

## 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

Hillary Clinton, and people who had not voted in the presidential elections. Half of them were required to identify which of the two photos was taken in 2009 and which was from 2017. About 40% of Donald Trump's supporters gave the wrong answer, identifying the 2009 picture as the most recent one, indicating that they were familiar with the President's statements and had chosen to believe him.

Much more interesting were the responses given by the other half of the group, which was asked a different question – the two photographs were again shown together and they were asked – "Which of the two photographs has more people in it?" without receiving any other information. In the 2017 picture there were obviously fewer people, and fewer than 3% of people that had voted with Hillary Clinton or had not voted in the election identified that photograph as having the most numerous crowds. For Trump supporters who were familiar with the controversy, the purpose of the question seemed obvious – if they admitted that there were more people in 2009, they were contradicting Trump. 15% chose the 2017 inauguration picture as the one having the most people in it. The question was simple and the correct answer easy to give, but the picture had transcended the physical – it was now a symbol of political partisanship. In other words, those 15% of respondents decided to prioritize their political position over reality. "*Clearly, some Trump supporters in our sample decided to use this question to express their support for Trump rather than to answer the survey question factually*"<sup>2</sup> remark Brian Schaffner and Samantha Luks.

The result, while extreme, is symptomatic for a widespread phenomenon in the politically polarized society of the USA – disagreeing on facts due to political allegiance. In *Partisan Bias in Factual Beliefs about Politics*, the authors affirm that

Partisanship seems to affect factual beliefs about politics. For example, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say that the deficit rose during the Clinton administration; Democrats are more likely to say that inflation rose under Reagan. What remains unclear is whether such patterns reflect differing beliefs among partisans or instead reflect a desire to praise one party or criticize another.<sup>3</sup>

How to explain the intensity of partisanship? In the US the existence of only two major parties can partly be to blame, as political options are often a negative vote against the Other. However, even in the absence of political allegiances, it is easy to understand why the attachment of a person to their opinions and beliefs goes beyond logic.

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[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/01/25/we-asked-people-which-inauguration-crowd-was-bigger-heres-what-they-said/?tid=sm\\_fb&utm\\_term=.48a257ebc87f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/01/25/we-asked-people-which-inauguration-crowd-was-bigger-heres-what-they-said/?tid=sm_fb&utm_term=.48a257ebc87f).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> Gerber Bullock, Huber Hill, "Partisan Bias in Factual Beliefs about Politics", in *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 2015, available at <http://www.sethjhill.com/100.00014074-Final.pdf>.

Firstly, most of these beliefs are created in childhood, during the period that sociologists name "primary socializing", that ends around time children turn seven. During this time, each person internalizes a series of norms and values that influence his understanding of the world, good and evil, right and wrong. This period of induction in society ensures (with a great degree of success) the taking on by the individual of collective norms. In *The Social Construction of Reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann summarize the way in which primary socializing is necessarily tied to subjectivity, namely the emotional attachment to the primary socializing agent in the vast majority of cases, family. Moreover, in the primary socializing stage the sense of self develops, which is defined, the authors argue, essentially contextualized by a certain social order.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, ideas about social order are first and foremost emotionally charged premises; the most important people for the development of a person, the parental figures that offer protection and affection are those with maximum legitimacy, so that a child, without critical thinking abilities, cannot challenge them and adopts them as fundamental premises, from which his or her relationship to the world and, by necessity, his or her identity derives. In this context, to be protective of "primary opinions" is in fact the intellectual expression of self-preservation. For example, to question the binarity of gender roles can be extremely difficult for most people, having defined themselves for all of their life as a boy/girl or woman/man.

On the other hand, attachment to one's own opinion can be explained by the fact that, once that person commits to an opinion, to change it can seem to discredit their intellectual prowess. If the situation about which an individual has formed an opinion has not changed in any way, then the change of opinion suggests an initial lack of research, weak judgment or intellectual laziness. In case the situation has evolved, somehow changed, after the opinion was initially formed, changing your opinion is still proof of that person's failure to anticipate that the situation would evolve or that they had prematurely formed an opinion.

