

ISSA Proceedings 2014 - Mitt Romney And Ideological Enthymeme In Denver: “Obamacare” And Its Functions

Abstract: This paper argues that surface-level analysis of political argument fails to explain the effectiveness of ideological enthymemes, particularly within the context of presidential debates. The choice of a terminological system limits and shapes the argumentative choices afforded the candidate. Presidential debates provide a unique context within which to examine the interaction of ideological constraints and argument due to their relatively committed and ideologically homogenous audiences.

Keywords: argument, Barack Obama, enthymeme, ideology, Mitt Romney, Obamacare, presidential debates, terminology

1. Introduction

On October 3, 2012 Mitt Romney and Barack Obama took the stage at Magness Arena at the University of Denver and participated in the first of three debates prior to the general election. Heading into the Denver debate, Romney was suffering a slow bleed of independents and moderate conservative voters (John F. Kennedy School of Government, 2013, p. 210). Whether due to the now-infamous 47% comment at a fundraiser in Florida, the near-calamity of the GOP convention, or Romney’s persistent vagueness in regards to his tax policies, one aspect of the race was abundantly clear; the challenger’s campaign needed a significant boost to remain competitive in the last month of the election. As a result, the Romney campaign entered the debate in Denver with a lower threshold of expectations than President Obama.

Reactions after the debate did not match the expectations established prior to the encounter. Rather than being the “knock down, drag-out fight” described in *US News and World Report*, the first matchup between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama was, as described by one writer at *Politico*, “relatively sleepy” with “no fireworks or big ‘moments’ to speak of” and “unusually civilized” (Metzler, 2012;

Haberman, 2012; Mariucci and Farofoli, 2012). Expectations were on the Obama's side by a 2 to 1 margin among voters, with the belief firmly in the minds of the electorate that Obama would win because of his experience (Milbank, 2012, p. A02). However, pundits agreed that the biggest difference between expectations and results was the lacklustre performance of the president (Medved, 2012; McAskill, 2012; Ingold, 2012).

Romney's performance was surprising but should not have been unexpected, as eighteen months of practice against twelve other potential GOP nominees provided him with ample opportunity to hone his performance and strategy. Following the debate, polls and pundits agreed that Romney had closed the gap between himself and the President and was in a much better position after Denver than before (Stelter, 2012, p. A22; Milbank, p. A02). David Axelrod, senior advisor to the Obama campaign, speaks about the result of the debate: "I think what he did was, in one night, he got back those Republican-leaning Independents. I think he improved enthusiasm among his base. I think the race snapped back to where it was essentially before the convention" (John F. Kennedy School of Government, p. 218).

The debate at Magness Arena provides scholars with a particularly vexing problem. Despite the media consensus that Romney won the debate in Denver, Robert Rowland's analysis reveals the superiority of Obama performance at the argumentative and evidentiary level, leading him to conclude "that something other than the arguments must have been the operative force moving public opinion" (Rowland, 2013, p. 537). In what follows, I argue that the strategic argumentative choices of Romney and his campaign played a crucial role in influencing public opinion. Mitt Romney uses a particular configuration of terms to overcome the substantive and evidentiary barriers facing him. Rather than articulating a set of policies clearly and defending them with supporting materials and evidence, Romney utilizes three specific strategies to avoid direct confrontation and outflank the Obama team.

First, Romney rejects the definition of the debate as a contest of ideas. Instead, by challenging the unspoken decorum and unenforceable rules of the presidential debate, Romney eschews the norms for a form of ideological combat. He exchanged a contest of ideas for what the *New York Times* called a "clash of philosophies" (Baker, 2012, p. A0). Descriptions of the debate such as Metzler's, calling for a "knock down, drag-out fight" is indicative of the media's preference

