediction of Einstein's general theory of relativity. For environmentalists, perhaps the observation of the highest temperature ever recorded in wintertime at the North Pole, yet another ominous warning of global warming.

However, such milestones pale into insignificance in comparison with an event that occurred in the United States on November 8th, 2016; the election of the property tycoon and reality TV star [Donald Trump](#) to the White House.

Apparently, Trump's election came as a shock to pollsters, political experts and media pundits. One wonders why, given Trump's personification of the American dream of being both rich and famous. Indeed, the candidate enjoyed a constant presence in many American living rooms throughout the election campaign, courtesy of a starring role in *The Apprentice*.

Does the US election result matter? Granted, Trump's campaign for the presidency appeared to be based on fear, dislike of foreigners and protectionism, while many of his public utterances suggested a personal tendency towards sexism, racism and misogyny. Such is politics – and surely such character flaws are only a problem for some people, now known as the “liberal elite”?

In fact, Trump's campaign was suggestive of something far more dangerous, at least for the scientist: a marked inability to distinguish fact from opinion and a strong tendency to disregard well-established facts in favour of fixed ideology.

This “post-truth” world view has become more and more apparent as the new president-elect chooses his administration. Time and again, candidates are being selected for high office on the basis of their loyalty or world view, rather than any expertise in a particular area. For example, control of the US [Environmental Protection Agency](#), a hugely important body, is to be handed to Scott Pruitt, the Oklahoma attorney general who has spent six years waging war against the EPA's climate and clean air initiatives.

Similarly, Trump's senior science adviser, Bob Walker, has advocated a substantial reduction in Nasa's geosciences division, dismissing its work as “heavily politicised”. Thus, one of the world's largest centres for research in environmental and climate science faces closure at the whim of newly appointed politicians who know nothing of science – and who apparently do not want to know.

Trump's tendency to [disregard facts](#) in favour of opinion is most obvious in matters of science, but it is just as worrying in areas such as economics and foreign policy. Where world leaders despair at Vladimir Putin's expansionist policies, Trump has declared unbounded admiration for the Russian leader. Where economists applaud Obamacare for providing affordable health insurance to millions of Americans for the first time, the president-elect has declared Obamacare “a disaster” and appointed one of the scheme's bitterest critics to ‘reform’ healthcare.

To be fair, Trump's apparent inability to distinguish between [facts and ideology](#) is hardly unique. As pointed out by Prof John Fitzgerald in this newspaper last week, the US [Republican Party](#) has long pursued an economic doctrine that is based on a particular world view rather than sound economics. Indeed, the GOP's insistence that tax cuts for the wealthy are self-financing flies in the face of a mountain of evidence to the contrary. As a direct result, recent Republican administrations have left the US with large deficits, despite a great deal of talk of “fiscal conservatism”.

Indeed, one of the most worrying aspects of the Trump's “dream team” is the number of key government roles handed to tycoons in business and banking. [Once](#) limited to the lobbying of incumbent politicians, corporate hawks will now hold the levers of power in the world's largest economy. It seems inevitable that these appointments will see a substantial decrease in the regulation of banking and finance, only eight years since the world has seen the disastrous consequences of just such unregulated capitalism.

Thus, Trump's White House shows every sign of becoming an inflexible, ideologically driven administration similar to the presidency of George W Bush. That presidency saw a war that destabilised large regions of the Middle East, a worldwide recession that put millions out of work and a marked inaction on the very real threat of climate change. One can never predict the future but the forecast is far from rosy.

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