Moreover, our opinion as the bases of actions and the wrongness of an opinion delegitimizes them. For example, if, based on a study, we believe that people who beg on the streets should not be helped because that money will be used to finance their vices, or because they have enough money already<sup>5</sup>, but we accept that we may have been wrong after examining another, more credible<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*, 1966, pp. 151-152.

<sup>5</sup> Stackhouse J. Seven days on the street. *Globe and Mail*, Toronto, December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Rohit Bose, Stephen W. Hwang, "Income and spending patterns among panhandlers", in *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, September 2002, available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC121964/>.

study, that show that people who beg on the streets are generally extremely poor and that they usually spend money on food, then all of the moments when we had denied a person asking for money on the street (due to these reasons) are wrong decisions and we should feel guilty about them.

Adding to that Berger and Luckmann's theory pertaining to the way accepting the social order is necessary for the coherent definition of self, we can conclude that a person can with great difficulty admit or even accept that they could be wrong. The solution is to persist in error.

### **Commercializing Conflict**

In 1968, journalistic standards of reporting on the American electoral process were in the process of being defined. Presidential debates had been televised for the first time in 1960, an advantage for the photogenic Kennedy, as compared to old and sweating Richard Nixon, that polled radio listeners had considered the winner of the debates. It was the beginning of a new era in political contest, in which the candidates had to *look presidential* as well.

In the summer of 1968 the conventions of the two main parties, Democrat and Republican, take place, in order to select the two parties' presidential candidates. For four days (between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of August, in Miami, for the Republican Convention and between the 26<sup>th</sup> and the 29<sup>th</sup> of August in Chicago, in the case of the Democratic Convention) regional delegates expressed their political preferences. Traditionally, TV stations would do live broadcasts of all of the speeches held at the convention. In 1968, things changed.

There were only three broadcast networks – CBS, NBC and, ranked last in terms of ratings, ABC. The latter could not afford to transmit for the entire duration of the conference (because it had to broadcast its most popular programs in order to not fall even lower in the ratings), so producers decide to broadcast a highlights reel of the speeches of the day, followed by a debate between intellectuals with opposite political views. Consequently, William F. Buckley, founder of the conservative magazine *National Review*, whose political views closely followed that of the Republican Party, was chosen to debate against Gore Vidal, liberal writer and supporter of the Democratic Party, on the merits of the two political platforms, every day, in 10 to 20 minute segments.

Buckley and Vidal had had the opportunity to meet previously and were familiar with each other's views. These past meetings had been sufficient opportunity for them to profoundly dislike each other. By some accounts, Buckley, the first to be contacted by ABC regarding the show, was asked if there was anyone he would not debate regarding the conventions. Buckley responded he could talk to any non-communist, but he would rather not talk to the

"philosophical degenerate", Gore Vidal. The ABC producers had found their second combatant.<sup>7</sup>

Their 1968 debates have a particular cultural importance – firstly, they are memorable because at the end of one of the debates Vidal calls Buckley a "crypto-Nazi", and Buckley, in turn, "accuses" Vidal of being a homosexual and threatens to punch him in the face. Although American politics was not completely devoid of insults at the time Buckley and Vidal were trading jabs, those moments were remarkably violent. Less than 25 years after the end of the Second World War, and in a time when sexuality, especially the subject of sexual orientation was taboo, the exchange shocked the American public. In future years, both Buckley and Vidal would write essays about their exchanges, somewhat apologetic, but most certainly continuing to denigrate the other.

But this verbal altercation is just the extreme result of an intentionally-created opposition, in contrast with dialogue. Buckley and Vidal are two people that were identified (and, more importantly, self-defined) as intellectuals. Intelligence was their most important, if not definitory, attribute. In front of viewers, Buckley and Vidal "fight" not only in the name of ideologies or incompatible political views, but in order to prove their might on their favorite battle arena in the subject they had turned into a career – a competition of ideas.

ABC producers had bet on conflict to generate interest from viewers and they were correct – by the end of the Democratic Convention, ABC had doubled its ratings compared to those for the 1964 conventions. These debates were the symptom of a profound change in the way journalists related to the political; the era of roundtables had ended, because consensus did not sell. Firstly, because it generates redundancy, secondly, because it lacks the sensational quality of competition, that animates both "sides" and the audience as a whole, including non-partisans, is attracted by conflict.

