draft

Why Do Politicians Speak Vaguely?

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Comments and Criticisms
Welcomed

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Most politicians speak vaguely. Indeed the political world often seems as if it were a collective dream: precision, rigor, careful explanation of one's views, formal, systematic, and logical analysis are almost absent. George Orwell thought the language of politics "ugly and inaccurate,"[1] but he was not the first intelligent man to be discomfited: Plato viewed his fellow men and described them as talking of shadows and attempting to make sense of echoes.[2] Clearly there is something odd about the verbal behavior of politicians, and it wants explaining.

After reviewing the literature and thinking about this subject I have located or conjured up fourteen different theories, each of which seems plausibly to account for the vagueness of elite verbal behavior. The theories may be divided into three classes: those which consider primarily the nature of the speaker, those which consider primarily the political subjects about which he is speaking, and those which consider the broader social and political situation of which the speaker is a part.

I. Theories of Speaker Characteristics

1. Inadequate Intelligence

The first theory postulates simply that most politicians are dumb. They are vague, nonlogical, and sloppy in their speech because that is the innate nature of their minds.

2. Inadequate Training

A second theory grants substantial native intelligence to politicians but considers them to be inadequately trained. By this account, clear, logical, and rigorous self-expression results only from explicit

training and hard work (as in the graduate training of scientists or philosophers). One cannot expect, then, that men who have not been trained as scientists or philosophers would speak cogently or sensibly.

3. Ambition (Narcissistic Personality Disorder)

A recent theory, based on psychoanalytic investigation of men with great personal ambition, proposes that politicians speak with a habitual "veil of ambiguity and indirection." This arises as a correlate of their grandiose strivings.[3]

4. Political Language is Vague Because of the Social Symbiosis of the Politician; It is a Defense Against Separation Anxiety.

By this theory the culprit is "separation anxiety". Most men are bound together by certain unquestioned authority structures, assumptions, taboos, and values, and the politician unconsciously fears to stand apart from mass society and speak and think clearly.[4] Bertrand Russell felt a similar fear of loss and anarchy led many philosophers to hide in "mists of fallacy and obscurity;"[5] the existential philosopher Walter Kaufman has recently chided modern man for cognitive degeneration which masks an individual's fear of developing his own separateness.[6] Politicians, like many other people, are insecure cowards who manuever around uncomfortable thoughts.

5. Political Language is Vague Because of the Social Symbiosis of the Politician; It is a Cognitive Adaptation.

Recent work on "language codes" suggests a more cognitive, less psychoanalytic version of the preceding solution to the mystery. Careful explanation, rigorous analysis, and formal logic characterize a person with a high degree of individuation. Such an autonomous individual not only feels a need to express his individuality, but

also he has the subjective distance, the sure sense of a separate self, to have a definite viewpoint. But political leaders, on the other hand, are symbiotically integrated parts of a political system without a clear sense of themselves as individuals. They function in a pervasive state of symbiosis, trapped in a system of reaction to forces, pressures, anxieties. They thus communicate in a restricted language code, a vague shorthand which is comprehensible to others within the system (and only appears vague to an outsider); such degenerated speech reflects a reduced necessity for clarity and logical explanation.[7]

II. Theories of the Subject Matter of Politics

6. Political Language is Vague Because Political Issues are Vague.

By theory six there are two classes of issues in society, the scientific and the political. Scientific issues can be settled clearly because, in principle, one knows how to think clearly about them and how to settle them. But politicians deal with the residual class of issues, those for which there is no clear and agreed meaning or established intellectual method of settlement. The rational mind (and hence speech) gets stuck, trapped, and flails about when it deals with such issues that are not amenable to logic and clarity.[8] Political issues are the tar-baby of the mind.

7. Political Language is Vague Because Political Issues are Emotional

A related explanation views politics as specifically an arena of emotion. Political issues are highly salient, of great emotional import - issues of freedom, justice, money, democracy, identity, security, aggression, communism, morality, and so forth. People become

anxious, aroused, reassured, or supportive in relation to such issues. Emotional engagement means that political language becomes emotionally expressive - that is, expressive of a part of the mind which does not operate dispassionately and logically.[9]

III. The Nature of the Political Setting and the Political Process

The final group of theories focus from different angles upon different aspects of the political setting and the political process.

8. Political Language is Vague Because Politicians - Rational and Shrewd Men - Seek to Build Winning Coalitions of People With Different Views

A politician is vague, by this theory, because he seeks to be all things to all men - or at least many things to a majority. If he expressed clearly exactly what he believed, most of his constituents (the argument goes) would disagree with him in at least some respect and would be more likely to vote for his opponent. So he appears friendly and speaks vaguely in the hope different sub-groups will read their own somewhat different but congenial meanings into his benevolent ambiguity.[10]

9. Political Language is Vague Because It is Designed to Motivate Action and Commitment

Theories 6 and 7, above, postulated vagueness in politics as arising from the nature of politics - from the vagueness of the questions necessarily left to resolution by political means, or from the emotionality necessarily aroused by political issues. The present theory argues that politicians themselves induce the emotionality of politics through vagueness and illogic because they seek to motivate positive support or action. Thus they use rhetoric rather than logic.[11] And they use vague terms because these operate as ambiguous projective

mechanisms for the mass public to read in its own feelings to make vivid the sinister threats and magnificent utopias, the anxieties, security, and nurturance which the politician conjures up.

