



RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF SPEECH OF POLITICIANS OR MERE OBFUSCATION: DILEMMA OF MODERN DEMOCRACY

Architshri Pandey*

ABSTRACT

This article delves into the prevalent use of ‘obfuscation’ in political discourse, referring to the deliberate use of vague and ambiguous language by politicians to evade accountability, shield themselves from criticism, and manipulate public opinion. The author posits that this obfuscation poses a significant threat to the democratic process, as it hinders transparency, erodes public trust, and fuels “polarization” within society. Furthermore, the article explores the potential ramifications of unchecked obfuscation, including the rise of “corruption” and the disenfranchisement of the public. It argues that by obscuring their true intentions and actions, political leaders create an environment ripe for abuse of power and erode the public's ability to hold them ‘accountable’. In response to this challenge, the author proposes several strategies to combat obfuscation, including fostering a culture of reasoned and “structured debate” and establishing an “independent body” to analyze political speech, evaluating it for clarity, coherence, and adherence to principles of reasoned argumentation. The article concludes by stressing the crucial role of clear, honest, and transparent communication in nurturing a healthy and robust democracy, where the public can effectively engage with political discourse and hold their leaders accountable.

Keywords: Obfuscation, Polarization, Corruption, Accountable, Structured Body, Independent Body.

INTRODUCTION

What is an easier way to express your thoughts - unreasoned conclusions/ facts or deductively reasoned conclusions? As far as the easiness is concerned, I am sure the former is the preferred answer. But at the same time, what contributes more to the aim of the delivery of thoughts?

*BA LLB, FIRST YEAR, HIDAYATULLAH NATIONAL LAW UNIVERSITY, RAIPUR.

This time it is the latter. Speaking about the aim, the objective of any expression of thought in general is:

- Correlation with existing thoughts of ours and others;
- When this correlation reaches the optimum stage, execution in the real world it ultimately impacts the life of ours and others.

The right to freedom of speech is a cornerstone of democratic societies, enabling the free exchange of ideas, fostering public discourse, and holding those in power accountable. However, the increasing prevalence of obfuscation in political communication, where leaders use ambiguous and evasive language to manipulate public opinion and avoid scrutiny, presents a challenge to the integrity of democratic processes. Freedom of speech empowers individuals to express their views, participate in public discourse, and hold their elected officials accountable. It facilitates the exchange of diverse perspectives, enables informed decision-making, and safeguards against abuses of power. However, the rise of obfuscation, where politicians deliberately employ vague and misleading language to avoid direct answers, deflect criticism, and manipulate public perception, threatens to undermine these democratic principles.

Obfuscation erodes public trust, hinders transparency, and fuels polarization. When political leaders engage in obfuscation, they create an environment where it becomes difficult to discern their true intentions, assess their performance, and hold them accountable for their actions. This lack of clarity can lead to cynicism, disengagement, and a decline in public faith in democratic institutions. The tension between the right to freedom of speech and the challenge of obfuscation presents a dilemma for modern democracies. While freedom of speech is essential for a healthy democracy, the misuse of this freedom to obfuscate and mislead undermines the very principles it is intended to protect. Striking a balance between these competing interests is crucial for safeguarding the integrity of democratic processes and ensuring that public discourse remains open, transparent, and accountable.

THE GENERAL PROCEDURE OF THE DEMOCRACY

Now, concentrating our focus on political leaders, their role is to govern us while holding political power. Now in modern democracies, they wield political power while in a political post or as opposition while not holding the political post. In both cases, they are obliged to the

public, and one of the obligations is to comment on the use of the political post. They either criticize or justify the work done in political posts by different stakeholders. This right is constitutionally guaranteed under Article 19.

Criticism in democracy on any performance of political power is seen as a mark of its healthy functioning. It is believed that the more the thoughts are expressed and considered to impact public opinion, the more the political power is justified. But this article aims to emphasize that what is the aim of this procedure. It is based on the premise that the more the thoughts, the more accepted and justified will be the governance. But what would these thoughts do together in the public domain, after they are expressed? The answer is that they would be correlated to form a dominant “consensus” on that topic. And deducing further, how this correlation would be achieved. This would be possible only when they share different basic justifiable logic within them. This logic could be either the:

- The reference to real-life objects,
- The reference to mentally constructed logic that are basic structures of other logic, and
- The correlation of the above two.

