

## DISAGREEMENT IN A PARTISAN WORLD. THE BUCKLEY-VIDAL DEBATES

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**Abstract.** The paper tackles the notions of disagreement and debate, especially in their televised iterations. Starting with a discussion on partisanship, particularly in the field of politics, and the ways in which it affects opinions and attitudes to facts, even those as incontestable as pictures, the paper then examines a moment that signals the debut of a new era in political commentary – the Buckley-Vidal debates of 1968. These are analyzed from the perspective of their impact on network television approaches to commercializing conflict, doubled by the motivations of the two debaters to prove dominance in this conflict of ideas. A short description of evolving journalistic standards applied to debate shows the perils and potential of engaging in debates while contending with issue of ratings, in particular in the era of post-truth, in which multiple truths can exist at the same time.

**Keywords:** political partisanship; televised debates; Gore Vidal; William F. Buckley.

The crowd gathered to witness President Donald Trump's inauguration was significantly smaller than that present in 2009, when Barack Obama started his first term. This was noticed by journalists and proved, among other ways, by comparing pictures of the two inauguration ceremonies, made from the same vantage point, at the top of the Washington Monument. The size of a president's inauguration crowd should not be a contentious matter – simply confirmed or infirmed by examining available evidence - but, perhaps out of a desire to prove his ascendancy over the former president, Donald Trump claimed the crowd at his inauguration was the biggest ever recorded. It was not just president Trump who would go on to repeat that in the following weeks – Sean Spicer's first address as official spokesperson for the presidential administration contained this incredible untruth – that 2017 had the biggest inauguration crowd in history.

Two journalists from the Washington Post, Brian Schaffner and Samantha Luks, researched to how this controversy has affected support for Donald Trump. In the days following the inauguration, when the question of the number of people attending had already been amply discussed by the media, Washington Post ran a study<sup>1</sup> with 1400 respondents, a mix of Trump voters, supporters of his opponent,

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Schaffner, Samantha Luks, "This is what Trump voters said when asked to compare his inauguration crowd with Obama's", in *Washington Post*, January 2017, available at