

Logical fallacies found in public discourse research paper example

[Politics](#), [Democracy](#)



Persuasion is an important goal of public discourse and it can be achieved in many ways. However, since ancient times, politicians, salesmen, and public figures, often resort to invalid argument or fallacies to persuade people to accept that what they express is true. This can be made intentionally or not, but the arguments made this way are wrong nonetheless. This work analyzes three arguments taken from different internet sources, to spot fallacies committed identifying the premises used and the conclusions they arrive to. This way, one can find out what the argument is trying to prove and why its conclusion cannot be followed from the premises given. Finally, the argument will be reconstructed without the use of the fallacy in order to arrive reasonably to the same conclusion.

First Presidential Debate from the University of Denver. October 2012

Lehrer: Does the federal government have a responsibility to improve the quality of public education in America?

Romney: Well, the primary responsibility for education is, of course, at the state and local level. But the federal government also can play a very important role. And I agree with Secretary Arne Duncan, he's -- some ideas he's put forward on Race to the Top, not all of them, but some of them I agree with and congratulate him for pursuing that. The federal government can get local and state schools to do a better job.

My own view, by the way, is I've added to that. I happen to believe, I want the kids that are getting federal dollars from IDEA or Title I -- these are disabled kids or poor kids or lower-income kids, rather, I want them to be able to go to the school of their choice.

So all federal funds, instead of going to the -- to the state or to the school district, I'd have go, if you will, follow the child and let the parent and the child decide where to send their student.

Lehrer: (To President Obama) " Do you think you have a difference with your views and those of Governor Romney on -- about education and the federal government?"

Obama: " You know, this is where budgets matter, because budgets reflect choices. So when Governor Romney indicates that he wants to cut taxes and potentially benefit folks like me and him, and to pay for it we're having to initiate significant cuts in federal support for education, that makes a difference."

<http://www.uspresidentialelectionnews.com/2012/10/video-watch-the-first-presidential-debate-from-the-university-of-denver/> (1: 16: 17-1: 17: 59).

Premises:

- Budget reflect choices, (premise)
- Romney wants to cut taxes to benefit folks like Obama and himself, (premise)
- The price to pay for that choice is cuts in federal support for education, (premise)
- I would not make budget cuts, (implicit premise)

Conclusions:

- Therefore, there are differences between their views (conclusion)
- Therefore people should not vote for Romney. (implicit conclusion)

This is a presidential debate and both candidates are trying to present

themselves as the best option for the public. Here Obama is responding to a simple question about the differences between him and candidate Romney, but the implicit conclusion is that Romney is a bad candidate.

The fallacy committed in this case is attacking a straw man, since Obama misrepresented Romney's argument to a point beyond recognition. In fact, Romney did not at any time state that he would cut federal funds for education. Instead he said he would redirect them. Obama tried to persuade people to think that he is the only one who would not reduce the federal budget while his opponent would. Actually, based on the premises given by Obama, both of them are against reducing the federal education budget, therefore his conclusion is invalid.

If Obama honestly wanted to establish some serious differences between his views and those of his opponent, he would have focused on why it is a bad idea to let lower income students and their parents choose the school they wanted to go to, and would have offered an alternative.

TV ad for the 2012 Obama's presidential campaign

Maybe you're struggling just to pay the mortgage of your home. But recently John McCain said: "The fundamentals of our economy are strong" (picture of a house being foreclosed). Then again, the same day, when asked how many houses he owns, McCain lost track, he couldn't remember. Well, it's seven, seven houses, and here's one house (picture of the white house) America can't afford to let John McCain move into.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpmFd25tRqo>

Premises:

- People are struggling to pay their mortgages, (premise)
- John McCain said " The fundamentals of our economy are strong", (premise)

- His position stems from his wealth status, (implicit premise)
- McCain is wrong because the fundamentals of the economy are not strong, (implicit premise)
- Because there are homes being foreclosed, (subpremise)
- McCain owns seven houses but does not remember their number, (premise)

- Because he owns too many houses, he loses track of them (implicit subpremise)
- People can't afford to let John McCain move into the White House, (premise)
- Because the fundamentals of the economy are not strong enough to pay for him moving into the White House, (implicit subpremise)

Conclusions:

- Therefore, people should not let McCain move into the White House, (conclusion)
- And people should not vote for John McCain (implicit conclusion).

