

## Lying With Statistics - Politics as Usual

Contributed by Steve Gillman  
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Watch for unrealistically precise figures when you read or here statistics. Nobody can actually say to the nearest hundredth of a percent how overweight a population is, for example, or exactly how many homeless people there are. But what else should you watch for?

{bot\_wrgoogle}Here's an small example pulled from a magazine I was reading. The May 2008 issue of Sierra Magazine had a small piece on the "hyper-consumptive, carbon spewing ways" of Western countries," with the following quote: "Stephen Pacala, director of the Princeton Environmental Institute, claims that the planets richest 700 million people - a mere 7% of the world's population - are responsible for half of the global greenhouse-gas emissions produced by fossil fuels." Notice that if 700 million is 7% of the world's population, we suddenly have 10 billion people in the world. The actual figure was about 6.7 billion as of 2008.

That kind of mistake is common in reporting. It is most likely a simple error, but on the other hand, it seems that the mistaken figures are often better for making the desired point than the true ones would be. It is bad enough if 10.3% of the world's people produce over half of carbon emissions, but politically a stronger point if a mere 7% do. Watch for this kind of common mistake and/or manipulation of the statistics.

For another example of lying with statistics, watch election reporting. More than once I've seen the vote percentages given for the Republican and Democratic candidates add up to 100% in major elections - even presidential elections. Of course for that to be true there would have to be no votes for any other candidates. In reality, other parties often get several percent of the votes. What the news organizations are apparently reporting then, is the votes that they think matter. This kind of manipulation gives the impression that there are no other political parties, but there were a dozen that ran presidential candidates last time I voted.

Be careful too of the more subtle lying with statistics. For example, let me ask you a question: If a company's profits go from 3% to 6%, did they rise 3% or 100%? Profits did double, which is a rise of 100%, but as a return on equity they moved only from 3% to 6%, which still leaves a poor rate of return compared to most industries.

How this is reported depends on the political slant of the news organization. If they want to attack the company for making too much money, they can write a headline that says; "XYZ Company sees 100% Increase In Profits!" Technically it is an accurate statement, but it hides a lot of truth, doesn't it?

Lying with statistics is perhaps most evident in opinion polls. In this case, the manipulation of the truth is accomplished by the way in which questions are phrased. If a thousand people were asked, "Should the government help people who face losing their homes to foreclosure?" the number of people for such a program would certainly be higher than if a thousand were asked, "Should you be forced to pay more taxes to help people make the payments on their houses?" Notice that both accurately describe what the program would do.

As you watch the evening news or read newspapers and news magazines, stop at each statistic they throw out there. Ask if it is likely to be accurate, and how it was arrived at. Ask if it tells the whole truth, and what other ways things could be measured. Get online and look for other information. Lying with statistics will continue, but being fooled by them is

optional.

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