10. Political Language is Vague Because It is Designed to Be Boring, to Lull the Critical Faculties, and Thereby to Induce Mass Political Quiescence.

George Orwell's famous "newspeak" theory of mass manipulation in 1984 has received empirical confirmation. In the clinic it has been determined that a highly effective way to short-circuit higher cognitive abilities and induce a type of quiescent hypnotic trance is the "verbal confusion technique" employed by someone of high status. The idea is simple: be vague, contradictory, and disjointed, and your audience eventually surrenders.[12] Edelman has argued an analogous effect of political language in America - people give up on politics because it seems so amorphous, too slippery to grasp in the terms in which it is presented. Such vagueness is deliberate, a calculated management technique to maintain elite dominance and regime stability by inducing mass quiescence.[13]

11. Political Language is Vague Because Politicians, When They Speak in Public, are Physiologically Aroused and Apprehensive Over the Reactions of Their Audience; this Induces a Situational Deterioration and Paralysis of Higher Cognitive Processes.

Laboratory research has demonstrated a so-called "audience effect." Well-rehearsed behaviors are performed better when there is an audience (e.g. trained athletes performing before spectators). But original thought is undermined by the same mechanism. Physiological arousal, apparently generated by anxiety over visibility and possible criticism, tends to inhibit the mind. Politicians, so the argument goes, can think and speak clearly and logically in private but become repetitious

and vague in public via this physiological process over which they have no control.[14]

12. Political Language is Vague Because of Mass Democratization.

By this account the King's English was a creature of the aristocracy. As masses obtained the vote, a simplified, "farmerized" mode of discussion became a necessity for political actors. Half the population of the United States has an I.Q. below 100; and, while this is true by definition, the fact is illustrative of the problem of appearing a "man of the people" and communicating in the simplified, general, and vague terms that are all they (presumably) will understand.[15]

13. Political Language is Vague Because of the Speed of Modern Life

Poincaré once remarked, "Please excuse the length of this letter; I had no time to write a shorter one." He was illustrating the hypothesis that cogent, clear, logical self-expression requires time for prior reflection. With the demands for instantaneous comment and the alleged pressures of modern political life, the politician frequently speaks off-the-cuff explaining a position provided him in a briefing paper by his staff. The "whirligig of politics" leaves no time for developing the aesthetics of logic and clarity.[16]

14. Political Language is Vague Because Politicians are Socialized to Perform this Role

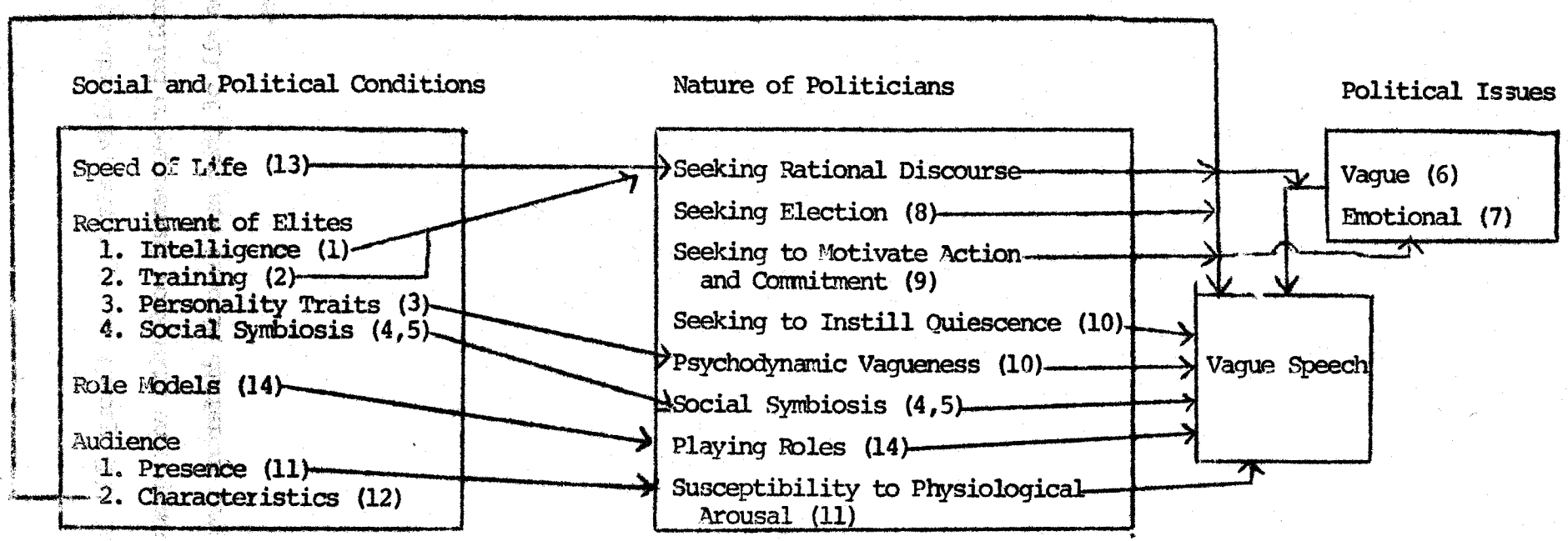
By this theory politicians learn their rules by imitating their predecessors and colleagues. Somehow norms of vagueness originated, and they have simply been perpetuated generation by generation.

