

# Jay Inslee and the Power of Stating the Obvious

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Congressman Jay Inslee (D-WA) recently commented that Republicans have ["an allergy to science and scientists"](#) during a congressional hearing targeting the EPA. This observation is significant not because of its insight, as Inslee was doing little more than stating the obvious. It is, however, unusual to hear a member of Congress make these kinds of matter of fact statements. While debate in Congress is often quite intense, Democrats seem uncomfortable saying these kinds of things even when they are painfully obvious. Most Republicans probably would not even challenge Inslee as leaders of that party frequently state that they prefer faith to science, particularly when it comes to matters of biology or the environment.

There is, of course, a stark contrast between the two parties in this regard. The leadership of the Republican Party seems to pride itself in its ability to make extraordinary and ungrounded claims about their political opposition. Democratic candidates are routinely referred to as trying to destroy America, as socialists or even as sympathetic to terrorists. Outrageous claims about the president's citizenship, faith or personal background are so common that the 2012 Republican primary may simply devolve into a contest to see who can make the most outlandish claims about President Obama.

It is not likely, nor would it be wise, for the Democrats to begin making similarly outrageous statements about the Republican leadership and their backgrounds and intentions. Democrats have tended to prefer to focus on the competence of Republicans rather than their intentions. It is notable that while many Democratic leaders, for example, believed President George W. Bush was destroying America, few asserted that he was trying to do that deliberately. Republicans in the opposition have not taken a similar approach and have attacked both President Obama's competence and motives.

American politics has reached a strange impasse where one side, the Republicans, screams about socialism every time the other seeks to have reasonable tax rates or a modicum of social services and calls any effort to rethink American foreign policy anti-American, while the other side, the Democrats, are sufficiently timid that noting that Republicans are not fond of science or scientific findings is considered a bold statement.

The Democrats would be doing the country a disservice by seeking to one-up the Republicans with regards to making outrageous claims about their political opponents, but clearly stating obvious, and in some cases non-controversial, facts would be an

interesting and novel approach. What would happen if instead of platitudes about working together to solve climate change, most Democrats stated that the other side is simply not interested in scientific realities and prefers to inhabit a fantasy world, or if instead of pledging support for bipartisan approaches to fixing the budget, the Democrats stated that the Republicans are deeply committed to making their rich supporters richer and care about little else when it comes to the economy? Most importantly, what if these statements came from the highest levels rather than from ordinary members of Congress?

The answer to all these questions is that we don't know. It is possible that Americans would be angry at the Democrats for revealing these simple truths or that the Democrats would allow themselves to be shouted down for being divisive. Of course, Americans are already angry at the Democratic leadership which, in turn, is constantly being shouted down for being divisive, so the added potential for damage would not be much.

Although simply stating obvious truths falls far short of a political strategy, it also has its advantages. First, politicians would feel more confident and present themselves more effectively if instead of feeling obliged to make statements so riddled with apologies, neutrality and platitudes that they are completely meaningless, they could describe politics as they are. This would also make Democratic politicians more appealing to voters; and not only because of their message, which would clearly offend some voters. Many voters, for example, are, like their Republican representatives, happy to ignore scientific findings and ignore global warming too or are wealthy and want congress to commit itself to keeping them wealthy. These voters would not warm to a Democratic Party committed to telling simple truths in simple language.

Nonetheless, being able to tell the truth as they see it would be a liberating and empowering experience for Democrats. It would allow them to unshackle themselves from the timidity and fear that has defined their party for more than a generation, but at no time more than during the Obama administration. If the administration put their considerable communication skills and resources, not into obfuscating, always seeking compromise and seeking to be all things to almost all voters, but to stressing the basic messages and realities that frame our political life, they would have some success at this. Today, however, it is still rare to hear somebody in Washington say in calm and sober language that the Republican leadership is not so concerned about scientific reality; and it is still controversial to say that leadership doesn't care about poor people. As long as the Democrats function within these constraints, they cannot be effective.