Here it is to be noted that the third type mentioned is the driving force of the correlation of thoughts, the second type helps in simplification of the thoughts whereas the first type serves as the origination point of the thought.

WHAT THE PUBLIC WANTS TO HEAR AND WHAT IT HEARS: ASSERTION Vs. ARGUMENTS

Now, having seen the procedure of democracy in general and the intended methodology behind it, we can deduce what are the requirements of the democratic procedure today. We often find that the leaders assume their obligation in the above procedure, just limited to presenting their assertions. Their opinions though put a check on the power of their counter-parts, their opinions are most of the time usually assertions and not arguments. Their assertions, unfounded by reasons often make their demands and comments baseless. This is called “obfuscation”. The main reasons for this tendency are:

- **To make unpopular or unethical actions seem more acceptable:** By using carefully chosen words, they can frame controversial policies or decisions in a way that

minimizes public backlash or criticism. For example, instead of saying "cutting welfare benefits," a politician might say "reforming social safety nets."

- **To avoid accountability or responsibility:** When faced with criticism or accusations, politicians may use ambiguous language to deflect blame or obscure their role in the situation. They might use phrases like "mistakes were made" without specifying who made them or what those mistakes were.
- **To create a favourable image or narrative:** Politicians often use language to portray themselves and their actions in a positive light, even if it means exaggerating their achievements or downplaying their failures. They might use terms like "strong leadership" or "fiscal responsibility" to create an impression of competence and trustworthiness.
- **To appeal to specific audiences or ideologies:** Politicians may tailor their language to resonate with particular groups of voters, using code words or dog whistles that convey specific meanings without being explicitly stated. This allows them to mobilize support without alienating potential allies.
- **To control the narrative and shape public opinion:** By carefully crafting their language, politicians can influence how people perceive events, policies, and themselves. They can use loaded terms or emotional appeals to sway public opinion and create a desired outcome.

As we can see, above all are the "shortcuts" of the political stakeholders to make their voice dominant and achieve their gains. They often compound it with violent protests and disruption of law and order, which often shreds down the topic into criminal charges and government restraints, to maintain the status quo. Even if not this, their assertions at most serve the purpose of just "highlighting" the urgency. But is their role limited just to this? Doesn't the media already have the role to do this? Highlighting the opinion by unreasoned conclusions acts like a blunt hammering on the public consensus, where the precision of a surgical knife is required.

The time has bygone where their mere expression of opinion was enough, against the premise of authoritarian and other similar types of governance. This was seen as an assertion of the public power over the unchecked state's authority. In the past, authoritarian and similar regimes relied on suppressing dissent and controlling information, allowing those in power to maintain

authority through their words alone. However, the rise of global interconnectedness, increased access to information, and a growing demand for transparency and accountability have eroded the potency of such pronouncements. The shift towards more participatory and deliberative forms of governance reflects a broader recognition of the importance of citizen engagement and the limitations of authoritarian pronouncements in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Otherwise, the practice of obfuscation not only denotes meagre fulfilment of obligations but also sets a bad “precedent” for the expression of thoughts in the democratic procedure.

DISADVANTAGES CREATED BY OBFUSCATION

As stated, this tendency sets a precedent that indirectly influences the further expression of thoughts and opinions. The environment created becomes very narrow in the absence of the “correlation” process denoted above. Summarizing, some of the disadvantageous outcomes are:

- 1. Hollowed emergence of different ideologies:** When leaders consistently obfuscate, it becomes difficult to discern their true beliefs and intentions. This lack of clarity can lead to the formation of political ideologies that are based on superficial slogans and emotional appeals. This can manifest in a distorted public discourse where the loudest and most disruptive voices, rather than the most reasoned or representative ones, dominate.
- 2. Disproportionate expression of opinions:** The society has made some rough “protocols” for expressing the demand for political power. The public uses this protocol to demarcate the extent of the problem. It is like using emotional indicators in person-to-person communication like sharp voice signifies anger. But today, this expression is very haphazard, with a rather emerging “competition” of who maximally disrupts the law and order in public. The more someone disrupts, the more he is expected to be heard. This is mainly because there is no practice of a reasoned and principled expression. In the area of logic, there is indeed competition, but that is focused on deducing more reasons and principles to back it and simplifying it further to correlate with the fundamentals. But as stated, now this has shifted to a blunt expression of “disruption” which not only creates a bad precedent but starts a vicious cycle.

