

ISSA Proceedings 2014 - Euphoria And Panic Bubbles In Presidential Debate Evaluations

Abstract: This project examines the first presidential debate of 2012 as a disturbance of the existing “horse-race” trajectory, creating partisan bubbles of euphoria and panic through mimetic argument evaluations. Prior to the debate the expectations set by the campaigns and the media commentary about the performance and political effect became a reflexive part of the argument itself setting evaluative thresholds. This created a mimesis leading to radically different expectations and evaluative criteria for the next debates.

Keywords: bubbles, media, mimesis, politics, presidential debate

1. Introduction

Presidential debates have been a perennial object of inquiry in fields of argumentation, political communication, political science, and rhetorical criticism both to answer empirical questions of media effects and as opportunities for critique and normative considerations of public argument (e.g. Berquist & Golden, 1981; Erikson & Wleizen, 2012; Goodnight, Majdik & Kephart, 2009; Lang & Lang, 1978; Majdik, Kephart III & Goodnight, 2008).

Despite this cross-disciplinary focus on presidential debates, the literature does not reflect an unambiguous hope of its social value. Following the seminal works of Anthony Downs (1957) and Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes (1960) in political science much doubt arose whether political campaigns, let alone the presidential debates claimed to influence them, really mattered to voters who appeared to vote based on party identity and with no real incentive to follow debates. Contemporary researchers like Erikson & Wleizer (2012) follow this research tradition and claim that polling on candidates occasionally changes around debates, but then revert to the mean and that the candidate leading the polls before the first debate is a better predictor of who wins the election than the candidate crowned “winner” of the debates. Even amongst those who do consider presidential debates politically important, the content of the debate themselves are often dismissed as “glorified press conferences,” (Kraus, 1987, p. 215)

“counterfeit debates,” (Auer, 1962) and “not debate by standards of rhetorical and argument analysis” (Meadow, 1987, p. 208).

Goodnight et al. characterize these verdicts collective as an assessment of presidential debates as “pseudo-argumentation.” Debate generally has always had a troubled relationship to the field of argumentation. Doug Walton (1989) characterized debate as occupying a half-way house between a quarrel and a dialogue, and presidential debates have been primarily treated in the field of communication studies and not in argumentation. However, the critical approach of public argumentation combines “positivistic with critical studies in analysing the political communication of an election” (Goodnight et al., p. 274). Such an approach in my view combines the realistic appraisal of candidates’ motivations and incentives from the traditional formalist rhetorical approach, and the more holistic contextual outlook on debates from the sociocultural tradition exemplified by Jamieson and Birdsell’s (1988) description of debates being “not so much discrete events as they are acts of argument whose meaning depends upon and resists contexts constructed from national campaigns and ‘spin’” (p. 13). Indeed, presidential debates are like snowflakes, no two are alike or take place in the same or even comparable rhetorically situated campaign environments and collectively they are fragments fitting into larger pictures finding meaning only through their relationships with the campaigns and are difficult to compare across election cycles. Finally, from the critical theory approach we get the essential question of how the public read and participate in the debates rather than merely focus on the reasons behind electoral success or immediate persuasion. In the words of Goodnight et al.: “Debates are enactment of public argument.” (p. 273) and are thus deserving of study within the field of argumentation, even - or maybe especially - if the argumentation itself leaves a lot to be desired, which is a charge I will wholeheartedly endorse.

Furthermore, I follow Arnie Madsen’s (1991) view of presidential debates, seeing the argumentation process as extending beyond the 90 minutes and instead consisting of three phases, pre-debate expectation setting, the debate itself and the post-debate spin.

I contend that the media convention of seeing campaigns and debates through the prism of the horse-race metaphor also makes it the sole evaluative criterion for presidential debates, and thus in effect also how the candidates and campaigns approach the debates. The mechanism through which the horse-race frame

achieves this effect is through exploiting the tendency for media induced bubbles of euphoria and panic fuelled by mimetic argument evaluations. The question is thus not who won or why, but how what constitutes winning is determined in the interplay between campaigns, media outlets and society at large.

The horse-race frame is the tendency to see any event - natural disasters, terrorist attacks, etc. - only through the lens of how it affects a candidate's chance of winning an election[i]. The implication of column space is zero sum in political reporting means that foregrounding who is winning the election necessitates casting issue positions, candidate qualifications or policy proposals as secondary (Nisbet, 2008). To make my case I will use the first debate between Gov. Romney and President Obama as a case study, treating each stage of the debate.

2. Before the debate

As predictable and tiresome as it may seem the practice of each campaign attempting to lower expectations for their own candidate's performance while raising them for their opponent persists. According to former Liberty University Director of Debate and adviser to Mitt Romney's 2012 campaign Brett O'Donnell: "The expectations game is enormous ... You want to try to raise the bar for your opponent" (Cottle, 2012). This is why this is the only time during a campaign when candidates have nothing but respect and admiration for their opponent.

