

R elevant HETORIC

The Art of Polarizing *Ethos*: An Analysis of Donald Trump's Campaign Rhetoric



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During the 2012 presidential campaign, various conservatives informed me that Social Security and Medicare are not entitlements; that 47% of Americans pay “no taxes at all;” that Obama has “radical views and associations;” that Obama spent millions of taxpayer dollars to hide his academic transcripts; that Obama “has the media on his side” and thus “they will not show you who he really is;” that Obama “does not love this country, nor do the people he associates with, and therefore he is working to diminish our country;” and that “Obama is the worst thing to happen to America since 9/11.”



By Krassotkin (derivative), Gage Skidmore (Donald Trump), Gage Skidmore (Hillary Clinton) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

In 2016, many Trump supporters organized to monitor polling places for voting fraud despite the wide news reporting that such fraud virtually never occurs. Conservatives told me that “Crooked Hillary” either “killed” or “had killed” four Americans in the Benghazi embassy attack, that she laughed at a twelve year-old rape victim when she defended the man accused of raping her, and that Trump’s bragging about assaulting women could be excused since “Bill Clinton committed sexual assault while in the White House.” Post-election, a swing-voter told me about an ABC News interview in which Clinton revealed her plan to confiscate all guns in the U.S. as part of a United Nations directive, using Russian and Chinese soldiers since the National Guard and police would not willingly confiscate citizens’ guns.

Each of these beliefs was debunked repeatedly, lacks proof, or strains credulity, yet many people persisted in believing them. Why? Quite simply, they consume Fox News and other conservative media, including posts and “fake news” on social media. A 2012 study by Fairleigh Dickinson University found that people who exclusively obtained information from Fox News were less informed than people who watched only Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show* or who did not consume any news at all.¹ As conservative David Frum explains, the “thought leaders on talk radio and Fox” create an “alternative knowledge system ... with its own facts.”² Lest that seem extreme, note that Politifact rates 59% of statements by pundits and guests on Fox News as “mostly false,” “false,” and “pants on fire.”³ In light of 2016’s inaccurate polling, I must emphasize the difference between flawed polling, reporting, or analysis and the willful suspension of disbelief that one sometimes observes in conservative media. Karl Rove, for example, denied the likelihood of an Obama vic-

tory even as the results came into the Fox newsroom.⁴ The so-called mainstream media was wrong in 2016, but some conservative media outlets, particularly fringe outlets active on social media, blatantly ignore facts. Instead, they wrap misleading information in persuasive rhetoric.

To better understand the Fox News Effect, I conducted a rhetorical analysis of Fox programming during the 2012 election.⁵ In 2016, Trump amplified the same rhetorical strategies to promote his core message, shroud the electorate in misinformation and partisan talking points, and achieve a full-proof *ethos* that propelled him into the White House. First, Fox used the rhetoric of polarization to create an “us vs. them” dichotomy between a “fair and balanced” conservative perspective and a threatening “liberal other,” such as the “mainstream media.” When a panel member or guest dissented from a Fox show’s prevailing view, the host redirected to a different topic to minimize debate and preserve the network’s unified front. Hosts and commentators also rapidly delivered information, piquing their audience with partisan buzzwords and hindering careful consideration of any particular claim or evidence. By frequently repeating key claims, Fox personalities made those claims more familiar and thus created an “illusion of truth” effect. Finally, Fox News and its commentators often decontextualized their claims and evidence, leading viewers to a very different impression or understanding than they might possess if given more context.



By Fox News Channel. [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Donald Trump rode these rhetorical strategies to the GOP nomination and a stunning election upset, thanks in large part to Fox News and its guests legitimizing these strategies for a more mainstream audience. As Sam Thielman points out, Trump’s candidacy “is the logical conclusion of what Fox News spent nearly twenty years sowing in rightwing politics.”⁶ There is a clear line from “Beck to Palin to Trump.”⁷ Phillip Rucker and Robert Costa of the *Washington Post* describe “Trump’s echo chamber” as a “more nationalistic and racially charged strain of the one most elected Republicans have inhabited for two decades.”⁸ Trump double-downed on this brand of rhetoric after the release of his 2005 *Access Hollywood* recording and the subsequent allegations of assault.