for such a sport. Focusing primarily on attacking the president and abandoning the rules enables Romney to fulfill the gladiatorial role perfectly (Dionne, 2012, p.A23). Second, Romney redefines evidence as something not based on widely accepted standards of reason, only ideology. By challenging the evidence and reasoning of the president, Romney makes it impossible to engage in a reasoned discussion about policy issues. Freed from the burden of proof, Romney becomes nearly indefatigable. Obama's ability to refute the claims of his challenger was undermined by this strategy, preventing any real gains on the part of the president. A final strategy employed by Romney is a particularly effective enthymeme - a title of titles - that relies on the ideological commitments of the audience. In *Grammar of Motives*, Kenneth Burke talks about how symbolic equations can be reduced to representative anecdotes that contain the entire order of symbolic equations (selection, reflection, deflection) within their structure (1969, p. 59). Romney goes a step further and develops an anecdote that refers to all other issues in play. By deploying "Obamacare" as an enthymeme in a variety of contexts and arguments, including some wildly outside the scope of the Affordable Care Act, Obama's policy successes are re-characterized as failures. Each iteration of the anecdote contains the entire symbolic equation of the previous versions and allows Romney to chain out the Obamacare enthymeme in a way that "sums up" his evaluation of the entire administration. In what follows, I develop these positions and show how Romney used them to create an ideological worldview without speaking to the specific policies required by his own ideological commitments (Burke, 1974, p. 84).

2. *Strategic considerations*

Before examining the debate itself, it is necessary to examine some of the key strategic choices made by the campaigns prior to the debate. First, both election teams understood both the opportunity and necessity of the first debate. Beth Meyers, senior advisor to Romney, indicates that "people would want to see it on the line" and that "whatever was happening in the campaign" they would need a "winning jolt" (John F. Kennedy School of Government, p. 208). David Axelrod indicated that the Obama campaign understood the historical significance of the first debate and admitted the team was too focused on the debate as a problem area and "over-prepared" the president with "too much material" (p. 210). Clearly, the Magness Arena debate offered significant dangers and opportunities for each candidate.

Next, the preparation strategies indicate that the campaigns were focused on two separate engagements. On the one hand, the Romney campaign arrived in Denver ready for a direct confrontation, Beth Meyers describes this strategy: “On every issue, ...we were very focused on finding an attack - a place to attack President Obama on every issue... that’s what we did so that when Mitt came on that stage at the first debate, he was loaded for bear on every issue” (p. 210). Mitt Romney’s campaign devised an offensively focused strategy, and targeted specific policies of the president in an attempt to place Barack Obama on the defensive.

On the other hand, Axelrod describes how the Obama campaign approached the debate as a discussion, focusing mainly on the policies and content preparation, which limited the President’s ability to adapt to the situation of televised debating (p. 211). In Axelrod’s words, the Obama team “had a strategy of limited engagement” that the president then took to an “illogical extreme” in the moment of the debate (p. 214). The result of the interaction of these two strategic approaches was that the debate “didn’t do much to the president’s image... It’s more of what it did for Mitt Romney” (p. 220). David Simas, director of opinion research for the Romney campaign, reflects on the impact of the strategic choices made by the campaign and their effect on the election:

What we saw after twenty-four hours was a consolidation back to Governor Romney. It accelerated in the second twenty-four hour period...What we saw is, by the third day, as David said, the race had settled back to preconvention levels. When we analyzed who it was that moved, it was precisely those voters from our perspective who had peeled off during the 47, so that’s on the quantitative side... in the qualitative, it opened up the door for Governor Romney. It corrected with a whole bunch of voters the problem that he had... for the first time we saw his very favorable numbers among the Republicans rivaling numbers that we had seen in 2008. (p. 218-9)

Axelrod agrees with this sentiment and argues that Obama’s numbers “didn’t suffer” but Romney “definitely improved” his standing in the race (p. 218). The debate in Denver offered the Romney campaign with a significant opportunity to reset the election and the former governor certainly surpassed expectations.