In all then, we have fourteen different causal theories. A diagram in Figure I maps the possible relations. None of the theories yet has been

tested systematically, although one theory (11) has been subject to carefully controlled experimental work with undergraduates. One may be true, but perhaps all of them are true in different proportion for different politicians.

Figure I

A Map for the Causal Analysis of the Vagueness of Politicians' Speech



FOOTNOTES

[1]George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language" in George Orwell, A Collection of Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1946), pp.156-171, p.157. Also,

> This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing. As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed." Ibid., p.159.

[2]Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds.), Plato: The Collected Dialogues Including the Letters (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), Bollingen Series #71. The Republic, VII, 514-516. (Paul Shorey, trans.), pp.575-844.

[3]Heinz Kohut, The Analysis of the Self: A Systematic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders. Monograph Series of the Psychoanalytic Study of the Child #4 (New York: International Universities Press, 1971), p.184; The argument is developed in Lloyd S. Etheredge, "Hardball Politics: A Model" (unpublished mimeo), pp.14-17. Orwell apparently discerned a similar connection, "The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms... politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia." Orwell, op.cit., p.167.

[4]"Orthodoxy, of whatever color, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style." Orwell, op.cit., p.166. For the general theory of separation anxiety and politics see Sebastian De Grazia, The Political Community: A Study of Anomia (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

[5]Bertrand Russell, "Philosophy and Politics" in his Authority and the Individual (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), p.86.

[6]Walter Kaufman, Without Guilt and Justice: From Decidophobia To Autonomy (New York: Delta, 1975). See also Lucian W. Pye, The Spirit of Chinese Politics: A Psycho-Cultural Study of the Authority Crisis in Political Development (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), esp. pp.70-71.

[7]Claus Mueller, The Politics of Communication: A Study in the Political Sociology of Language, Socialization, and Legitimation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). The basic work referred to is by Basil Bernstein.

[8]See, for example, the argument of Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System," in David Apter (ed.) Ideology and Discontent (New York: Free Press, 1964), pp.47-76, esp. pp.71-72.

[9]See, for example, Robert E. Lane, Political Thinking and Consciousness: The Private Life of the Political Mind (Chicago: Markham, 1969); Lucian W. Pye, Politics, Personality, and Nation-Building: Burma's Search for Identity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962); De Grazia, op.cit.; Murray Edelman, The Symbolic Uses of Politics (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964); Dan Nimmo, Popular Images of Politics: A Taxonomy (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974); Thurman Arnold, The Symbols of Government (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962); Harold D. Lasswell, Psychopathology and Politics (New York: Viking, 1960); M. Brewster Smith, "A Map for the Analysis of Personality and Politics" in Fred Greenstein and Michael Lerner (eds.) A Sourcebook for the Study of Personality and Politics (Chicago: Markham, 1971) pp.34-44.

[10]See especially W. Lance Bennett, "Imitation, Ambiguity, and Drama in the Political Order: An Essay in the Civil Religion" (unpublished ms.) and idem. et al., "Deep and Surface Images in the Construction of Political Issues: The Case of Amnesty" (unpublished ms.); Anthony Downs, An Economic Theory of Democracy (New York: Harper and Row, 1957)

[11]Aristotle, Rhetoric; Georges Sorel, Reflection on Violence excerpts on the general strike myth in Henry Murray (ed.) Myth and Mythmaking (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960) pp.358-365; Geertz, op.cit.

[12]Perry London "The Induction of Hypnosis" in Jesse E. Gordon (ed.) Handbook of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis (New York: Macmillan, 1967) pp.44-79.

[13]Edelman, op.cit.; Murray Edelman, Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence (Chicago: Markham, 1971).

[14]Key studies include Robert B. Zajanc, "Social Facilitation," Science 149:3681 (July 1965) pp.269-275; N.B. Cottrell, "Performance in the Presence of Other Human Beings: Mere Presence, Audience, and Affiliation Effects" in E.C.Simmel et al, (eds.) Social Facilitation and Imitative Behavier (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1968); W.V. Gore and D.A. Taylor, "The Nature of the Audience as it Affects Social Inhibition," Representative Research in Social Psychology, 4 (1973) pp.18-27; Joseph Sasfy and Morris Okun, "Form of Evaluation and Audience Effects," Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 10 (1974) pp.461-467.

[15]Orwell, op.cit., p.165 believes totalitarian dictatorship is also a cause.

[16]I have lifted the phrase from the title of a recent symposium by W. Dean Burnham, Jeff Pressman, Chris Arterton, and Edwin Diamond. The lack of continual novelty (repetitiousness) may also be a factor - See Orwell, op.cit., p.166.