- 3. Erosion of Trust:** When leaders consistently obfuscate, it erodes public trust in their intentions and competence. People become sceptical of their motives and less likely to believe their pronouncements, even when they may be truthful. And even when they try to associate, they use factors of association that are irrelevant to the motives with which they try to associate.
- 4. Hindered Accountability:** Obfuscation makes it difficult to hold leaders accountable for their actions and decisions. By using vague language and avoiding direct answers, they can deflect blame and avoid taking responsibility for their mistakes.
- 5. Polarization and Division:** Obfuscation can contribute to political polarization by reinforcing existing biases and making it harder to find common ground. When people are unable to understand or trust opposing viewpoints, it can lead to increased division and animosity.

THE END RESULT: CORRUPTION

These disadvantages in turn facilitate the corruption in the exercise of political power. The “lag” created between what the obligations require and what the stakeholders do first gives rise to distrust, then confusion and at last this confusion is taken advantage of and the political power wielders can do the corruption. This lag gives rise to a lack of accountability as the public is not able to analyze and thus keep a check on the political power. Thus, obfuscation can lead to a lack of trust in the government. When people feel that they are being kept in the dark, they are more likely to suspect that something is being hidden. This can lead to cynicism and disengagement, which can further erode accountability.

In addition, obfuscation can make it difficult for people to participate in the political process. If people do not understand the issues at stake, they are less likely to vote or get involved in other ways. This can lead to a situation where a small group of people can make decisions that affect everyone else, which can further increase the potential for corruption. Thus, obfuscation disincentivizes public participation, which in turn leads to a lack of accountability, resulting in corruption.

PUBLIC, AT LAST, GIVES TO ASSERTIONS: POLITICAL POLARIZATION

So, as stated above, one of the major consequences is that of “Polarization” of the views of the public. This is because the ideologies expressed are often hollow. This in turn leads to the public relating to the ideologies with weakly constructed reasons. So, this in turn leads to resorting to the most basic form of group formation- yes or no. Have there had been more logic, people would have formed more than just two groups, as more and more ideas would have poured in. And eventually, these groups would have most probably would have given rise to a new balanced ideology, rather than the mere domination of one ideology upon others.

The public is not ultimately at liability here, they are forced to tend to the process of polarization as they don't feel that their reasoned views would be accepted by the public. This is the very reason why “indirect democracy” was created in the first place. It was the responsibility of the leaders to set the tone for public discourse, as they are the “fulcrum point” of all the political ideologies floating in the public. When they engage in respectful dialogue, even with those who hold opposing views, they set an example for others to follow. Conversely, when they resort to divisive rhetoric or obfuscation, they contribute to a toxic political environment, as dominating in politics today. Thus, political leaders must guide the public to prevent polarization.¹ Otherwise, a vicious cycle starts, where the process of polarization amplifies with each augmentation of the political ideology into the polarized ideology.

The current situation is much similar to, or rather worse when direct democracy is imposed upon a large population. The process of reasoning becomes very slow among the public and a rough process of polarization starts, where the manner of expression becomes more important than the reasoning in the expressed idea. But this process amplifies when the process is accelerated by the leaders, who themselves assert rather than argue. Again, assertion is just the expression of the already concluded facts and the argument is the backing of the assertion by reasoning.

¹ Tetsuya Matsubayashi, DO POLITICIANS SHAPE PUBLIC OPINION? BRITISH JOURNAL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE CAMBRIDGE CORE (2012), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/do-politicians-shape-public-opinion/8B08F2AC84682539AAF6A90A57E62092> (last visited Feb 12, 2025).