The debate

In the debate at Magness Arena, Romney used three argumentative strategies to capitalize on his strategic opportunities. The results of the debate prove that the

particular strategies adopted by Romney were successful, at least in the short term. First, Romney approached the debate as an engagement in ideological combat, rather than a debate about ideas and policies. Some audiences who watched the debate were expecting and desired a “knock down” fight, and a fight is exactly what Romney produced for bring the audience. Burke describes this strategy as “appetite fulfilment” and argues for its supreme psychological effectiveness (Burke, 1957, p. 31). The appetite, however, did not need to be created by Romney in this case, for the expectations of the audience had already been established beforehand by the framing of the media. Outlets like *US News* and *World Report* and the *Denver Post* characterized the debate as a “fight” and “duel” respectively (Metzler, 2012; Crummy, 2012, p. A2S). Polling data prior to the debate also indicated that one of the two main foci of the electorate during the debate was going to be Romney’s adherence to conservative principles (NBC News, 2012, p. 11). The conditions were prime for the Romney campaign to approach the debate as an ideological fight.

In contrast to voters expecting a duel, a full one in five likely voters felt that Romney “flip flops and changes his mind too much on issues” and “is too wealthy to understand the day-to-day concerns of most Americans” (*NBC News*, p. 11). The electorate’s demand for consistency from Romney represented a significant barrier to his success in the debate. Burke, however, indicates that the fulfilment of audience expectations only requires the maintenance “of a principle under new guises. It is the restatement of the same thing in different ways” (Burke, 1957, p. 125). For Burke, fulfilling psychological expectations can supplement and sometimes exceed the effectiveness of the content. Independent and moderate Republicans had an appetite for a particular type of confrontation heading into the Denver debate, and Romney provided them with exactly what they wanted.

For example, at the end of the first segment on the economy, Mitt Romney undermined the norms on speaking order, decorum about who speaks first and who gets the last word. First, Romney appealed to Jim Lehrer, demanding that he get the final word in the segment. “Jim, the president began this segment, so I think I get the last word, so I’m going to take it. All right? (Chuckles)” (NPR.org, 2012).**[i]** Romney aggressively claimed the response time, then asked for permission as an afterthought. Lehrer objected briefly, but the President provided Romney the opening he needed to really shape the debate, “He can - you can have it.” “That’s not how it works,” replied Lehrer, and despite stringent

objections, the terms of rebuttal order and the time limits on those refutations were discarded by both candidates, leaving Lehrer with little room to re-establish the original parameters.

A second example of Romney's ability to control the debate's overall structure is an exchange over the issue of Medicare and the impact of the Affordable Care Act on current and upcoming retirees. After a section where Obama attempted to pivot back to the macro-level health care issue, Romney objected:

Mr. Romney: That's — that's a big topic. Could we — could we stay on Medicare?

President Obama: Is that a — is that a separate topic? I'm sorry.

Mr. Lehrer: Yeah, we're going to — yeah. I want to get to it, but all I want to do is very quickly —

Mr. Romney: Let's get back to Medicare.

MR. LEHRER: — before we leave the economy —

Mr. Romney: Let's get back to Medicare.

Mr. Lehrer: No, no, no, no —

Mr. Romney: The president said that the government can provide the service at lower —

Mr. Lehrer: No.

Mr. Romney: — cost and without a profit.

Mr. Lehrer: All right.

Mr. Romney: if that's the case, then it will always be the best product that people can purchase. But my experience —

Mr. Lehrer: wait a minute, governor.

Mr. Romney: my experience is the private sector typically is able to provide a better product at a lower cost.

Mr. Lehrer: can we — can the two of you agree that the voters have a choice, a clear choice between the two of you —

Mr. Romney: absolutely.

President Obama: yes.

Mr. Lehrer: — on Medicare?

Mr. Romney: Absolutely.

In this extended exchange, Romney argued with Lehrer in an attempt to keep the discussion away from the larger health care issues and focus instead on the relationship between Medicare and the Affordable Care Act. Romney, even after repeated objections from Lehrer, continued to change the topic until he succeeds.

Rather than complete the discussion, Lehrer attempted to end the segment as quickly as possible. Instead of asking for an articulation of the differences between the two candidates, Lehrer satisfied himself with merely establishing that one exists.