President Obama's campaign manager Jim Messina emphasized Gov. Romney's advantage in preparation: "we saw a revamped Mitt Romney who has emerged fresh from weeks of intense debate preparations ... He's quick, polished, and ready" (Burns, 2012). Governor Romney also attempted to downplay expectations of himself while shifting the pressure onto the president stating: "Now, he's a very eloquent speaker and so I'm sure in the debates ... he'll be very eloquent in describing his vision." However, some of Gov. Romney's surrogates were unwilling to play along in the expectations management game. Senator McCain said that "I think you could argue that Mitt has had a lot more recent experience, obviously." (Killough, 2012). Not to be outdone New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie set the bar shockingly high by telling Bob Schieffer on national tv "This whole race is going to turn upside down come Thursday morning" (Caldwell, 2012).

Collectively, these efforts are mimetic arguments deployed by campaigns to create bubbles of euphoria and panic for their opponents and supporters

respectively. Bubbles, usually theorized in connection to financial events, are characterized by the public perception of a probability substantially moving away from its fundamental underlying value. In the context of an election, the fundamental value is how probable either a debate or electoral victory really was. For present purposes I define mimetic argumentation as an elementary social act achieved through copying and repetition that can, if socially contagious, cause bubbles. Essential to the process of copying is imitation; just as investors imitate each other's behaviour and standards, so political reporters and campaign advisers imitate conventional wisdom and boilerplate statements to fit within the mainstream of respectability. For a more complete treatment of the history of mimesis going from Plato, Isocrates, through Gabriel Tarde extended by Elihu Katz to Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard see Tom Goodnight and Sandy Green (2010).

Regardless of how effectively each campaign played the expectation game, a Washington Post-ABC poll found that 55% of likely voters thought the president would win the debate compared to 31% who thought Gov. Romney would win thus setting the bar each would have to clear in order to be determined winner (Henderson, 2012).

3. The debate and its immediate assessment

The debate itself included some rather significant substantive changes to Gov. Romney's platform, exemplified by his outrage that the president would allege his tax policy would provide tax relief for the richest 1% of Americans, despite also taking umbrage to Rick Santorum's claims in an earlier primary debate that Gov. Romney's tax policy did not provide tax relief for the richest 1%. However, the policy positions of the candidates and their argumentative consistency was not central, or even present, in the post-debate analysis and evaluations.

In the immediate aftermath of the debate, all instant polls confirmed that Gov. Romney was perceived as the winner by the public, an impression reinforced by pundits of all political stripes. No doubt, this is in part because all the pundits and spokespersons approached the analysis the same way - taking the instant polls at face value and then rationalizing the results. Though the verdict of pundits and spokespeople was consistent with the initial verdict of the public, it has become political wisdom that the post-debate spin is crucial and that what is said after the debate has more political impact than what is said during it, exemplified by the public's muted reaction to Gerald Ford's gaffe against Jimmy Carter until the

press seized on it (Lang & Lang, 1979; Madsen, 1990). It is the norm that “campaign spokespersons never admit that their candidate was anything less than brilliant and insightful or that the opposing candidate succeeded in accomplishing anything” (Hollihan, 2008, p. 235). This also means that campaigns each try to burst their previously induced bubbles of panic and euphoria before the debate and now reverse them so that one’s own side is pleased and buoyant and likely to turn out to vote, while depressing opposition turnout by making their candidate seem a lost cause.

However, it seems there are exceptions in lopsided debates, which is supported by Arnie Madsen’s (1990) case study of the debate between Governor Dukakis and President Bush. After the first presidential debate in 1988 “the Bush campaign in essence admitted their candidate was the weaker debater in the first joint appearance, but that Bush still won because he ‘smoked Dukakis’ liberal tendencies out.” (Madsen, p. 107).

In striking contrast to the normal partisan divide in cable news over almost every issue of fact and value, the post-debate evaluations of Democrats like James Carville and Van Jones were in complete agreement with Republicans such as Alex Castellanos, Carly Fiorina and Michael Steele. Not only was the end verdict identical, so were the evaluative criteria which did not include the logic of the arguments, the argumentative consistency or the facts supporting the positions of the two candidates. Rather, references to President Obama as listless, passive, and not wanting to be there prevailed, while Romney was described as confident, comfortable and driving the debate.

