Perhaps no political promise is more potent or universal than the vow to restore a golden age. From Caesar Augustus to the Medicis and Adolf Hitler, from President Xi Jinping of China and President “Bongbong” Marcos of the Philippines to Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again” and Joe Biden’s “America Is Back,” leaders have gained power by vowing a return to the good old days.

What these political myths have in common is an understanding that the golden age is definitely not right now. Maybe we’ve been changing from angels into demons for centuries, and people have only now noticed the horns sprouting on their neighbors’ foreheads.

But I believe there’s a bug — a set of cognitive biases — in people’s brains that causes them to perceive a fall from grace even when it hasn’t happened. I and my colleague Daniel Gilbert at Harvard have found evidence for that bug, which we recently published in the journal Nature. While previous researchers have theorized about why people might believe things have gotten worse, we are the first to investigate this belief all over the world, to test its veracity and to explain where it comes from.

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