The shift away from predetermined norms about the debate provided Romney with two direct strategic benefits: (1) he can stay on the attack throughout the debate by always demanding the last word in any given segment and (2) he can extend the discussion in areas where he is strongest and avoid defending his own positions. When Jim Lehrer interrupts the candidates to let them know that “—we’re way over our first 15 minutes” Romney says “It’s fun, isn’t it?” Fun? Perhaps. Strategic? Certainly. By the end of the debate, Romney has so thoroughly succeeded in shattering the time limits, Jim Lehrer is forced to scrap an entire segment of the debate. Romney undermined the parameters of the debate from the outset and one consequence of that is by forcing Obama on to the defensive and avoiding the expectation to rebut Obama’s arguments.

The second strategy adopted by Romney undermined a key pillar in Obama’s argumentative approach - the use and usefulness of evidence. Romney consistently challenged the president’s statistics and use of studies throughout the debate, establishing an unequal balance in the burden of proof. In one of the more memorable exchanges, Romney indicted the use of studies to challenge the president’s attack on his tax plan.

“Now, you cite a study,” Romney said, “There are six other studies that looked at the study you describe and say it’s completely wrong. I saw a study that came out today that said you’re going to raise taxes by \$3,000 to \$4,000 on middle-income families. There are all these studies out there.” Romney employed four particular strategies to undermine the use of evidence within this single statement. First, Romney challenged the authority of Obama’s evidence with a quantitative advantage. Romney used a ratio of six to one to offer the audience with a clear distinction between the two candidates. Second, Romney attacked the qualitative advantage of Obama’s study, arguing that the studies he cited are macro-level evaluations of Obama’s evidence. Romney can now make the claim that he provided a more comprehensive view of the situation, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Third, Romney cited a study that he read earlier in the day to challenge the recency of the president’s evidence. In citing the most recent study, Romney offered new evidence that undermined the relevance of Obama’s study to

the status quo. Finally, Romney discarded the idea of comparing studies to determine truth altogether. "There are all these studies out there," he said, implying that any attempt to discern truth from scientific study is futile.

The entire purpose of this exchange revolves around one of Romney's key goals in the debate - creating as much distance as possible between himself and the tax cuts called for in the Ryan Budget. In the short term, the tactic worked, and Romney's success in the first debate is clear. Nine days after the debate in Denver, *The Atlantic* published an article calling into question the validity of the studies and their usefulness as support for Romney's tax plan (O'Brien, 2012). Articles challenging Romney's "six studies" appeared in most major newspapers shortly thereafter, and the gains Romney achieved in Denver swiftly evaporated (Khim, 2012; Schlesinger, 2012). In the long run, the media and eventually the public found Romney's evidence wanting. During and after the debate, though, the strategy worked to Romney's immediate advantage. Despite the fact that the "studies" he cited were largely produced by ideologically suspect organizations, the limits of the debate, and the dismal state of public reason made it almost impossible for Obama to effectively make this point clear during the debate.

Third, Mitt Romney developed the term "Obamacare" as an encapsulation of all Obama's policy positions and cast universal aspersions upon them. It functioned primarily as an enthymeme designed to resonate with far-right, moderate conservative, and independent voters. The term Obamacare has long been a subject of immense definitional confrontation by both political parties (Cox et. Al., 2012, p. A12). Mitt Romney, coincidentally, was the first politician on record to use the term. In 2007, he spoke at a campaign speech in Iowa, "The path of Europe is not the way to go. Socialized medicine. Hillarycare. Obamacare." This simple equation developed in 2007 in Iowa would be repeated again and again by Romney throughout his two presidential campaigns (Sarlin, 2012; Goldman & Talev, 2012). Fundamentally, the argument can be summed up as - the Affordable Care Act is a form of socialized medicine which puts the nation on a slippery slope towards socialism, this, being the fundamental problem with the European Union, meaning that the Affordable Care Act dooms America to financial ruin. The rhetorical and argumentative effectiveness of this anecdote relies on three interrelated arguments that operate together to engage multiple audiences with contradictory expectations of the candidate.