The attractiveness of using non-verbal communication as the decisive evaluative criterion for pundits is clear. It has an air of objectivity about evidenced by the bipartisan consensus in analysing the two candidates’ physical appearance, tone and nonverbal argumentation. James Fallows (2012) at the Atlantic goes so far as to recommend watching the debate with the sound turned off, in order to determine the true winner. Furthermore, evaluations based on non-verbal communication are difficult to falsify and they liberate pundits and journalists from having to grapple with issues of fact like what Gov. Romney’s tax policy really was or what if any logical inconsistencies candidates tried to get away with. Moreover, it is easy to communicate to lay audiences. In a particular jarring moment on MSNBC’s coverage, former Chairman of the RNC Michael Steele (2012) conceded that on the substance Gov. Romney might have said some untrue

things: “So the substance of it ... I think you`re absolutely right. We can have that debate on the substance.” However, in the next sentence Steele directly stated that the truthfulness of Gov. Romney’s arguments were irrelevant: “But how the American people fed off the debate tonight, looking at the Twitter feeds, they saw a Mitt Romney they hadn`t seen before and they liked him.” Time Magazine journalist Mark Halperin (2012) concurred stating: “there`s a bunch of things he said on taxes, Medicare, on Romneycare, that fact checkers will go to town on ... But in the end you look at the polls.” At the ABC Sunday talk show roundtable, New York Times columnist and Professor of Economics Paul Krugman tried to gently suggest a different way of evaluating the debate: “Isn’t our job, at least partially - never mind the quality of the theatrical performance - but to ask about, were there untruths spoken?”(Kirell, 2012). The other panellists quickly rules this out as Peggy Noonan and James Carville stated that this was the president’s job, not theirs.

On his *New York Times* blog, Krugman (2012) later asked: “The question now is whether the revelation that Romney was making stuff up matters.” The answer, on the basis of the evidence, is that Romney suffered no adverse consequences. Collectively, and across political fault lines, the pundits agreed not just on awarding Gov. Romney with the victory, but that the horse-race frame should be the way to not just analyze, but also report the debate. This bipartisan agreement formed a consensus which took hold in the media and gained strength and momentum through mimetic repetition across media outlets, in particular by late night comedians and cable news anchors as the public gauged the debate through the affective reactions by various media figures with known partisan leanings. Enabled by a consensus verdict, these mimetic repetitions formed what I argue to be bubbles of panic and euphoria amongst liberals and conservatives.

If prominent journalists and those paid to inform and educate the public over the airwaves are to blame, so are the candidates themselves. The formal traditional rhetoricians are right that the content of the presidential debate does not lend itself to great analysis or sophisticated argument evaluations. And this is not a bug, it is a feature. President Obama’s debate training included memo cards that said “advocate (don’t explain)” trying to reign in the president’s heartfelt desire to rise above the gamification of the event and participate in a meaningful way (Heileman & Halperin, 2013). The president told his inner circle: “It’s easy for me to slip back into what I know, which is basically to dissect arguments” (Ibid.). A

deeply concerned David Axelrod replied comfortingly - and without the slightest irony - that he could help the president with his problem: "you have to find a way to get over the hump and stop fighting this game - to play this game, wrap your arms around this game." (Ibid.). During debate drills the debate coach Ron Klain shouted "fast and hammy" "fast and hammy" at the president when he tried to veer away from the slogan based strategy (Ibid.). In terms of liberal panic, perhaps no image stands out more clearly than Chris Matthews of MSNBC shouting on air, while referring to Obama: "What was he doing, where was he?" visibly worried the president may have lost the election claiming he did not watch enough MSNBC to learn how the issues ought to be debated (Kirell, 2012b). Left leaning comedian Bill Maher, who had publicly announced donating \$1 million to the pro-Obama Super PAC Priorities USA, expressed dismay at the president's performance joining Michael Moore, Ed Schultz and others in not just criticizing Obama's performance, but worrying the debate cost him the election.

Conservatives on the other hand were not just elated with Gov. Romney's performance but convinced that Gov. Christie's prediction was prophetic - that Mitt Romney had gone from being a big underdog to prohibitive favorite, now that the debate had shown America what the "real" Mitt Romney was like. In the 48 hours after the debate Gov. Romney generated \$12 million in online contributions, as well as a surge in volunteers and bigger crowds at his events, not to mention an additional 300,000 facebook friends (O'Connor & Nelson, 2012).

Faux conservative Stephen Colbert started his late night comedy show by dancing down the stairs to the tune of "Ain't No Stopping us Now" stating "we've got a whole new horse-race" in between yelps of celebration and the occasional external oxygen supply to contain his euphoric celebration of the debate and its implication for the race. But perhaps nobody was as sincerely euphoric about the impact of the debate as *Wall Street Journal* columnist Peggy Noonan (2012): "There is no denying the Republicans have the passion now, the enthusiasm. In Florida a few weeks ago I saw Romney signs, not Obama ones."

