



## The language of politics

*"Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind" - George Orwell*

### Introduction

Language is a critical tool in politics. Used effectively it can convince, gain power and get results, but when it fails it can have disastrous results.

The simple issues and choices behind many political debates can easily be obscured by politicians and commentators keen to present one side of the story. This is not always their fault however as one fact can be seen in different ways, depending on your political views.

Even if politicians can agree on the facts themselves (occasionally) in a situation, they can present them in very different ways in an attempt to achieve different political ends. This paper explores the different ways that politicians (in fact, anyone) can present the same situation in order to promote their own viewpoint, or convince you of it.

### State intervention

One of the most fundamental differences between political ideologies is their views on whether the state should get involved in people's lives, the economy or any other aspect of society. Many political debates on a wide variety of topics - from the environment to taxes - are simply variations of this basic debate - how much should the state 'interfere' in other aspects of society? Differences in views on this topic often bring out the strongest, and most predictable, variations in interpretation of the facts.

It's worth noting that, just because someone may be in favour of the state getting involved in one area of society (e.g. regulating the economic system), this certainly doesn't necessarily mean they'd want it involved in all other areas (e.g. in telling people how to behave in their private lives). An economic conservative may be a social libertarian and (often) vice versa.

At the most basic level, involvement of the state could simply be interpreted as 'interference/meddling' on one side and 'doing what's right for people' on the other.

It can however differ according to the context of the involvement. For example, state regulation of the economic system could be seen as 'meddling' and 'restricting the natural operation of the economic system' on one side, but on the other side could be seen as protecting people (especially those with less power or wealth).

The state getting involved in people's private lives (such as telling them what is suitable for them to watch on TV) could be interpreted on one side as unwelcome 'censorship' versus on the other side as much needed 'protecting our children'.

Below are some words that you may see on each side of the argument, each emphasising the positive side of their side's position, or the negative consequences of the other side's position.

### **More state involvement**

#### **General**

#### **Economic regulation**

Justice/Fairness

Protection

Taming corporate power

#### **Regulation of our own lives**

Protecting

### **Less state involvement**

Freedom

Rights

Meddling

Interference

Interference

Restriction

Slowing economic growth

Bad for business

Censoring

Any form of regulation of the economic system is often described as 'bad for business' - whether this is environmental regulation or increased business taxes.

Another form of state intervention is the taxes that the state levies on us as individuals. Some would argue that paying higher taxes is about justice, fairness, looking after the vulnerable, a way of taking responsibility, a mark of a compassionate, good society. Others would argue that higher taxes are an infringement of our freedoms and rights to use our money how we'd like. It's often a battle between 'collective responsibility' and 'individual freedoms'.

Ultimately this particular debate covers very similar territory to the 'state intervention' idea presented above.

### **Consumerism**

Whereas some people are concerned about the impact of consumerism on people and society, others complain that regulating this would affect the level of 'choice' people have. Again the same basic territory applies as for the 'state intervention' idea above.

## **War**

The language used to describe military interventions by governments is often more painstakingly crafted than the military strategies themselves. Take this example from 2011<sup>i</sup>, where Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes was at pains to emphasise that the US was not 'at war' with Libya:

*"I think what we are doing is enforcing a resolution that has a very clear set of goals, which is protecting the Libyan people, averting a humanitarian crisis, and setting up a no-fly zone," Rhodes said. "Obviously that involves **kinetic military action, particularly on the front end.**"*

As noted in The Economist<sup>ii</sup>, no leader wants to admit to having had people tortured, but Dick Cheney did say: "I was and remain a strong proponent of our enhanced interrogation programme" — which seems to mean something remarkably similar.

One of the most often cited differences in interpretation in political language is the idea of a 'terrorist' as opposed to a 'freedom fighter'. These days, when the media or politicians aren't sure how to label a group of political killers, they will call them 'militants' until they feel confident to describe them as goodies or baddies (and the associated language that accompanies these judgements).

## **Other reading**

George Orwell, Politics and the English Language, 1946,  
<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/orwell46.htm>

<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0311/51893.html#ixzz2drGPb7fE>

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## **References**

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0311/51893.html#ixzz2drGPb7fE>

<sup>ii</sup> The Economist, How Democrats and Republicans use language, 2013,  
<http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21581745-how-republicans-and-democrats-use-language-war-words>