The result? Many Republican leaders renewed their endorsements, and nearly sixty million people voted for him. Some hailed Trump’s victory as a fundamental remapping of the electorate, but political scientist Larry Bartels points out that the outcome primarily “reflect[s] partisan patterns familiar from previous

election cycles.”⁹ That is, people voted based on party identification more than any other factor. According to Christopher Aachen and Larry Bartels’ *Democracy for Realists*, people adapt their political beliefs to fit the candidate they prefer, and this preference mostly depends on party affiliation. Paradoxically, more information or knowledge of politics does not mitigate partisanship; rather, people who consume more political news take in more partisan talking points such as Fox’s echo chamber.¹⁰ They develop false perceptions and impressions that govern their reaction to future news — for example, the casual dismissal of “locker room talk” and allegations of sexual assault that would have irrevocably damaged candidates in previous elections.



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Trump’s perfection of Fox’s rhetoric amplifies and reinforces the mindless partisanship revealed by *Democracy for Realists* to unprecedented levels. In the post-election soul searching, many observed that Trump’s core messages about bringing change to Washington, the economy, immigration, and globalization resonated so powerfully with white working-class voters that they did not care very much about — or embraced — the accompanying messages of xenophobia, Islamophobia, racism, sexism, and misogyny.¹¹ Others pointed to the negative impact of FBI Director James Comey’s letter to Congress announcing the discovery and pending review of more Clinton emails. These observations are correct, but I contend that Clinton’s troubles and Trump’s core messages could not have outweighed his own scandals, his offensiveness, and his erratic behavior without the use of Fox-style rhetoric to propagate uncritical partisanship and establish an unassailable *ethos*.

How else can we explain denouncing Bill Clinton for consensual sexual affairs but embracing a serial adulterer accused of assault by over a dozen women? How else can we understand viewing Hillary Clinton as dishonest but supporting a person who denies saying things that he said on camera, a candidate who made “entirely false” statements at a rate four times greater than Clinton (52% to 12%) according to Politifact?¹² How else can we understand an anonymous Republican donor wondering, “What if Putin insults him? Does he drop a bomb on Moscow or something? I’m not sure he is stable. I’m voting against her

because I can't stand the woman. But ... I don't think he's mentally balanced."¹³ If Trump won the presidency despite inspiring questions about his mental capacities, I fear that other candidates will emulate his rhetoric in their pursuits of office.

Analysis

The following analysis will focus on Trump's RNC acceptance speech¹⁴, debate performances, and most publicized controversial statements throughout his presidential campaign. Specifically, I will examine elements of his campaign stump speeches, certain attacks on his critics, his defense against accusations of sexual assault, his allegations of a "rigged" election, and his criticism of the "mainstream media." These arguments best exemplify the use — and logical conclusion — of Fox News' rhetorical strategies. Trump's rhetoric of polarization delegitimizes opposing views and sources of information while simultaneously strengthening his *ethos*. His redirection shifts attention from his flaws and controversies to other narratives, preserving his *ethos*. His rapid delivery of information piques his supporters' partisanship and prevents careful consideration of any particular claim. Even if a claim is fact-checked and debunked, Trump often repeats the claim in an attempt to imbue it with familiarity and thus a sense of truth. Lastly, he decontextualizes his assertions so that they will be received differently than they otherwise might be. Combined, these strategies build and maintain an *ethos* of astonishing power.

Rhetoric of Polarization

Monica Brasted explains how polarizing rhetoric — establishing common ground, a "we/they" attitude, and opposition to a threatening enemy — can affirm one group's collective identity while also subverting a competing group's *ethos*.¹⁵ Citing Raum and Measell¹⁶, she says these tactics require three environmental factors: existing polarization, a charged emotional atmosphere, and "an agent that views the world as a battle of opposites and presents themselves as the only redeemer." First Fox News, and now Donald Trump, utilized polarizing rhetoric to create a collective identity and a common enemy. Its regular viewers, therefore, gained polarized perspectives and knowledge while believing they are consuming the most accurate information and assessments from the most forthright, legitimate sources. Trump's campaign was often described



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as populist, and “Populism is, at base, ‘us vs. them’ politics” in which one group defines itself at least partially in opposition to other groups.¹⁷

From promising to build a wall across the Mexican border to calling for a ban on Muslim immigration to fighting with the “establishment” leaders of his own party, Trump consistently pitted an endangered “us” against a threatening “them.” He presented himself as a savior who will “make America great again”