The argument is in an electoral advertisement, so what it is trying to prove is that the opposite candidate should not be elected president. The fallacy committed is an abusive ad hominem argument since it discredits the opponent in a personal way without offering a substantial counterargument

to his assertion. It is also trying to divert the argument about the wellness of the economy to the personal circumstances of the opponent. The counterargument does not mention a good reason why people should not vote for John McCain or why the fundamentals of the economy are not strong.

For a fallacy free argument, both parts would first have to agree on the concept of fundamentals of the economy and separate it from economic specific circumstances. That would give a better idea of whether McCain is correct or not. Moreover, the advertisement should separate the evaluation of the opponent from the evaluation of the merit of the opponent's idea. If it can be proven that the fundamentals of the economy are not as strong as McCain suggests, there might be a chance that he is not suitable for directing the finances of the country, therefore he might not be the best candidate.

Dana Milbank's view of the changes introduced in the senate

" After 1917, cutting off debate, or reaching " cloture," required a two-thirds majority. In 1975, that threshold was reduced to 60 of 100 votes. Even that lower minimum required lawmakers to cooperate with each other.

Cloture has fostered more bipartisanship in the Senate, Donald Ritchie, the Senate historian, told me Thursday after Reid detonated his nuclear device.

The majority leader of the Senate is expected to try to work out some kind of a bipartisan deal to get enough votes to get cloture. Because the House is run by majority rule, it is seen as a sign of weakness if the majority leadership of the House has to get votes from the minority side. Now the

Senate will be just as dysfunctional.

Reid's remedy — calling a simple-majority vote to undo more than two centuries of custom — has created a situation in which the minority leader, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, is expected to use the minority's remaining powers to gum up the works, and to get revenge when Republicans regain the majority."

<http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/opinion/57176022-82/majority-senate-reid-democrats.html.csp>

Response by T. Michael Holmes, posted on the San Diego Union Tribune

Syndicated columnist Dana Milbank's statement "[the Democrats] turned the Senate into the House" is absurd.

The principal constitutional differences between the Senate and the House of Representatives are: One, the Senate gives equal representation to the states; the House has each state's members reflect the population of that state. Second, senators are elected for six-year terms; members of the House are elected every two years. Third, since one-third of the Senate is elected every two years, it is what is referred to as a "continuous body"; by contrast, every seat in the House is up for grabs every two years.

<http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2013/Nov/27/letters-typhoon/2/?#article-copy>

Milibank's argument:

- The Senate and the House of Representatives have essential differences between them, (implicit premise)

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- One important difference was that the Senate did not run by majority vote, (implicit premise)
- The minimum for reaching cloture required lawmakers in the senate to cooperate with each other, (premise)
- Because the majority leader was expected to try to work out some kind of a bipartisan deal to get enough votes to get cloture, (subpremise)
- The house is dysfunctional, (implicit premise)
- Because the House is run by majority rule, it is seen as a sign of weakness if the majority leadership of the House has to get votes from the minority side, (subpremise)
- The senate will now be run by majority rule, (premise)
- The senate is now a clone of the house and will be as dysfunctional (conclusion).

Holmes' counter argument:

- The democrats did not turn the senate into a clone of the house, (premise)
- Because the constitutional way to elect the members for each chamber remains unchanged, (subpremise)
- Therefore, Milbank's argument is absurd (conclusion).

The argument presented by Holmes tried to prove that what Milbank was saying was absurd. The fallacy committed was an equivocation since both of them were referring to very different things when they talked about the former differences between the Senate and the House of Representatives. Milbank referred to the way each chamber was run, the essential differences, and Holmes referred to the way the members of each chambers are elected,

the formal differences. Holmes' argument does not prove that Milbank was wrong, it just proves that he does not understand why the chambers should have different rules for making laws.

For proving that the assertions made by Milbank are absurd, her opponent would have to prove that the way the House of Representatives works is not dysfunctional, or that the Republicans will not have any intentions of revenging when they regain the majority.

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