First, Romney used the name itself - Obamacare - to shape the terms of the

debate. Viewers of the debate literally see this happen. Romney used “Obamacare” first in Denver, and tells the president that he uses “that term with all respect.” Obama quickly responded by saying “I like it” and later in the same segment he said “I have become fond of this term.” Jim Lehrer also bought into using Obamacare to describe the president’s health care policies when transitioning into the segment of the debate on health care. “Now let’s move to health care,” he said, “where I know there is a clear difference - (laughter) - and that has to do with the Affordable Care Act... ‘Obamacare’.” Rather than using the name of the legislation and correcting the candidates, Lehrer used Romney’s terminology consistently for the rest of the debate. When Lehrer says to Romney, “tell the president directly why you think what he just said is wrong about ‘Obamacare’” the name rolls off Lehrer’s tongue as easily as it does Romney’s.

For Romney, Obamacare is a *title of titles*, it “sums up (that is, literally contains) all the particulars of things and ideas” that the audience should dislike about the president (Rueckert, 1983, p. 256). A title of titles contains the “perfect essence” of an idea and encourages audiences to associate the kernel of the idea with all of its derivations. “One goes up, arrives at the title of titles... and comes back down through all the levels... bringing (borrowing) back what one discovered at the top, following the reversible logic that is everywhere at work in these analogies” (Reuckert, 1983, p.256). Romney made meta-level arguments about the problems with Obamacare, and after having established their credibility with the audience, carried them back down to other policies, and condemn the whole lot with a single idea. If Obamacare is a bad policy, all of the administration’s policies are bad policy. If Obamacare is socialized medicine, all of Obama’s policies are socialized policy.

Next, the use of the “path” metaphor allows Mitt Romney to talk about the Affordable Care Act in what Kenneth Burke calls the “end of the line” mode, or the principle of entelechy (Burke, 1974, p. 84). The end of the line mode utilizes “principles of entitlement and entelechy,” in which “everything human is being driven toward the perfection of itself, to the end of its line” (Reuckert, 1994, p. 9). The principle of entitlement, or the titling of situation, names the situation, creates a set of conditions for behaving in that situation. Romney asks the audience to take the implications of Obama’s health care policies to the end of the line. Rather than just being a typical slippery slope fallacy, Romney’s reliance on entelechy develops the Obamacare anecdote as the first stage of socialism leading

to economic and social ruin. The argument does not hinge on the actual effectiveness of the president's health care policy, but rather relies on the audience's conception of the "path" down which the policy takes the nation.

During the debate, Romney used this strategy to attract fiscally undecided moderates, some of whom may have been unsure about the arithmetic behind his tax policies. Romney connected wasteful spending of the Affordable Care Act with the budget deficits to our economic competitor, China. "Is the program so critical it's worth borrowing money from China to pay for it? ... 'Obamacare' is on my list." Romney connects the spectre of big government with budget deficits, and argues that those deficits put us in the same position as Europe's faltering economies. "I don't want to go down the path to Spain," he says only a few moments later, "I want to go down the path of growth that puts Americans to work." Differentiating between the "path to Europe" or "path to Spain" and the "path to growth" sets up a dichotomy between (successful) capitalist economies and (failing) socialist economies. Romney previewed this in his opening statements of the debate when he said "it's going to take a different path, not the one we've been on, not the one the president describes as a top-down, cut taxes for the rich." The path metaphor helped Romney to make the debate about ideology, not policy. The strategy allowed Romney to take one set of arguments about the policy and carry them over to other policies and issues that have little to nothing to do with health care.

Finally, Romney casted the choice between himself and the president as a moral issue and used the "clash of philosophies" expectation to elevate the election to that of an existential crisis for the American way of life. Romney applied this logic to a variety of issues throughout the debate. When speaking about Medicaid during the debate, Romney argued that the entire situation is a states-rights issue, and suggested that the entire nation "craft a plan at the state level" rather than implement a single federal mandate. Rather than addressing the technicalities or providing a nuanced response, Romney cased the issue into the state-rights/federal-authority divide and asserts that a state-level policy would be superior. Shifting to the economy, Romney argued that Obama care has "killed jobs" and even implied that the president is personally responsible for the failed recovery:

I just don't know how the president could have come into office, facing 23 million people out of work, rising unemployment, an economic crisis at the — at the

kitchen table and spent his energy and passion for two years fighting for "Obamacare" instead of fighting for jobs for the American people.