By Spartan7W (JPG version of File: Trump Hat.tif) [CC BY-SA 4.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

by protecting its citizens from globalization, immigration, and ISIS. In the opening of his nomination acceptance speech, Trump described a “moment of crisis” with “attacks on our police” and “terrorism in our cities” threatening our “way of life.” Unlike our current political leaders, Trump would end “the crime and violence” and “put America first.” Later, he claimed to know “the system” better than anyone, and thus “I alone can fix it.” Trump explicitly portrayed himself as a redeemer opposing those who

would do us harm or who simply cannot “fix” America’s problems, tapping into and inflaming existing polarization to strengthen his appeal. Exit polling and post-election interviews reveal how Trump’s savior image outweighed his other rhetoric and images for many voters, including those expected to support Clinton. Fifty-three percent of white female voters chose Trump despite his misogynistic language. Sheryl Gay Stolberg of *The New York Times* summed up the attitude of the female Trump voters she interviewed after the election: “America was on the wrong track, the women said, and Trump alone could fix it.”¹⁸

When his statements were criticized, Trump used polarizing rhetoric to blame the liberal media for misinterpreting his words, if not outright lying. After suggesting that “second amendment people” could assassinate a President Hillary Clinton, for example, Trump claimed the media misinterpreted his sarcastic reference to the 2nd Amendment voting bloc. He began questioning the fairness of the election as his standing in the polls slipped, warning of widespread voting fraud despite no evidence that such fraud occurs at any significant level.¹⁹ Pressed to clarify his position, Trump, Pence, and his surrogates argued that the biased media was rigging the election through its unfavorable coverage. Newt Gingrich, for instance, said Trump’s campaign was about “breaking the elite media, which has become a phalanx of the establishment.”²⁰ Having been force-fed this argument for years, it is only mildly surprising that over fifty-five percent of likely voters in an October 2016 poll said the media was biased against Trump, including six in ten inde-

pendents and twenty percent of democrats.²¹ Never mind that the media did not cause Trump to say so many offensive, clueless, and controversial things. In short, Trump amplified Fox's "us vs. them" dichotomy to portray himself as a victim of the liberal media by condemning both criticism and straight-forward news reporting as evidence of bias.



The rhetoric of polarization was not limited to the media for Trump. After women began coming forward with allegations of sexual assault, Trump described them in a campaign speech as part of a global conspiracy against him. *The Washington Post* perfectly encapsulated his "us vs. them" rhetoric in excerpting one of his post-debate campaign speeches: "It's a global power structure," he said. Trump went on to describe himself as a populist martyr — "I take all of these slings and arrows gladly for you" — and posited: "This is not simply another four-year election. This is a crossroads in the history of our civilization that will determine whether or not we the people reclaim control over our government."²² He not only identifies a shadowy threat; he also paints himself as a willing sacrificial lamb and the sole hope in a struggle for civilization itself. Rather than admit fault as most any other person would have done, Trump traded on the powerful *ethos* that results from never wavering from one's polarizing rhetoric.

As the election results show, Trump's *ethos* was largely unassailable among his supporters. Fox and Trump's polarizing rhetoric has created a collective cognitive dissonance toward any dissent. According to the theory of cognitive dissonance, people experience psychological discomfort when they encounter information that contradicts their beliefs. To alleviate this discomfort, people may update their beliefs, rationalize the new information, denigrate the information's source, simply dismiss the new ideas, or avoid different perspectives entirely.²³ By rationalizing, denigrating, dismissing, and avoiding, polarizing rhetoric preserves the audience's psychological comfort within an echo chamber that simultaneously gratifies the desire for confirmation of one's beliefs and builds *ethos*. If Trump violates his supporters' existing beliefs, they are likely to adjust their thinking to maintain their partisan preferences and restore their psychological comfort.²⁴ Armed with such bullet-proof *ethos*, Fox News and Trump employ their other rhetorical strategies in attacking contrary information and perpetuating their *ethos* as saviors from the liberal threat.

Thus Trump weathered statement after statement and controversy after controversy that would have destroyed another candidate's electability.

