

Post-truth politics

By David Roberts (<http://grist.org/author/david-roberts/>) on Apr 1, 2010

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During this strange lull in the (endless) development of the federal climate bill, I've been mulling over a few political notions.

First: voters don't generally know much about politics or policy. They have things they *do* know a lot about (*American Idol*, baseball teams, accounting software, scrapbooking), but for most voters, politics and policy aren't among them. **Voters use crude heuristics to assess legislative proposals.** This runs somewhat counter to the idealized Enlightenment view, which goes something like this: Voters

1. gather facts,
2. draw conclusions from the facts,
3. form issue positions based on the conclusions, and
4. choose a political party that shares those issue positions.

The best evidence from political science shows that the process is almost exactly the reverse. Voters:

1. choose a tribe or party based on value affiliations,
2. adopt the issue positions of the tribe,
3. develop arguments that support those issue positions, and
4. choose facts to bolster those arguments.

(For more on this see "It Feels Like We're Thinking (<http://grist.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/thinking.pdf>)" [PDF] by Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels.)

Though party is the most common tribe and the best indicator of issues positions, there are other heuristics at work as well. One crude way to judge a proposal is by how much support it's getting from the "other side." To most voters out in the

vast middle, consensus across parties is a very strong indicator of acceptability. Conversely, if there is no support on the other side — if the proposal is *controversial* — there is something suspect about it.

Notice, however, that heuristic creates a perverse incentive. It's captured perfectly in this post (<http://crookedtimber.org/2010/03/29/partisanbipartisan/>) by John Holbo, who asks you to imagine a two-party system wherein one party has poor discipline (members often stray to the other side on individual votes) and the other iron discipline (always voting as a bloc):

Over time, both parties will push positive proposals/legislation. Quite obviously, the Bipartisan Party will be at a tactical disadvantage, due to its lax discipline. Less obviously, it will have an ongoing optics problem. All the proposals of the Partisan Party will be bipartisan. That is, a few members of the other party will, predictably, peel off and cross the aisle to stand with the Partisans. None of the proposals of the Bipartisan Party, on the other hand, will ever be bipartisan. No Partisan will ever support a Bipartisan measure. In fact, all proposals of the Bipartisan party will face bipartisan opposition — as a few Bipartisans trudge across the aisle (there are always a few!) to stand with the Partisans. Result: the Partisan party, thanks to its unremitting opposition to bipartisanship, will be able to present itself as the party of bipartisanship, and be able to critique the Bipartisan Party, with considerable force and conviction, as the hypocritically hyperpartisan party of pure partisanship.

This is, of course, exactly the tenor of the criticism Democrats have gotten from Republicans and political pundits. Because Republicans refuse *en masse* to support Democratic proposals, those proposals have been characterized as controversial and extreme. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has been uncommonly candid about the strategy (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/17/us/politics/17mcconnell.html?hp=&pagewanted=all>):

“It was absolutely critical that everybody be together because if the proponents of the bill were able to say it was bipartisan, it tended to convey to the public that this is O.K., they must have figured it out,” Mr. McConnell said about the health legislation in an interview, suggesting that even minimal Republican support could sway the public. “It’s either bipartisan or it isn’t.”

Republicans have quite cannily figured out how to manipulate voters’ heuristics. **No matter what Democrats do or propose, Republicans meet it with maximal, united opposition, criticizing it as socialism, tyranny, or appeasement.** They’ve accurately realized that all they have to do to render Democratic proposals controversial is refuse to support them.

As a consequence, **no matter what Democrats do or propose, they’ll have to deal with the optics of their proposals appearing partisan.**

We live in post-truth politics: a political culture in which politics (public opinion and media narratives) have become almost entirely disconnected from policy (the substance of legislation). This obviously dims any hope of reasoned legislative compromise. But in another way, it can be seen as liberating. If the political damage of maximal Republican opposition is a fixed quantity — if policy is orthogonal to politics — then there is little point to policy compromises. They do not appreciably change the politics.

For Democrats shaping policy, this suggests a two-fold strategy. First, they should pull attention to issues and proposals where the political ground is already favorable, from broad stuff like financial reform to narrow bills on jobs and energy. Second, on those issues that are inevitably going to be controversial, **aim for maximally effective policy and deal with the politics separately.** In post-truth politics, attempting to change perceptions by weakening policy is a category mistake. Remember, no matter what shape a Democratic proposal takes — a centrist health-care bill full of ideas Republicans supported just a year ago or a cap-and-trade system like the one first implemented under George H.W. Bush — Republican opposition will be maximal.

So: fight the opposition on political grounds and concurrently craft the best, most effective policy possible. The political controversy around a bill, whether it’s over partisanship, back-room deals, or procedural maneuvers, is ephemeral. It will

pass quickly. In the end, the policy will be judged by its effects on voters' lives — whether it solved the problem it was designed to solve.

