

# What is post-truth politics?

**Emma Kilheaney** considers why lying is a key tool of today's politicians, and looks at the overturn of Obama's veto in Congress



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**RIGHT NOW, IT PAYS TO BE OUTRAGEOUS,  
BUT NOT TO BE TRUTHFUL.**

The term 'post-truth politics' was first used by the blogger David Roberts on an environmentalist website called *Grist* in April 2010. It refers to living in 'a political culture in which politics (public opinion and media narratives) have become almost entirely disconnected from policy (the substance of legislation)'.

Roberts coined the term to describe a situation in the US Congress where the Republican Party made no attempt to win support for its policy decisions by providing evidence-based arguments. Instead, it opposed all policies put forward by the Democratic Party in order to exploit the emotional responses and loyalties of its followers. This has led to a situation in which politicians seem to be losing their ability to support consensus, resulting in more extreme candidates and policy positions.

## How did we get here?

Voters in both the UK and the USA today know very little about policy or politics. Reason and facts therefore no longer matter. Instead, the electorate relies on the public 'mood' and on unsubstantiated claims to make its political decisions.

Politicians such as Donald Trump and Nigel Farage appear not to care whether their words bear any relation to reality, so long as they affect the political debate. As Brendan Nyhan, professor of government at Dartmouth College, has stated 'right now, it pays to be outrageous, but not to be truthful.' Although politicians have always lied, in the post-truth politics age they actively use lying as part of an electoral strategy.

As politics becomes more adversarial and media focused, facts (true or otherwise) become one of the main rhetorical weapons in public debates. There appears to be less resistance to 'incorrect' facts, allowing politicians to get away with falsifying the truth on levels not previously seen. One explanation for this is that the public is much less trusting of politicians than it once was. If the electorate doubts everything that politicians say, their words no longer need to bear as much relation to reality.

## Examples of post-truth politics

Andrea Leadsom, who dropped out of the race to become the next Conservative party leader and prime minister in July, has been described as a symbol of post-truth politics. Her supporters describe facts as 'negative, pessimistic and unpatriotic'. Before quitting the leadership race, Leadsom embodied the 'anti-factual' mood of the country. During Britain's EU referendum campaign the Leave camp claimed that Britain paid £350 million towards the EU each week. If Britain left the EU, it was claimed, this money could be spent on the NHS. Despite challenges from the Office for National Statistics, the Brexiters continued to use this fictional 'fact' in their electoral campaigns.

In the recent US presidential televised debates, Republican candidate Donald Trump instructed the TV moderator not to challenge him or stop the debate if the facts that he used to form his arguments against the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton were untrue. This may be because, according to PolitiFact, 70% of Donald Trump's factual statements are not true. Only 15% are true or mostly true. The other 15% of his statements are half true. According to the same source 28% of Hillary Clinton's factual statements are false, 50% are true and the other 22% are half true.

## In other news...

On 29 September, Congress voted overwhelmingly to overturn President Obama's veto — the first time this has happened in Obama's presidency. The bill Obama wanted to veto will allow families of the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks to sue the Saudi Arabian government, and other foreign nationals, suspected of involvement in the attack.

The Senate voted 97 to 1 and the House of Representatives voted 348 to 77 to overturn Obama's veto of the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act. This was only the twelfth time, during his 8 years in office, that Obama had exercised his power of veto.

The legislation will now overturn a 1976 law which granted sovereign immunity to foreign nationals. The 1976 law resulted in the rejection by US courts of several

cases brought against the Saudi Arabian government by families of 9/11 survivors. Saudi Arabia has objected strongly to the 2016 legislation as 15 of the 19 hijackers involved in the 9/11 attacks were Saudi nationals.

Obama argued that the legislation would put US diplomats at risk as they would no longer receive diplomatic sovereign immunity, and would expose the US to future lawsuits.

The last time a president had his veto overturned was in November 2007 when Congress overturned President George W. Bush's veto on a bill authorising spending on water projects.

## Questions

- 1 What impact does post-truth politics have on political parties?
- 2 How does post-truth politics affect politicians' ability to carry out their representative function?
- 3 What can we learn from the overriding of Obama's veto about the fate of second term presidents?

## Weblinks to follow up

David Roberts' article on *Grist*: <http://grist.org/article/2010-03-30-post-truth-politics/>

Politifact data on Trump: [www.politifact.com/personalities/donald-trump/](http://www.politifact.com/personalities/donald-trump/) and Clinton:

[www.politifact.com/personalities/hillary-clinton/](http://www.politifact.com/personalities/hillary-clinton/)

*Economist* article about dishonesty in politics:

[www.tinyurl.com/jyo75d6](http://www.tinyurl.com/jyo75d6)

Different views from *New York Times*:

[www.tinyurl.com/j3goneo](http://www.tinyurl.com/j3goneo), *Spectator*:

[www.tinyurl.com/hbmm7yb](http://www.tinyurl.com/hbmm7yb) and the *Straits Times*:

[www.tinyurl.com/zw462k9](http://www.tinyurl.com/zw462k9)

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