Romney directly blames the president for making a choice to enact health care at the cost of the recovery, and rather than addressing the difficulty of dealing with two crises simultaneously, Romney argued that Obama bungled both. In addition to killing jobs, the administration raised taxes "by a trillion dollars" under Obamacare. In fact, the characterization of Obamacare as a tax by the Supreme Court earlier in June probably helped Romney argumentatively more than Obama. Few things are more essential to core American political mythology than the issue of taxation. The grievance of "taxation without representation" written in American founding documents exhibits the centrality of the topic in American political mythology. Calling health care reform a tax casts a positive term "reform" within the ideologically charged realm of "taxes."

Obamacare also destroyed the bipartisan spirit in Washington according to Romney, driving both sides into their respective corners, from which they have yet to emerge. Republicans didn't want Obama's version of health care reform, but "you pushed it through anyway" Romney tells the president "without a single Republican vote." In Romney's version of events, Obama, "pushed through something that" he, "Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid thought was the best answer and drove it through." Romney himself is the counter-example to Obama's partisanship: "I like the fact that in my state, we had Republicans and Democrats come together and work together." The genius of this move is that it undercuts Obama's ability to attack Congress while simultaneously placing the blame on Obama for the failure of the recovery and bipartisanship. Romney also charges the president with taking away a public good. The health care reforms, he says, "put people in a position where they're going to lose the insurance they had and they wanted." Romney is targeting voters who already have health insurance, people for whom the fear of losing one's health insurance operates far more effectively as a bogeyman than does the promise of a more efficiently run system. Finally, if voters have any doubt about the consequential nature of this election, Romney casts the choice in near biblical proportions - "If the president's re-elected, 'Obamacare' will be fully installed. In my view, that's going to mean a whole different way of life for people." At its fully realized extension, Romney wants the Obamacare enthymeme to present an ideological choice to the audience. Choose the incumbent, head down the path to Spain and socialism, and

inevitably national social and financial ruin; or, pick the challenger and head down the “Path to Prosperity.”

4. Conclusion

Mitt Romney’s three strategies in Denver were relatively successful in the short term. Neil Newhouse, polling director for the Romney campaign explains the effect of the debate on the race:

... these voters saw Mitt Romney, and they watched the debate. They’re impressed... And the image that had been portrayed of him, painted of him, had begun to kind of wash away a little bit... 47 percent kind of went away... it was all good for us. It gave us perceived momentum. Not just that our numbers were moving... but we began to see some erosion and some softening of Obama support. The information flow numbers, everything, began to kind of trend our way a little bit so that you got a sense there was a wind at our back. (John F. Kennedy School of Government, 2013, p. 219)

Romney eschewed the norms of presidential debates and was successful in keeping both Barack Obama and Jim Lehrer off balance throughout the debate. He also diminished the utility of supporting evidence for both candidates, and due to his lack of reliance on it, ended up benefiting more from this condition than the president. These two strategies enabled Romney to control both the arguments within the debate, but the conditions under which those arguments were perceived by the viewing public.

As an enthymeme, Obamacare was useful for arguing for multiple audiences. Romney fluidly shifted between one attack and another in Denver, using the flexibility provided him by the anecdote and preventing the president from going on the offensive. Romney manipulates the ideological coordinates of the audience to create “clusters” of arguments that obviate the need for independent supporting evidence for each argument. Using particular terms in particular configurations, Romney can guide the audience toward the conclusion that the president has failed in his first term, and use the ideological content of “Obamacare” to malign other policy. While speaking of health care reform, Romney can smoothly introduce topics of taxation, states-rights, the economy, bipartisanship, public opinion, and so on. Obamacare operates as the central cluster or hub anecdote around which all other political arguments are arranged. The demands of televised debates, the format, the state of public reason, and the

partisanship on both sides of the political spectrum are all conditions under which these types of ideological enthymemes operate with maximum effectiveness on television. However, they take little to no time to use in a debate, have relatively few downsides, and feed all the worst habits of the American electorate (sensationalism over substance, attack over defence, and effervescence over evidence).

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NOTE

i. All quotations from the debate were taken from the NPR transcript and audio recording of the debate.

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