Rapid Redirection

Trump directly repudiates challenges, but he also redirects to his opponents' real and imagined defects. After the Gold Star parents Khazir and Ghazala Khan criticized him at the DNC, for example, Trump attempted to redirect the media narrative to Ghazala's silence during Khazir's speech. He questioned whether Khazir had allowed her to say anything, suggesting the real story was the dynamic in the Khan marriage or gender inequality among Muslims.²⁵ His attempt to shift attention may have failed in this case (his criticism of the Khans was widely criticized itself), but it is telling that Trump tried. He would rather redirect than engage or apologize. It is preferable to minimize attention to one's flaws, maintain the echo chamber, and preserve one's *ethos*.

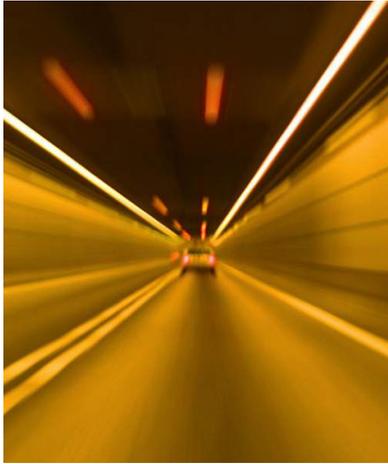


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Redirection was also observable in Trump's attacks on Alicia Machado. He not only defended himself against her criticism; he also directed his Twitter followers to look up a sex tape that does not exist.²⁶ This was more than a personal, *ad hominem* attack intended to discredit his critic. It was an attempt to redirect people's attention from his offensive words and attitude to alleged flaws in Machado's background. It is difficult to imagine any other politician responding to Machado at all. Some attribute Trump's attacks to his extreme sensitivity to slights, perceived and real. Sensitive he may be, but redirecting to an opponent's flaws was also a staple of Trump's campaign rhetoric. He always sought to control the spotlight and the narrative.

Similarly, Trump pivoted away from questions about his *Access Hollywood* comments at the second debate. He glossed over the comments as mere "locker room talk" and then abruptly brought up ISIS killing people, implying that there are more important things to fret over than his words. Later in the debate, and in the media, Trump attacked Bill Clinton's history of affairs, accused him of sexual assault, and asserted that Hillary Clinton cruelly treated the accusers. Trump is hardly the only politician to pivot away from tough questions or touchy issues, but his redirection was unique in its speed and viciousness. He scarcely responded to issues before bringing up other topics, and often the new topics were deeply offensive personal attacks such as those launched against the Khans, Machado, and the Clinton marriage.

He did not only distract from himself; he also impugned his critics and gave his audience reasons to continue believing in his *ethos* rather than ascribing merit to the criticism.



Rapid Delivery

New Yorker critic David Denby vividly illustrates Trump's characteristic rapid delivery in the following description of one his early primary stump speeches:

Trump ran from Hillary Clinton (“She has no strength. She has no stamina”) to the United States being “ripped off on trade,” and then to veterans “not being taken care of,” and then to generals wasting time talking on television, and then to “Bush” (mimics a man sleeping), then to Hillary’s complaint that

Trump’s tone was not “nice” ..., then to the need for smart people ..., then to the [national debt] ..., then back to the trade imbalance with China, Japan, and Mexico.²⁷

Nearly every Trump speech or interview included a similar surge of words at one point or another. His rapid delivery was exemplified at each debate, as he often rattled off a series of short phrases without completing any of the thoughts.

Many viewed his rambling tendency as an erratic style, but I contend that Trump’s objective was to pique his listeners’ emotions and partisanship with buzzwords. He referenced partisan talking points with the goal of delighting conservatives with the arousal of their anger at Clinton, immigration, globalization, etc. As Jeff Hancock explains, neither Trump nor his supporters cared about facts. Trump said things that he knew would entertain his base, and his base appreciated these things not because they have factual basis but rather because they invoked their perception and sentiment. It was not important whether Trump cited accurate figures about trade or unemployment. It was only important that he reflected his listeners’ sense that the economy is leaving them behind.²⁸ Partisan buzzwords accomplished that goal, and moreover, his listeners could not consider any claim too long since he flitted from topic to topic so quickly. Already inclined to accept what he said, his supporters could be excused for finding themselves carried along the wave of his rants.

The strategy and goals of rapid delivery make sense in a stump speech to a receptive audience, but they become problematic when the claims demand more support and especially when the rhetoric of polarization reaches the crescendo of demagoguery. It is irresponsible to question public figures’ veracity, strength,

or stamina and then race to the next talking point. It is unethical to make outrageous claims of global conspiracy, widespread voter fraud, and pre-debate drug use without even attempting to support those claims with real evidence.²⁹ But Trump can rely on assertions and buzz-words thanks to his *ethos* with his intended audience, and exciting their emotions about Washington dysfunction, the economy, immigration, and globalization only further reinforces that *ethos*.

