

Stretching the truth: New research reveals negative effects of exaggerative political statements

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Justifying policies through unsubstantiated or slightly invalid arguments can have a significantly negative effect on the public opinion of politicians, according to new research from City, University of London.

With increasing scrutiny on global government policies in a "post-[truth](#)" era, and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic that polarized international responses and reactions to the virus, an increased focus has been placed on policymakers to justify their actions and validate reasons for taking decisions.

Short of lying, this can often lead to politicians "stretching arguments"—making invalid claims that are difficult to both prove and disprove.

The study, "[Argument-stretching: \(slightly\) invalid political arguments and their effects on public opinion](#)" by Dr. Konstantin Vössing, Senior Lecturer in Comparative Politics at City, is published in *European Political Science Review*.

The work sought to explore how perceived validity of arguments when imposing policies affected both the popularity and support of the [policy](#), and that of the individuals implementing them.

Key findings from the research include:

- Stretching an argument creates a significant negative effect on people's opinions towards a politician. Those who use argument-stretching statements are considerably less popular, on a 0-100 scale, than those who use more valid arguments.
- Argument-stretching also affects credibility of the policies themselves. People are more likely to express support for a policy presented using an irrefutable argument than an invalid one.
- The additional presence of a directly opposed argument, however, reduces the negative effects of a stretched argument against that of a more valid one for both policy and policymaker. This is an important consideration for opposition, as strategic

politicians might benefit from holding back on expressing views whenever they expect opponents to harm their own reputation and public support for policies with stretched arguments.

- Failure to justify a policy at all prompts an even less favorable response to both policy and politician than presenting a stretched argument.

Dr. Vössing's research involved three separate field studies with samples representative of the voting public in Germany. The first was a laboratory test involving 332 participants of mixed ages, genders, education and [social class](#), with participants reading a fictional newspaper article about a proposed "Euro-tax" and its benefits for EU members. The article featured quotes from a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) with participants given one of two versions—one where they used argument-stretching to extol the benefits of the tax, and one where they used a more factually valid justification. Participants were then asked to give their approval on the policy and MEP spokesperson.

A second study repeated this process, but as a survey with 1,306 participants with Forsa, the polling company. The second study presented a selection of participants with a third variation on the news story—one with no argument or justification for being in favour of the tax.

A third study of 348 laboratory participants repeated the first two studies, but also introduced a counter-argument, in the shape of one of two quotes from an MEP who was opposed to the tax—with and without justification for this opposition.

The results suggest "stretching" an argument is counterproductive for the credibility of a [politician](#) and the policy they are supporting. However, Dr. Vössing commented that there were a range of other factors which

may determine their motivation to do so.

"Politicians carry a range of naturally conflicting considerations, which go a long way towards explaining why they may wish to stretch an argument," he said.

"They tend to try and boost their [public support](#) in three ways, either through endorsing a popular policy, creating a goal to justify an endorsement of a policy, or making a non-stretched argument about how a policy will affect a goal. However, it is generally impossible to achieve all three.

"Sometimes, politicians decide to connect a popular policy to a popular goal and accept that the link between the two might not be entirely valid. They stretch the argument so that they can mention the policy together with the popular goal.

"For instance, funding universal health care through the NHS is a very popular goal. Supporters of Brexit claimed that the policy of leaving the EU would have a positive effect on that goal. But we know now that the argument was stretched. It was convincing to many audiences at the time, despite the stretched argument, because it combined a popular policy with a popular goal."

"Alternatively, they may just want to say something to justify a goal, which as the research suggests, has a more positive impact than no argument at all. At the same time, making a stretched argument might be seen as necessary if it leads to the success of a more valued, wider overall objective."

Dr. Vössing said the study had implications on governance and the integrity of elected officials.

"Even if the negative effects of argument-stretching dilute over time, the effect of cumulative cases could have profound negative consequences on democracy and the overall political class," he continued.

"Politicians may get away with the very occasional stretch if the negative subsequent effects on their popularity subside, but the build-up of invalid arguments over time could undermine deliberation and accountability, and directly compromise democratic procedures and values.

"Honesty and integrity are essential in a democratic society. Even if there is a difference between lying and stretching an argument, persistent use of the latter can easily cloud this difference over time. Elected politicians must be careful to ensure they promote policies with sound justification to remain accountable to the voting public."

More information: Konstantin Vössing, Argument-stretching: (slightly) invalid political arguments and their effects on public opinion, *European Political Science Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.1017/S1755773923000164](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773923000164)

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