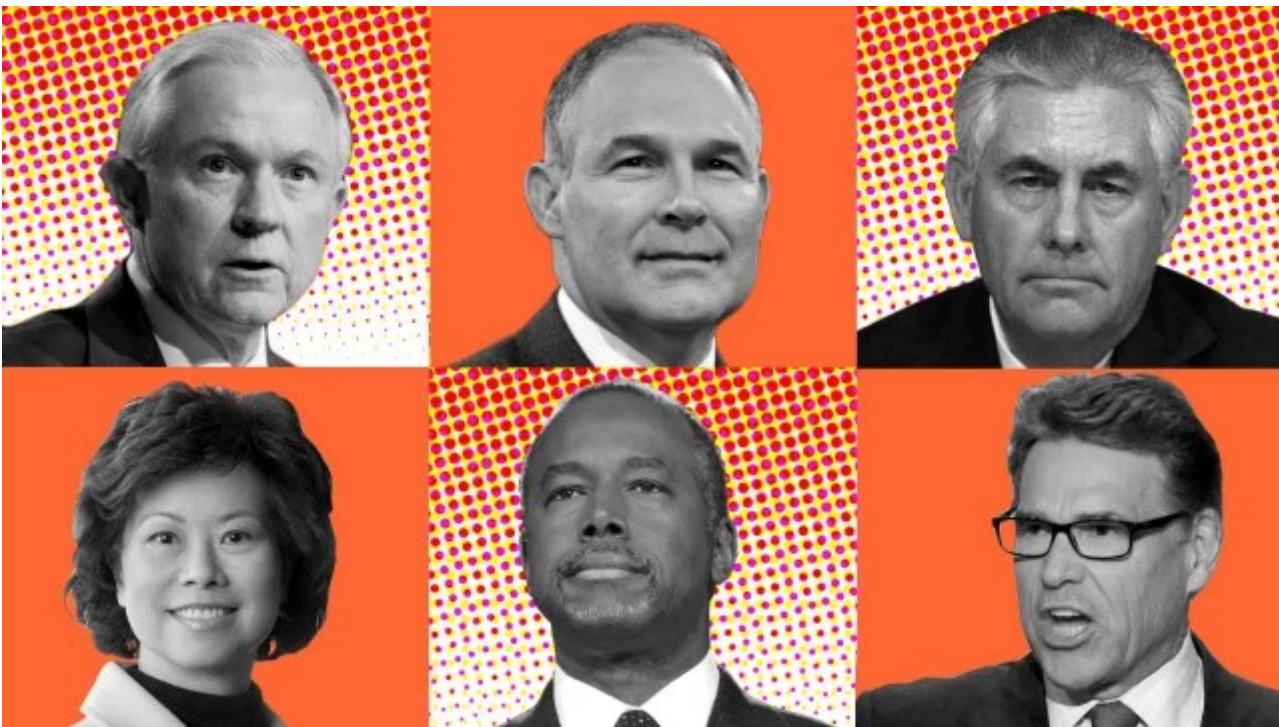
What does all this mean for the climate/energy bill (and Obama's offshore drilling announcement)? More on that soon.

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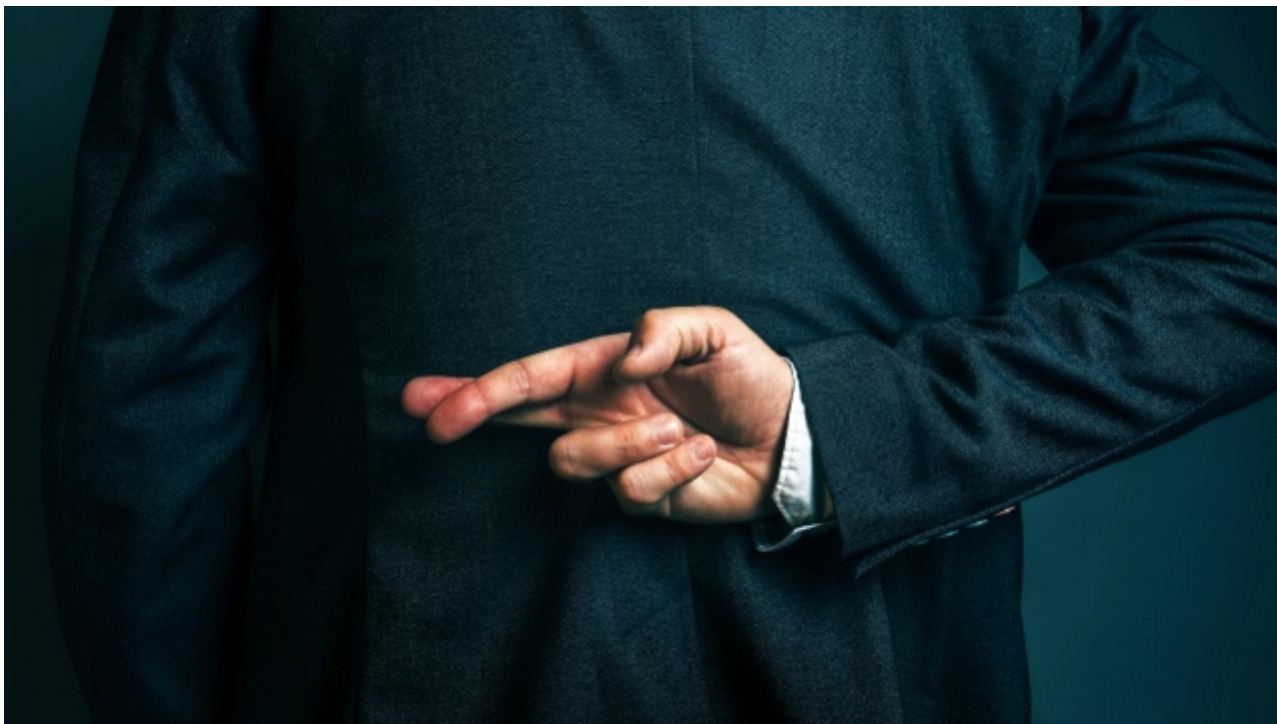


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