Repetition

Psychological research shows that the more familiar ideas become through repetition, the more truthful they seem regardless of the source's perceived credibility.³⁰ Fox appears very credible to its intended audience by using polarizing rhetoric, making its repetition especially effective. Trump, of course, rose to political prominence by promoting birtherism on Fox News, latching onto the network's perceived credibility among its audience. His own polarizing rhetoric amplified his credibility to the point where he bragged he could shoot someone and still maintain his political support. Thus, repetition's "illusion of truth" effect can be very potent for certain audiences when used by Fox and Trump.

Trump regularly repeated false talking points without regard to their accuracy or credibility, from his birtherism to his assertion that Muslims in New Jersey celebrated on 9/11. He stood by the latter comment even though it was debunked many times over. He and his surrogates repeatedly said that Hillary Clinton laughed at a twelve year-old rape victim even though that claim was also repeatedly debunked.³¹ In the debates, he defended his avoidance of taxes by persistently criticizing Clinton for not changing the law, as though she could have done so with a unilateral sweep of the pen, and added the false claim that Warren Buffett also used the "carried interest" loophole.³² David Denby quotes from one campaign speech, "We can't live like this. It's gonna get worse and worse. You're going to have more World Trade Centers. It's gonna get worse and worse. We can be politically correct, and we can be stupid, and it's gonna get worse and worse."³³ It seems Trump believed he could make political correctness the cause of terrorist attacks if he simply said it enough. But as explained above, neither Trump nor his supporters care much for the facts, or lack thereof, behind his claims. The claims *felt* like accurate representations, and hearing them often enough made them seem true enough. The more he reflected his audience's perception and emotion, the more he reinforced that perception and his position as a potential savior.



Similarly, Trump sought to validate the “rigged system” within the context of his polarizing rhetoric by asserting over and over that the system is rigged. Consider these remarks from a rally in Bangor, Maine:

The election is being rigged by corrupt media pushing false allegations and outright lies in an effort to elect Hillary Clinton president. But we are going to stop it. We are not going to back down. False stories, all made up. Lies, lies. No witnesses, no nothing. All big lies. It’s a rigged system and they take these lies and put them on front pages. This is a rigged system, folks, but we’re not going to let it happen.³⁴



When Trump persistently refused to commit to accepting the election results, he reinforced his base’s polarized distrust of the system and their faith in his personal victimhood. As Phillip Bump says, “The best way to get people to ignore those accusations [of sexual assault] is to double-down on their existing skepticism about the media and, ideally, to loop his opponent into that same grand conspiracy.”³⁵ It is an effective, if unethical, rhetorical strategy; in a Reuters survey conducted in mid-October, 2016, seventy percent of republicans said a Clinton victory would be the result of illegal voting or vote rigging.³⁶

Most unbelievable, Trump repeatedly asserted in the debates and elsewhere that he did not say things that he said on record. Obama released his long-form birth certificate in 2011, but Trump continued publicly questioning his citizenship until 2015. Late in the 2016 campaign, he claimed his goal in questioning Obama’s citizenship was to compel the release of his birth certificate and thus settle the matter. He supported the Iraq War unequivocally on Fox News and other television, but during the campaign he doggedly insisted that he opposed it. He repeatedly claimed that he would have won the popular vote except for millions of illegal votes, even after that claim’s widespread debunking.³⁷ Trump seems to believe his assertions will become true if he repeats them enough, regardless of any evidence to the contrary. The fact that he insists on easily disproved “alternative facts” (to borrow a phrase from his campaign manager and adviser Kellyanne Conway) shows his commitment to the strategies of polarization and repetition.³⁸

Why not? These strategies worked. Reiterating key themes reinforced his audience’s existing perceptions and imbued bald opinion with the illusion of truth and fact. The Trump campaign deserves further credit for identifying and consistently championing one of conservatism’s most powerful messages:

Washington is broken. Aided by years of Fox News and Tea Party criticism of Washington “insiders” and gridlock (created by GOP obstructionism), Trump convinced many voters that Washington needed change and he was the “outsider” to deliver it. According to exit polls, 39% of voters wanted a candidate who could “bring needed change,” and 83% of those “change voters” supported Trump. In contrast, Clinton represented the status quo.³⁹



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Decontextualizing Claims

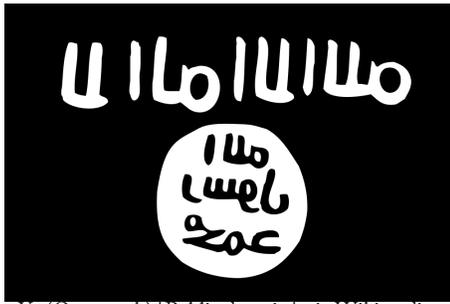
Trump’s campaign often ignored context in order to create straw men as well as to make his argument appear stronger. In his nomination speech, for instance, he attacked Clinton’s service as Secretary of State but neglected crucial context:

In 2009, pre-Hillary, ISIS was not even on the map. Libya was stable. Egypt was peaceful. Iraq was seeing a reduction in violence. Iran was being choked by sanctions. Syria was under control. After four years of Hillary Clinton, what do we have? ... After fifteen years of wars in the Middle East, after trillions of dollars spent and thousands of lives lost, the situation is worse than it has ever been before. This is the legacy of Hillary Clinton: death, destruction, terrorism and weakness.

Trump’s own words (“fifteen years of wars”) acknowledged that Bush committed America to Afghanistan and Iraq long before 2009. Trump might have justifiably criticized then-Senator Clinton for voting to support the Iraq War, but how was Secretary Clinton culpable for the Arab Spring, the resulting coup in Egypt, the following civil wars in Libya and Syria, and the rise of ISIS? His goal, of course, was not to convince the unconverted but to arouse the faithful with their favorite themes and buzzwords. By repeating these buzzwords absent appropriate context, he confirmed the audience’s existing beliefs while also shaping and reinforcing them, creating a self-feedback loop that buttressed his *ethos* and enabled further groundless assertion. He excited his listeners’ perception and sentiment of feckless, corrupt, unresponsive leadership, and the baseless claims were accepted for simply *feeling right*.

For example, Trump strongly criticized announcing the assault on the ISIS stronghold of Mosul, saying the “US [is] looking so dumb” on Twitter. Championing a surprise attack makes intuitive sense. But

considering the context reveals that ISIS leaders expected an eventual attack on Mosul long before any formal announcements; the Iraqi government began encouraging civilians to flee the city months before the



Yo (Own work) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

assault's build-up. Alan Yuhas of *The Guardian* writes, Trump's "claim that 'surprise' would be a more effective strategy suggests a dearth of knowledge about military strategy and risks to civilians." Trump very well may lack knowledge of contemporary military strategy — he often referenced Patton and MacArthur during his campaign — but I argue that he also dismissed the context of the Mosul attack as part

of his general rhetorical pattern. It did not matter if ISIS expected an attack, if civilians were at risk, or if trying to get civilians out of the city could enable more liberal use of American firepower. Championing a surprise attack MacArthur would be proud of sounded good to his intended audience and offered an opportunity to criticize the current leadership.⁴⁰ He used and nurtured a negative perception of Washington.

But Trump did not merely neglect to acknowledge the full context surrounding his claims and arguments, as Fox News and politicians in both parties are wont to do. He willfully ignored and distorted the larger context of his claims, grossly misrepresenting events as well as often entering the realm of unprovable — and thus unfalsifiable — conspiracy theories. Consider Trump's statements about the women accusing him of sexual assault, the election being rigged against him, the probability of rampant voter fraud, and the existence of a broader global conspiracy against his candidacy.

Trump ridiculed one woman accusing him of grabbing her inappropriately who happens to star in pornographic films, saying "I'm sure she's never been grabbed before."⁴¹ The grabbing itself, of course, was not the issue. The issue was the lack of consent to be grabbed. Yet Trump distorted the issue by (de)contextualizing it as an unjustified complaint about harmless behavior, as though pornography stars do not merit protection against assault because of their profession. He belittled other accusers for their appearance, implying that they are lying



because he would not have touched or kissed such unattractive women.⁴² Again, he (de)contextualized the issue as a matter of credibility *based on appearance* rather than the number of accusations and the character of the women's accounts. One can see Trump's redirection at work in these examples, but the recasting of the

situation, presenting his alleged behavior as either justified or laughable, stands out as the primary rhetorical strategy.

