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## **ASSIGNMENT - Political Bullshit**

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## ASSIGNMENT

# Political Bullshit

### Learning Outcomes

- Recognize differences between bullshit and lying in political speeches.
- Analyze political speech for bullshit.
- Develop a strategy that can be used to diffuse bullshit while it is occurring.

### Context

Political bullshit happens. Understanding how politicians use bullshit is necessary; bullshit is a threat to democracy. In 1986, Harry Frankfurt attempted to define political bullshit and develop a theory of bullshit. It was not a sticky idea, at that time. When it was republished in 2005, audiences were more receptive. Frankfurt refined the theory and definition of bullshit in 2006. Of course, other academicians, some from other disciplines, tested the theory and expanded its applicability.

Harry Frankfurt's definition and theory of bullshit are reproduced, as excerpts, here: "It is correct to say of bullshit, as he says of humbug, both that it is short of lying and that those who perpetrate it misrepresent themselves in a certain way." "However studiously and conscientiously the bullshitter proceeds, it remains true that he is also trying to get away with something." "It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as of the essence of bullshit." "It does seem that bullshitting involves a kind of bluff." "For the essence of bullshit is not that it is false but that it is phony." "This points to a similar and fundamental aspect of the essential nature of bullshit: although it is produced without concern with the truth, it need not be false. The bullshitter is faking things. But this does not mean that he necessarily gets them wrong." "The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides, on the other hand, is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him; what we are not to understand is that his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it." "The bullshitter ignores these demands altogether. He does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are."

Gerald Allan Cohen adds to this theory of bullshit by noting "unclarifiable unclarity": "But what particularly interests me is a certain variety of nonsense, namely, that which is found in discourse that is by its nature unclarifiable, discourse, that is, that is not only obscure but which cannot be rendered unobscure, where any apparent success in rendering it unobscured creates something that isn't recognizable as a version of what is said."

G. A. Reisch expands on the theory of bullshit remarking that bullshit has a pragmatic goal.

In *Rhetoric and Governance Under Trump: Proclamations from the Bullshit Pulpit*, Bernd Kaussler, Lars J. Kristiansen, and Jeffrey Delbert declare, "Moreover, bullshit is both a product and a process and is commonly called into existence when people are asked to speak on matters about which they have little or no expertise or experience. Enlisted in support of unstated primary goals, bullshit can also be evasive when used strategically to distract audiences from a speaker's actual motives."

## Your Task

It can be difficult to parse when a politician is lying and when a politician bullshits. Focus on the parts of bullshit that can be traced. For example, you might look at process and product. You might focus on the phony or fake parts. You could critique a speech act for its “unclarifiable unclarity.”

The first part of this assignment is a community project. Divide into groups of 5 students. Select a leader, scribe, researcher, presenter, and questioner. Using information from the summary of bullshit or from Harry Frankfurt’s original theory of bullshit (Frankfurt, Harry. 1986. “On Bullshit.” Princeton University. You can access it here <https://www.math.mcgill.ca/rags/JAC/124/bs.html>), critique two political speeches (historical to contemporary) for elements of bullshit. The speeches need to be from different party perspectives. Present the group’s critique to the class.

The final part of this assignment allows you to work with two other students. Together, you will explore if bullshit is a type of political corruption. Compose a short essay (750 words) in which the small group members explore what bullshit is--a type of political corruption or something else. Be specific about what this something else is if bullshit is not a type of political corruption. Give it a name.

As you compose the essay, remember your audience: an educated reader who is willing to be patient and listen openly, but does not possess infinite resources of patience. You need to make a clear point that can be argued and debated.

The elements of a good essay still apply. It needs an Introduction with a thesis statement that previews the two or three main points and announces why these points matter. Body paragraphs need a topic, example, and explanation. The explanation must answer the “so what?” question. The conclusion needs to remind the readers of the main points you want them to remember.