4. *The bubbles and the aftermath*

The case of Romney's bubble of euphoria is perhaps exceptional because of the rare bipartisan consensus on the verdict of the debate, but it may also in part be attributed to the nature of the way in which people experience debates now: often across many platforms like Twitter, TV and live blogging simultaneously. Many

viewers will now know the collective verdict of the debate before it is over as some TV outlets show live graphical representations of focus group sentiments. Moreover, the increased speed of the news cycle, the number of polls taken – often reported daily – and the ubiquitous media coverage accelerates the building of the bubbles, which are also aided by the emergence of social media platforms and the ability of the public to generate and remix debate evaluations through their own memes. As these accumulate, the consensus deepens and gets more attention in a spiral effect.

Some may claim that Romney euphoria after the first was not a bubble. After all, it was supported by many polls, so how can we know what happened was media induced mass hysteria rather than justified Republican optimism? There are three arguments in response. First, irrational exuberance in the moment after the debate is the job description of any communication director of a campaign. The Romney campaign later announced with great fanfare that they were moving out of North Carolina and into new states, essentially going on offense because they were so confident of winning North Carolina. It turns out they moved one staffer. This led Jonathan Chait (2012) to categorize these efforts as an attempt at a “momentum narrative” by “carefully attempting to project an atmosphere of momentum, in the hopes of winning positive media coverage and, thus, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.” Second, an undeniable effect of the euphoria was a change in expectations, and thus evaluative thresholds, for the second debate, in which Gov. Romney did not impress. Third, a quarter of all ballots cast in the election were early ballots, and early voting started in many states up to a month before the debate even occurred. Moreover, the Obama campaign was a lot less nervous because their massive polling and analytics operations knew that Gov. Romney essentially only won back disaffected registered Republicans as opposed to independents or Democrats. Matt Yglesias (2013) contrasted the internal polling of OFA (Organizing For America, President Obama’s Election Organization) which was steady and stagnant with the wildly oscillating Gallup poll, ultimately concluding that public polls are made to drive media interest and build brands which they do by proclaiming important and frequent disturbances, not by accurately stating that not much has changed and claims that Republican euphoria after the first debate is a bubble. In other words, polling companies make profit by building and bursting bubbles throughout political campaigns.

5. *Conclusion*

The debate evaluations of the first presidential debate suggests that though partisan affect is perhaps more relevant than ever, partisan debate evaluations may very well move in the same direction, and if they do, they can enable mimetic argument evaluations that flourish on social media with contagious amplification of what were perhaps overreactions in the first place. These ubiquitous verdicts can drown out concerns about the costs to the public sphere of the established campaign function of the debates.

The case study of the first presidential debate of 2012 shows that bubbles of euphoria and panic surrounding presidential elections is an empirical reality and that these bubbles are a consequence of a flawed public argument practice driven by media conventions and campaign strategies enabled by an insistence on interpreting the debates through the horse-race frame. While presidential debates can be productive interventions changing national debates and conversations, the risk remains that they merely operate as government sponsored fund raising events.

To mitigate against these risks future research in public argumentation may profitably address how presidential debates can and should be read, how society rewards good debate and penalize deceptive, obfuscatory or otherwise socially harmful debate practices. One intriguing suggestion, made by a journalist after the first 1988 debate between Gov. Dukakis and President H. W. Bush, was to challenge the candidates live, on the air, on things they said which were false and let them answer the charge. Today's immense crowdgathering and crowdsourcing capacity of social media and digital archives makes this a no less tempting idea. Maybe argumentation could become a more integral part of education from an earlier age in teaching social studies. In terms of format, David Zarefsky has previously advocated a return to the Lincoln-Douglas format, a view he shares with Newt Gingrich, and when two such otherwise entirely different historical scholars reach agreement it is worth pursuing further. Finally, why not ask of analysts and pundits to have formed a judge philosophy in advance of the debate, sketching out how they will evaluate arguments rather resorting to ad-hoc or post-hoc rationales. The prospects for these and other suggestions for presidential debates are certainly contestable, but given the social and political significance of the debates theories for improvement ought to be a continued priority for the field of argumentation.

It takes collective social responsibility to make debates work - media, coaches,

and citizens alike must ask why answers to questions are or are not satisfactory, and the significance of this. We must insist on what Tom Goodnight terms a shared ethos, and I believe this can be done by more closely aligning the social function of presidential debate with the campaign function for the candidates. As Charlotte Jørgensen (1998) puts it “one may either take the more cynical path and accept the restrictions imposed by TV on public deliberation - or ... try to make the media adapt to the needs of informed political debate.” (p. 441).

NOTE

i. A case in point is the announcement that Hillary Clinton is set to become a grandmother, only for this prompts questions of how it will affect her chances of winning the 2016 election (see e.g. Feldman, 2014). The absurdity of this example is not unusual, the horse-race frame has come to completely dominate political coverage.

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