Trump's loose play with context also stood out when it came to the election itself. He ignored the facts that state and local governments administer elections, that most state governments are dominated by republicans, and that it is extremely unlikely enough voter fraud could occur to affect a national election. Comprehensive research shows that voter fraud is virtually non-existent,⁴³ but in Trump's rhetoric, it was entirely plausible that a shadowy global power structure centered around Hillary Clinton's political machine encompassed not only the mainstream media but also republican leaders like Paul Ryan, the Federal Reserve, the Justice Department, the Commission on Presidential Debates, and the women who accused him of sexual assault.⁴⁴ Dismissing context enabled Trump to (re)contextualize the election in a way that reinforced the polarizing "us vs. them" rhetoric, delegitimized the system and his political opponents, and further inflamed the partisanship of his core supporters. It is possible, using Trump's rhetoric, to argue that he and his supporters "took back" America from unknown power brokers, or that he would have won by even more electoral votes if the system had not been rigged!



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Discussion

My analysis of Trump's rhetorical strategies has multiple implications. First, it offers an explanation for Trump's stunning victory that has not been discussed or appreciated in the media. My analysis also adds to the growing realization of the *objectivity* of criticizing Fox and Trump's strategies. Contrary to what Fox and Trump would have us believe, condemning their rhetoric is neither a partisan attack nor a matter of trusting the "mainstream media" over more conservative media. It is recognizing reality. Considering the election result, it is a frightening reality in which unethical rhetoric succeeds and thus must be analyzed and defended against. Therefore, my analysis also shows that we must teach students to identify, investigate, and critique such irresponsible rhetoric. We simply cannot trust that citizens will naturally evaluate candidates based on their positions and qualifications rather than partisanship. As Sophia McClennen laments, "we have collectively lost our ability to process information and make good judgments."⁴⁵ Our only hope for an



informed, open-minded citizenry, I believe, is to teach objective rhetorical analysis and hope our students turn into citizens who can independently identify problematic arguments and outrageous misinformation. Fourth, my analysis demonstrates that we must begin emphasizing a spirit of open-mindedness and inquiry more than critical thinking, problem-solving, communication skills, creativity, career-readiness, or any other educational value. Our democracy desperately needs citizens who are open to

changing their minds in response to new information, not citizens who deny, denigrate, or dismiss disagreeable facts in order to preserve their partisanship.

As much as Fox and Trump argue that criticism stems from a liberal bias, this analysis shows many objective problems with their rhetoric. While undeniably effective, their strategies are unethical for perpetuating misinformation, inflexible partisanship, and impenetrable cognitive dissonance. Rewarded with first an enraptured audience and now the Presidency, Fox News, Trump, and other partisans will likely continue using the rhetorical strategies of polarization, redirection, rapid delivery, repetition, and decontextualization. Trump's victory speech struck a conciliatory tone, but I doubt his reelection campaign will abandon what worked before. Considering the current rhetorical environment and the tendency to adapt one's beliefs to fit a candidate, it seems unlikely that large numbers of voters will hold Trump, the probable leftist imitator in 2020, and other future candidates accountable for their irresponsible and unethical rhetoric.

Our best hope for change is to equip students to recognize, analyze, and debunk questionable arguments and to instill in them a spirit of inquiry and open-mindedness. We must teach our students to identify logical fallacies and unbelievable claims, use common sense to assess those claims, and conduct thoughtful, nonpartisan research to either verify or debunk them. They must learn to process information and make good judgments about that information. We should teach students to explore topics before making up their minds, to continuously pursue knowledge, and to update their opinions and beliefs when new information comes to light. Rather than condoning partisan talking points, we should challenge students when they regurgitate incorrect facts, blatant misrepresentations, or outright



falsehoods. They must learn to reflect on their own beliefs and arguments, recognizing possible inconsistencies and contradictions. In a sense, I am merely repeating the clarion call for teaching better critical thinking skills, but I would have us teach students to apply those improved critical thinking skills to the growing sea of misinformation and the cloud of polarizing *ethos*.

