

For Bewildered Voters, a Stump-speak Decoder

As a professor who teaches critical thinking, I am professionally interested in how language is used to influence opinion. And although I would agree with the old saw that “the pen is mightier than the sword,” I would add “but just as two-edged.” The language’s effectiveness in allowing people to express their innermost thoughts and feelings is equaled by its efficiency in allowing them to conceal or obscure the same.

In my discipline, this presidential election year with its plethora of candidates is a pedagogical bonanza. Rarely are we treated to such a public demonstration of the language’s capacity to obfuscate. Because in a democracy it is in the candidate’s interest to sound like all things to all people, he has a great incentive to use language in as misleading a way as possible. To this end, politicians seem to have created a dialect of their own in which things never quite mean what they seem to say.

Of course, because the voters’ interest is different from an academic’s, they may not find this to be such a blessing. In fact, to be able to vote intelligently, it would seem that what the electorate needs is a glossary for translating the political dialect into ordinary English. Therefore, as a survivor of the campaign thus far, I would like to offer the following partial dictionary (based on hours of viewing televised debates, national and local news interviews, the *McNeil-Lehrer News Hour*, *Nightline* and the Sunday morning news shows) to the voters of those states whose primaries are still to come.

- **I believe I have already answered that question.** Translation: I have not answered that question, and I’m not going to.
- **There is no longer any debate about whether X should be done; the debate now is about how best to implement it.** Translation: I can give no principled reason why X should be done.
- **We’ll let the American people decide about that.** Translation: I can give no justification for my action/position/behavior.
- **This is not exclusively a problem for the Democrats.** Translation: This is exclusively a problem for the Democrats.
- **This is not exclusively a problem for the Republicans.** Translation: This is exclusively a problem for the Republicans.
- **We need to return compassion to government.** Translation: I want to spend your money.
- **We need a strong America, second to none.** Translation: I want to spend your money. (Note: Evidently, there is no phrase that means “I believe you should be allowed to keep your money” in this dialect.)
- **My proposal is revenue neutral.** Translation: I’m going to raise your taxes.

- **These programs are self-financing/pay-for-themselves-through-outyear savings.**

Translation: I'm going to raise your taxes.

- **I will never support a tax increase that would have a detrimental effect on the economy.**

Translation: I'm going to raise your taxes.

- **I will not support a tax increase under any circumstances.** Translation: I won't raise your taxes right away. (Note: It is impossible to say "I am going to lower your taxes" in this dialect.)

- **I'm a fiscal conservative.** Translation: I will act upset about the fact that I spend more money than I take in.

- **We can make significant savings by eliminating waste from government programs.**

Translation: I have no plan for balancing the federal budget.

- **Tax cut.** Translation: A decrease in the rate of tax increase.

- **Spending cut.** Translation: A decrease in the rate of spending increase.

- **I'm running an idea-based campaign.** Translation: I'm behind in the polls.

- **The only poll that counts is the election.** Translation: I'm behind in the polls.

- **What I have to offer this country is leadership.** Translation: I'd rather not offer any specific proposals.

- **My record shows me to have been consistently within the mainstream of American thought.** Translation: I've never taken a stand on any truly controversial issue.

- **Let's look at the record.** Translation: Let's distort the record.

- **Negative advertising.** Translation: The other candidates' ads.

- **We were not successful in getting our message out.** Translation: The people rejected our message.

- **We were outspent X to 1.** Translation: The people rejected our message.

- **Reactionary (when used by a Democrat).** Translation: Republican.

- **Big spender (when used by a Republican).** Translation: Democrat.

- **Reagan administration (when used by a Democrat).** Translation: The source of all evil.

- **Congress (when used by a Republican).** Translation: The source of all evil.

I admit that not everyone would agree that this political dialect exists. Many people would reject that idea that our political leaders are purposely misleading. And I'm sure that the many loyal supporters or the remaining presidential candidates would dismiss my contention as the misguided ramblings of a cynical mind. To such people I can only respond that evidently I have not been successful in getting my message out. I guess we'll have to let the American people decide.

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