Neoliberals are most receptive to political tricks, study finds

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Do we fall for political tricks—when politicians tell us things that seem completely meaningless? Social psychologists of the University of Amsterdam tested how people respond to vague and meaningless statements like "To politically lead the people means to always fight for them" and "For better and stronger Gonfel!" (a fictitious country). They find that right-wing people, and especially neoliberals, are more

receptive to such statements. The study is now published in the *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*.

The digital age we live in gave rise to misinformation, lies, fact-checks, information overloads, and political shenanigans. These are statements that are very abstract and meaningless, but are supposed to mobilize voters. "That is, politicians tell things that seem to mean nothing and everything at the same time," explain the authors. "For example, when politicians state to 'believe in people or country', or 'promise to fight for a better future'. Such very vague statements we often see during political elections and political campaigns."

But what do such statements actually mean? Which effect can they have? Are some people more susceptible to it than others? This very vague communication and prevalent social phenomenon was not studied before.

Testing how receptive a person can be to political deception

The researchers studied the endorsement of vague political statements, slogans, and programs. After a systematic analysis of literature on this and similar phenomena, they developed three tests to estimate how receptive a person can be to political deception, and how this related to their political ideology and support for neoliberalism, populism, and voting behavior. These tests were conducted in the Netherlands, Serbia and the US.

One test was made up of ten sentences which participants rated on how persuasive they were. One of the sentences stated: "To politically lead the people means to always fight for them." "Though the sentence looks as if it conveys something, it is not clear what it means to fight for

people," state the authors. "It is vague, abstract, and essentially meaningless."

The second test was made up of five slogans about elections in the fictitious country of Gonfel: "For better and stronger Gonfel!" But what does it mean for a country to be better and stronger? The third test contained three long political programs that did not have any sensible meaning, also related to the fictitious country of Gonfel.

Right-wing people (especially neoliberals) are more receptive to false statements

The authors conclude that their study worked well to measure political deception. "Although the term could be controversial, our research suggests that the concept ... exists and can be measured."

Through a meta-analysis of the three tests, they find that all political deception measures positively correlated with support for the free market, while only some positively correlated with social and economic conservatism, and populism. "In the U.S., the Netherlands, and all countries combined, increased receptivity ... was associated with a higher probability to vote for right-wing candidates/parties. Especially neoliberals are more receptive to these statements."

The authors did not investigate and do not know which political parties use political trickery more. "We do assume though, that every party or candidate use such expressions, because of the structural requirements of politics and political communication."

More information: Vukašin Gligorić et al, Political bullshit receptivity and its correlates: A cross-country validation of the concept, *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* (2022). DOI:

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