Critical thinking includes many abilities: recognizing the flaws in one’s own perspective, beliefs, or opinions; understanding and applying reasoning with which one disagrees; accepting statements and facts as truthful even when they contradict one’s position; solving problems; inferring ideas; calculating probabilities; and decision-making. Students who are explicitly taught critical thinking skills are less susceptible to fallacious thinking and judgments, such as confirmation bias, and therefore they usually make better decisions than those who are not taught to think critically. Research also suggests that teaching critical thinking helps students select relevant information, identify missing or conflicting details, better support their claims, and work more effectively with others.⁴⁶ With so much misinformation cluttering our public discourse, with Fox News and Trump building such effective polarized *ethos*, with Trump and others constantly questioning the legitimacy of fact-based media, strong critical thinking skills are more essential than ever. People must be able to soundly judge information and arguments.

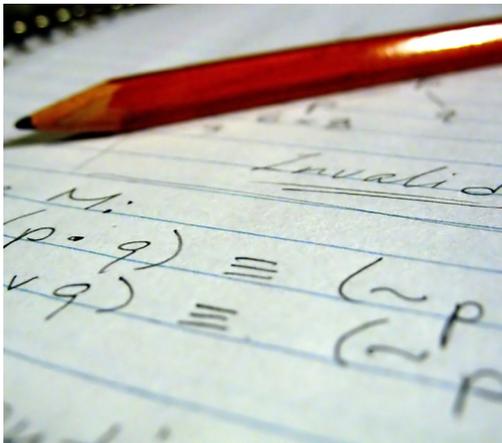
After the second Clinton-Trump debate and the initial wave of assault allegations against Trump, I engaged my students in a conversation about Trump’s “locker room talk” defense of his bragging about sexual assault. We had just studied an excerpt from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By*, and my goal was to relate their ideas about the power of metaphor to shape thought, feeling, and action to the way Trump’s language seemed to influence his treatment of women, thus critiquing the minimizing “locker room talk” argument. One of my students raised her hand during the discussion and said, “Hillary killed four Americans at Benghazi. I think we have more important things to worry about.” Seeing my shocked expression, she rolled her eyes as though to say “whatever” and clarified, “Okay, she *had* four people killed.”

Rather than let this stand unchallenged, I suggested to her that there is quite a difference between holding Secretary Clinton responsible for failing to secure the Benghazi embassy and saying that she killed, or ordered the killing, of four Americans. This led me to dis-



cuss one of Trump's other groundless claims, the charge that Clinton laughed at a twelve year-old rape victim after successfully defending her rapist. I asked the students, "Does that sound like a reaction any human being would have?" Several shook their heads no. "Okay," I said, "so when something sounds so unbelievable, research it." I then shared how easily I researched and debunked the claim through the *Washington Post*.⁴⁷ And I managed to explain how the language we use to discuss politics, political parties, and candidates can influence our attitudes and voting behavior for good or ill.

Our democracy, our society, needs citizens who can recognize a truly incredible, outrageous claim when they hear or read it, who can notice a lack of credible evidence, who can detect logical fallacies or partisan bias, who will then take a few minutes to educate themselves, and who will next honestly re-assess the candidate making the groundless claim and expecting the public to buy it. To have such citizens, teachers



must educate students in objective rhetorical analysis, basic reasoning and logic, nonpartisan research methods, systematic decision-making, and the importance of open-minded inquiry.

The danger, of course, is that our efforts may either morph into or be perceived as attempting to change students' political and personal beliefs, fulfilling long-held conservative fears about liberal professors. We can defend against this legitimate danger by focusing

on the requirements of ethical rhetoric and scholarship, such as supporting claims with valid evidence, accurately representing sources, and avoiding fallacious reasoning. If my student wishes to argue that Clinton killed four Americans in Benghazi, then she must construct the logical chain between failing to secure an embassy in a dangerous war zone and a leader's responsibility for subordinates' lives. She must anticipate, consider, and soundly rebut counterarguments to her position. She must be willing to hold George W. Bush accountable for killing Americans in New Orleans due to the federal government's poor response to Hurricane Katrina, rather than excusing republicans and denouncing democrats simply for being republican or democrat.



Most importantly, we can explicitly champion our purpose in promoting open-mindedness: to help students view changing one's mind as learning rather than compromising one's political purity; to demon-

strate to them that public and intellectual debate need not be zero-sum games; to show them that they can acknowledge the validity of other perspectives and arguments without necessarily sacrificing their entire belief systems; and to teach them to process information and make good judgments about that information.

End Notes

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