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Commentary on: David Zarefsky's "The 'Comeback' second Obama-Romney debate and the virtues of argumentation"

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1. INTRODUCTION

David Zarefsky's analysis of what he and many commentators labelled the "comeback" debate for Barack Obama is, as is typical of his scholarship, clearly argued, supported with close analysis of the argumentative exchange, and developed with an accessible style. Zarefsky's overall argument draws an important distinction about commentary on the debate, arguing that Obama won the second debate not only because of an aggressive style, but also because of his argumentative skill.

Rather than comment on Zarefsky's insightful description of crucial argument exchanges in the debate or his analysis of Romney's use of ethotic argument or how both candidates relied on association and dissociation, I want to focus on underlying implications of his argument. My approach is to use Zarefsky's analysis as a jumping off point to draw distinctions about what argumentative analysis reveals about American presidential debates.

2. GENRE AND INFLUENCE IN POLITICAL DEBATE

Zarefsky is rightly focused on explaining how President Obama scored a significant victory in the second presidential debate, thereby stopping the political momentum that the Romney campaign developed after the first debate. To this end, he focuses on how Obama's argumentative and rhetorical choices helped him win the debate in the mind of viewers. He also focused on how Romney's choices sometimes helped and often hurt him. For example, Zarefsky refers to one of Obama's answers as "a strong response to a potentially harmful question" and then adds that in a rejoinder Romney "hit his stride." In a developed analysis of the exchange that occurred about the attack on Benghazi, Zarefsky labels the composite answers on the topic a "decisive victory for the president." I do not disagree with these judgments, but want to note that the research base on how arguments work as persuasion in political debates is quite thin. The analysis of the exchange on Benghazi illustrates this point. It is certainly plausible that Obama's answer influenced the audience because he backed up his claim with strong evidence. But it is also plausible that Obama did not so much win the argument as Romney looked weak when he asked

the moderator for confirmation that his summary of the aftermath of the attack was correct. The underlying point is that we know a great deal about the many “virtues” of argument as a method of problem-solving, but much less about whether the mass audience finds strong arguments to be more persuasive than other forms of rhetoric or even weak arguments.

Zarefsky explicitly gets at this point in the conclusion when he argues that more than argument Obama’s victory came from his forceful persona and from “a number of weaker strategic choices on Romney’s part.” In fact, Zarefsky seems to conclude that in relation to clash, use of evidence, and other argumentative criteria, the debate did not provide an “encouraging” picture of public argument. Yet, in apparent contradiction, he concludes that when viewed as a form of “social practice” the “second presidential debate of 2012 fulfilled those expectations reasonably well.”

In fact, there is no contradiction, but an implicit distinction that is only briefly sketched in the essay. Zarefsky gets at this point when he denies the charge that presidential debates are not real debates, but instead claims that “they are debates of a special kind and need to be evaluated not against *a priori* standards but against the requirements and expectations of the genre.” With this statement, Zarefsky implies but does not develop the view that the normal standards for evaluating clash, evidence usage, and reasoning to distinguish strong from weak arguments need to be adapted to the purposes served by and constraints limiting televised presidential (and presumably other) political debates.

While there has been a great deal of work done on the influence of presidential debates and considerable analysis of the rhetorical factors that shape and usually limit the impact of debates, there has been much less consideration of the proper generic standards for evaluating the argument in presidential debates. Zarefsky’s analysis implies two ways in which argument critics might adapt *a priori* standards to the genre. First, it seems clear from his analysis that the details of the argumentative exchange are less important than the overall feel of who has more forcefully supported a position. It is not that clash is unimportant in shaping viewer response, but that audience standards are far more impressionistic than those of an argument critic. I think Zarefsky is right that application of this impressionistic standard led viewers to conclude that Obama won the debate. It was because the debate produced useful clash of positions that it can be judged a success in functional terms.

Second, Zarefsky’s analysis suggests the importance of developing standards for evidence usage based in the social knowledge of the mass audience as well as traditional standards for evaluating evidence usage. One of the more discouraging findings of a great deal of political research on voter knowledge is that voters don’t know very much about important issues of the day and often lack basic information about the functioning of important institutions. Standards for evidence usage in the genre of presidential debates need to take into account this unfortunate situation. One approach might be to ground judgments of evidentiary adequacy in the social knowledge of the audience. Based in this approach the argument critic could argue that evidence was strong or weak based on the audience’s pre-existing knowledge or based in the specific evidence citation of the arguer. I think this audience-based

standard implicitly underlies Zarefsky's judgment that Romney "hit his stride," when he attacked Obama for failing to fulfil his promises. It was not necessarily the specifics that Romney cited that made this argument strong, but the fact that he tapped into the underlying feeling that Obama had not succeeded in achieving what he promised in 2008. Zarefsky's analysis of "ethotic" argument is also suggestive of the importance of adapting evaluative argumentation theories to the genre of presidential debates. The difficulty for the argument critic is that such an approach will require adapting traditional standards for evaluating evidence to the perceived social knowledge of the audience, while accounting for the fact that on many occasions this social knowledge is also factually inaccurate.

3. FORMAT AND FUNCTION IN PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

In understated language, Zarefsky observes that the many "interruptions and exchanges" in the debate did not well serve "the goals of the debate." He also notes that the moderator, Candy Crowley of CNN, caused controversy when she confirmed that Obama had indeed labelled the attack in Benghazi as terrorism. Her actions led some to question whether it was the proper role of the moderator to label one side as correct. Based on this analysis, Zarefsky suggests that a "series of unmoderated but time-limited follow up opportunities . . . might be an improvement" on the current format. The underlying point is that the format ought to be adapted to the purpose of educating the people about the candidates and issues and there is little evidence that inclusion of an active press moderator does that. Moreover, there is evidence supporting an alternative format similar to the one that Zarefsky sketches. In a portion of the 1980 Carter-Reagan debate, the two candidates were each allowed an opening statement and then two rebuttals on a topic area. One study (Rowland, 1986) found that the inclusion of two rebuttals gave the candidates the opportunity to both extend their own arguments on a topic and develop objections to the arguments of the other candidate, producing effective clash. Unfortunately, the success of the format was not enough reason for it to be used again. This failure may reveal media preference for a format that produces conflict, even if that conflict creates more heat than light.

4. CONCLUSION

Zarefsky's insightful analysis of the second presidential debate in 2012 supports his judgment that the debate worked "reasonably well" in fulfilling the functions of presidential debates in educating the population on the issues and the candidates. It functioned in this way, despite the weaknesses identified by Zarefsky, because of the power of the free marketplace of ideas. The debate had many flaws, but it placed the views of the candidates in direct conflict, providing viewers with a chance to judge whose positions and leadership would be better for the country. John Stuart Mill (1910, 81, 201) defended the free market of ideas because he believed that over time better ideas would win out. As Zarefsky demonstrates, Mill's faith in the power of public reason for choosing among conflicting views has strong support, even in the narrow and artificial confines of a presidential debate.

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