In this model, constructive talks are sacrificed. No longer do people speaking try to reach a compromise or solutions, because competition comes first. Buckley and Vidal often interrupt each other, subtly (or not so subtly) offend one another, all the while losing valuable time they could have used to inform the public or construct arguments in favor of their opinions, because a debate between just two sides can easily become a zero-sum game, which they take advantage of. The opponent's incompetence becomes validation for their own position and, as time passes and the two sides become more clearly oppositional, attacking each other repeatedly, the more incompatible the two perspectives seem, just as the

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<sup>7</sup> John Anderson, "The Buckley vs. Vidal debates: The original knock-down, drag-out TV", in *Washington Post*, August 2015, available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-buckley-vs-vidal-debates-the-original-knock-down-drag-out-tv/2015/08/05/a8fac4e6-3a21-11e5-9c2d-ed991d848c48\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.e9abb0fc8468](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-buckley-vs-vidal-debates-the-original-knock-down-drag-out-tv/2015/08/05/a8fac4e6-3a21-11e5-9c2d-ed991d848c48_story.html?utm_term=.e9abb0fc8468).

people who verbalize them do. So much so, that the incompatibility of the two worlds is sometimes not just of opinions, but even factual.

The Buckley-Vidal debate is a visible reflection of a process of truth negotiation, of redefining a *discourse*, a term understood as the totality of ways of speaking or thinking about a certain subject, based on common assumptions (see Foucault<sup>8</sup>). Vidal, a writer whose debut novel was positively reviewed by critics, is later rejected by the literary community because of *The City and the Pillars* (1948), in which the main character is homosexual. Homosexuality is considered an unacceptable form of deviance by the 1940s American society. The book and the artist were de facto suppressed, labeled as undesirables – in his book *Postmodernism și identități culturale. Conflicte și coexistență*, Virgil Nemoianu talks about the "Victorian morals that sought to discipline Flaubert, Baudelaire and Wilde...the puritan ban of Shakespeare...the medieval distrust towards and punishment of literary genius...the trial and execution of Socrates"<sup>9</sup>, all examples of creators whose existence does not conform to majority-supported values being rejected and eliminated from the public conversation.

In response to Vidal's book, critics marginalized him; most notably, Orville Prescott, critic for *Times* magazine, a heavyweight of American literature and a former admirer of Gore Vidal's work, vowed to never review his books from then on. In doing this, he attempts to condemn him to anonymity and excludes him from the process of shaping *discourse*. Prescott himself enjoys economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital (a graduate of the prestigious Williams College, born in a rich family, having many connections in the literary community), that he uses to discredit Vidal, who, prior to that point, had been in a privileged position as well. The two are in an antagonistic relation within the social space, and Prescott has a higher position in the symbolic and social space.<sup>10</sup>

After being exiled, Vidal wrote a number of detective novels under the pseudonym Edgar Box, in order to be able to support himself through writing. In an interview he claims to have been warned by an editor that even after 20 years had passed, he would still be attacked because of his book<sup>11</sup>. But in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the West goes through a cultural revolution. The Second World War creates new, very vocal, opinion makers that promote human rights and axiological neutral way of relating to culture and society. Technology gains

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Sociologie*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, translation by Oana Gheorghiu, ALL, Bucharest, 2010, p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> Virgil Nemoianu, *Postmodernism și identități culturale*, translation by Laura Carmen Cuțitaru, Editura Universității "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" Publishing House, Jassy, 2011, pp. 258–301.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason. On the Theory of Action*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1998, pp. 32-34.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew. O'Hehir, "How one sexy gay novel derailed Gore Vidal's literary career", *Salon*, 23 May 2014, available at [http://www.salon.com/2014/05/22/how\\_oneSexyGayNovelDerailedGoreVidalsLiteraryCareer/](http://www.salon.com/2014/05/22/how_oneSexyGayNovelDerailedGoreVidalsLiteraryCareer/).

ground, living standards go up, and baby-boomers can now focus on more than making ends meet. Human rights (somatic freedoms, gender equality, eliminating segregation, the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community, all are, if not accepted, acknowledged as topics. As previously referenced, even the notion of political competence is redefined to some extent, now including and prioritizing criteria like being telegenic or sincere, instead of experienced (older) in the Nixon-Kennedy debate. Therefore, when Gore Vidal attacks Orville Prescott in an article published in 1961 in *Esquire* magazine, and (truly outrageous!) dedicates only half an article to do so, afterwards focusing on a critique of Ayn Rand's work<sup>12</sup>. Prescott is now unworthy to be the center of conversation.

