

THE DIALOGIC EMERGENCE OF 'TRUTH' IN POLITICS

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In American political discourse, debates are often framed around issues of truth (e.g. did Saddam Hussein possess weapons of mass destruction?, did Iraq help al-Qaeda carry out the attacks on 9/11?). Political actors wield facts to show that they have uncovered the 'real' truth as they counter their opponents' truth claims. Yet truth in these debates is not so much discovered as enacted.

In this paper, I examine political discourse as a performative process through a framework that draws upon the Bakhtinian idea of intertextuality (Bakhtin 1980, 1986; Kristeva 1980). We do not create utterances completely from scratch, but rather construct our utterances out of previous discourse, which we "assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" (Bakhtin 1986: 89). In this way, political actors reanimate previous discourse not only to produce and strengthen truth claims, but also to subvert the truth claims of opponents. To illustrate these notions, I take examples from the first debate between George W. Bush and John Kerry prior to the 2004 presidential election as well as remarks delivered by Joseph Lowery at the Coretta Scott King funeral in February 2006.

I argue that political discourse should not merely be analyzed as the individual style of the politician to persuade or deceive, but as the confluence of various texts and discourses. By viewing truth as an emergent property of a dialogic process, analysts can then focus on the performative acts that bring truth into existence. The framework of intertextuality is central to this endeavor because it allows the analyst to connect political discourse with the larger interpretive web in which it is embedded, and thus better understand the way cultural knowledge is produced, reproduced and subverted by sociopolitical actors.

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