HOW OBFUSCATION CAN BE PREVENTED?

Having seen the disadvantages of the obfuscation, let us see how this process could be prevented. Now, one view on this would be to create a law to prevent this. But this would be ineffective as its interpretation would be difficult and also there is no environment to support and endorse it. Also, it would be a very blunt action and would be seen as a deterrent to freedom of speech. So, what we need is a self-propelling reason among the public and leaders to not engage in doublespeak and engage in a principled debate. This could be achieved by incentivizing them to do so.

This would in turn be facilitated by training the stakeholders by promoting a culture of reasoned debates. It is like educating children in schools and connecting it with pragmatic results in their college days. They learn mathematics in school which in turn is used in physics to see real-life applications. But as thought processes in the political domain are not very technical, this link could be realized in a short duration. So, in an alternative constructed environment they are needed to train their thoughts and reach principled conclusions. Some suggestions for the same are:

Promoting the culture of parliamentary debates among the leaders: We often see political leaders in India engaging in debates on media channels, but it is widely remarked with harsh language and unprincipled allegations. There is negligible discussion apart from these. Even the allegations are not backed by evidence or reasoning. Thus, a need to endorse the culture of academic Parliamentary debate is required. The main advantage is the practice of specific structure and “roles” in the debate that highlight different processes of a healthy discussion. This would greatly train their thought processes.

An independent speech analyzing agency: There are already “fact” checking agencies in existence. They check the validity of the facts provided by different people in social media and mass media. Those facts are mostly about the events occurring at specific places. The agencies just check the existence of those events. But now there is a need for “discourse analysis” of the speeches and statements given by political figures. It would involve analyzing factors like how much reasoning has been given, how much correlation has been given in the ideas, how much the speaker-related their speech with the central idea without deviating, etc. In short, this shall quantify the amount of obfuscation. This would ultimately incentivize the leaders to withdraw from obfuscation, by providing them a competitive and meritorious environment.

So, as we have seen from the above examples that provide structures to prevent obfuscation, there is an eminent need for a “standard structure” for the speeches and statements of political figures in mass media. What happens now is that speeches are nowadays analyzed based on the thoughts and critical analysis provided by different personalities. That is, different “personalities” are vested with the power to provide a degree of reliability and trueness. But now, it is the need of the hour to devise a standard structure to compare with. This would enable the public to truly analyze the political figures themselves, thus increasing accountability. It is considerable that this would be just an advisory requirement as posed against the educational requirements. The former doesn’t require any need for minimum education and thus doesn’t deter free representation in a democracy. This system would achieve its goals based on competition. This also provides a tool for the public to judge the accountability of the political figures.

As for the nuances of the structure of speech, this has been already achieved in the domain of academic Parliamentary Debates, where different specific keywords have been devised to denote different forms of “correlation” of the different ideas, like knifing, burden, clash, etc. These types of structural components would help standardize the speeches in the political domain. It is good to recognize that in the political domain like democracies, “speech” is a very important form of exercise of democratic power, which involves communication between the voter-representative relationship. Voters choose representatives to articulate their interests and concerns. This requires clear, honest communication from those representatives about their positions, intentions, and the reasoning behind their actions. Voters choose representatives to articulate their interests and concerns. It requires clear, honest communication from those representatives about their positions, intentions, and the reasoning behind their actions. Thus, standardizing the same would make this relationship healthy.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted the issue of obfuscation in political discourse, where politicians use ambiguous language to avoid accountability, manipulate public opinion, and hinder transparency. The paper has minimally used citations to refer to anything, as this is an eminent topic, yet to get recognition. The use of obfuscation not only undermines the principles of democracy but also contributes to political polarization, erosion of public trust, and a decline in accountability. To combat this issue, the paper suggests implementing measures such as promoting a culture of reasoned debate, establishing independent speech analysis agencies, and

standardizing the structure of political speeches. By taking action to prevent obfuscation, we can foster a more transparent and accountable political environment that promotes healthy democratic discourse. Thus, I request to reader to recognize this assault on democracy and advocate for eradicating the practice of obfuscation.