

# Libertarian Social Desirability Bias

I often rail against Social Desirability Bias, our all-too-human tendency to lie when the truth sounds bad. Critics occasionally treat my railing as thinly-veiled ideology: I dismiss non-libertarian rhetoric as “mere Social Desirability Bias,” while treating libertarian rhetoric as objective truth.

To clear the air, then, let me bluntly state that most libertarian rhetoric is *also* drenched in Social Desirability Bias. Consider a few standard examples:

1. “The effect of government regulation can only be to worsen the very problem it purports to solve.” This sounds good, but is almost always a gross overstatement. The phrase “can only be” strongly suggests not just certainty, but a priori certainty. And this is silly. While I think the minimum wage does worsen the problem of poverty, this verdict depends on labor demand elasticity, the effect of income and employment on happiness, and other subtle empirical questions. *Could* the effects of the minimum wage be otherwise? Of course.
2. “Inevitably...” Oh brother! Libertarians love to use this word. But as Tetlock teaches us, predictions without an expiration date are virtually meaningless. “Paper money will lead to hyperinflation in the next 25 years” is at least worth entertaining, but “Paper money will inevitably lead to hyperinflation” is empty verbiage.
3. “Without exception...” Oh brother! The entirety of human history contains not a single exception? Have you even *looked* for exceptions?
4. “I disagree with what you say, but will defend to the death your right to say it.” Sounds great, but how many libertarians would even give a finger for their *own* right to loudly announce their own most controversial belief? So they probably aren’t prepared to die for a stranger’s free expression, are they?
5. Almost every claim that a specific regulation will “destroy an industry” or even “destroy the economy.” As Adam Smith quipped, “There is much ruin in a nation.” While hyperbolic rhetoric draws more attention than “Will make us .03% poorer,” that doesn’t make it true.

Question: If both libertarians and their opponents habitually practice Social Desirability Bias, is there anything libertarian about my one-man crusade for ugly truth? The answer is a subtle Yes. I’ve already explained that **betting kills hyperbole**, the lifeblood of activist government:

*Why are proponents of government action so prone to hyperbole?*

*Because it's rhetorically effective, of course. You need wild claims and flowery words to whip up public enthusiasm for government action. Sober weighing of probability, cost, and benefit damns with faint praise – and fails to overcome public apathy.*

*Now suppose my Betting Norm were universally accepted. Any public figure who refuses to bet large sums on his literal statements is an instant laughingstock, a figure of fun. What happens? Political hyperbole ends for politicians and pundits alike. Hysterical doom-saying and promises of utopia vanish from public discourse. No one serious can afford them! As a result, it becomes very rhetorically difficult to make the case for government to do anything – or at least anything new. Without an inspiring case for government action, government sits still.*

Much the same goes for Social Desirability Bias more generally. If proponents of big government had to speak the plain unvarnished undemagogic truth at all times, the case for their favorite policies would be uninspiring at best.

Imagine trying to sell the minimum wage with, “We can raise hourly pay by 10% while cutting employment by 5%. A modest net gain for workers despite those who suffer as a result.”

Or imagine a world where every politician was limited to ONE “top priority.” Once he says, “Fighting poverty is our top priority,” the most he can say about terrorism is, “Fighting it is our second-highest priority.”

Or imagine trying to launch a war of choice with, “There’s a 30% chance we’ll make things better, 50% chance they stay the same, and a 20% chance we’ll make things worse. I like those odds.”

Government wouldn’t wither away in a world without Social Desirability Bias. Yet passionate statist activism would. And to state another ugly truth: Passionate statist activism harms human liberty far more than passionate libertarian activism helps it.