But for Buckley and Vidal, the debate was more than an opportunity to flaunt their intelligence. While they truly had different opinions, and felt strong animosity towards one another, they also received financial compensation. Each of them had received 10.000 \$ for their contribution during the two conventions and had by then made careers from appearing on shows where they both preached to and entertained the audience.

In shows like *The Mclaughlin Group*, whose four hosts often lost their temper and spoke over each other, and *Crossfire* journalists start becoming starts, not just mediators between politicians and the public. In the 1970s, *60 minutes* had a short section dedicated to a one-on-one debate between a conservative and a liberal commentator. Saturday Night Live had a recurring "debate" sketch in which cast members Jane Curtin and Dan Ackroyd usually start their argument with an insult - "Dan, you pompous ass" and "Jane, you ignorant slut", parodying the polemic tone of these shows. In March of 2003, Bill Clinton and Bob Dole, candidates in the 1996 presidential elections, had a series of debate session for *60 minutes*. Ratings were very low – because of the September 11 attacks and the Irak War, and then in full swing, the two former opponents could not argue with each other too much. A producer for the show, Don Hewitt, remarked, with almost indecent regret, that:

The war made it difficult for them to talk about all the issues that divide them...They haven't managed to go after each other as I hoped they would. The war was sort of an inhibiting factor. The president didn't want to be seen as anything less than patriotic and Dole, of course, it's his (party's) president who was waging this war. There's a sensitivity that goes with wartime. People tread lightly, on eggshells.<sup>13</sup>

Pundits gain prominence (another term for them is *talking heads*) - people that are specialized in commenting on political or social issues. On the other hand,

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<sup>12</sup> Gore Vidal, *Comment*, July 1961, *Esquire*, July 1961, available at <http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a4595/comment-0761/>.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Johnson, "60 Minutes' may veto Clinton-Dole face-offs", in *USA Today*, May 2003, available at [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/columnist/mediamix/2003-05-06-media-mix\\_x.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/columnist/mediamix/2003-05-06-media-mix_x.htm).

broadcasters, out of a desire (deontological or pragmatically motivated) to include all sides of a debate (in the name of balance), offers a platform even to people with a clearly unscientific viewpoint, inviting, for example, people who deny the existence of global warming to panel shows about environmental issues, despite a 99% virtual consensus within the scientific community that it exists.

The appearance of *surrogates*, supporters of a certain group or person that appear in panel shows and “debate” other guests. They do not have to win the debate; it is enough that they took part. In some cases, their positions are contradicted by facts, but the fact that their statements are heard, repeated with gusto, is enough for some people, especially already partisan audience, that their position is equally valid to that of the “other side”. As there are no verdicts at the end of such a show, the debate is not over. A consequence of our allegiance to debate is that we can at times prioritize it over its constructive end. It can feel comfortable to let multiple truths exist at the same time, which each group can use to validate their own position.

There is an ontological stake in the Buckley-Vidal debates. The two perceive each other as fundamentally incompatible, and a scenario in which they agreed with each other would have disheartened them terribly.

### Conclusions

This paper has illustrated, through the Buckley-Vidal case, how the notion of debate can be used in order to legitimize the commercialization of (verbal) conflict and how, due to personal motivations that are often organically created by partisanship, participants to a debate can willfully steer away from constructive dialogue. The airing of dissenting voices by broadcast television is caused by a combination of changing cultural norms in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American society (a telling example being the case of Gore Vidal’s exclusion from the literary world in the 1940s and subsequent regained prominence) and the pragmatic incentive of better ratings.

The fact that partisanship affects our interpretation of facts, as we see from disagreement over the Donald Trump inauguration crowd, is worrying but perhaps inevitable. The fear of being wrong may condemn us to persist in error and stop us from engaging in meaningful debate. We must therefore appeal to the better angels of our nature (and/or Seneca) and examine the ideas expressed by those “on our side” as thoroughly as we do those of our debate adversaries.



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