



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### "So I know how to do this"

*The prototypical argumentative pattern in U.S.A. presidential debates*

Reijven, M.H.

#### DOI

[10.1075/jlac.00098.rei](https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.00098.rei)

#### Publication date

2024

#### Document Version

Final published version

#### Published in

Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict

#### License

CC BY

[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

Reijven, M. H. (2024). "So I know how to do this": The prototypical argumentative pattern in U.S.A. presidential debates. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, 12(1), 89-110. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.00098.rei>

#### General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

#### Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

# “So I know how to do this”

## The prototypical argumentative pattern in U.S.A. presidential debates

Menno H. Reijven

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Debates are important events during presidential elections in the U.S.A. Candidates are juxtaposed and engage with each other on a wide range of issues. This poses the question how disagreement between the two candidates and the public is managed. The aim of this paper is to articulate the prototypical argumentative pattern used by candidates which shows that to defend that the public should vote for them, candidates recurrently make three central claims. Specifically, they claim that some political action has to happen, they will do that action if elected, while their opponent will not. This basic argument scheme – which could be referred to as campaign promise argumentation – is further expanded by candidates by responding to six distinct critical questions, resulting in a prototypical argumentative pattern designed to deal with potential criticisms against a bid to become president.

**Keywords:** political argumentation, election debates, U.S.A. presidential debates, prototypical argumentative patterns

### 1. Introduction

Democracies are defined by conflict (e.g., Mouffe 2013). There are many different opinions and through discussion and debate, policy decisions have to be made. During election campaigns, candidates for political office have therefore a task to manage the conflict they have with the public and their political opponents: their audience may not be convinced to vote for them, and their opponents need to position themselves in unique ways as well to garner votes. All these disagreements have to be managed in the various communicative events during political campaigns. One communicative arena where this recurrently happens are presi-

dential (or election) debates. Looking at how disagreements are managed in this arena is a way of understanding how democracy is being done.

The argumentative nature of election debates has been recurrently discussed. Throughout the years, some scholars have characterized U.S.A. presidential debates in different ways, stressing the lack of argumentative interaction. Regarding the first debates ever held in the U.S.A., in which a panel of journalists asked the candidates questions, Auer (1968, 147–149) called them counterfeit debates as they seemed to function more like simultaneous interviews; Lanoue and Schrott (1991) have characterized the U.S.A. presidential debates as joint press conferences. One criticism scholars expressed was that the format of presidential debates does not encourage reasonable argumentation (e.g., Bitzer and Rueter 1980). A panel of journalists may prefer asking “gotcha” questions over fostering debate (Lamoureux et al. 1994). Thus, argumentation to resolve a difference of opinion was not recognized as central to presidential debates.

However, other scholars have claimed that presidential debates provide discourse that is relevant for election campaigns. During the debates, there is regularly direct confrontation between the candidates through attacks and defenses of claims (Benoit and Wells 1996). Similarly, scholars have also found that there are frequent instances of clash between the two candidates (i.e., getting into the specifics of policies causing engagement with the opponent, see Carlin et al. 2001; Carlin et al. 1991). In addition, even if the candidates are interrogated by a press panel, their task is to probe for elaborations by the candidates on their positions, and thus, they attempt to get the candidates to provide argumentation (Weiler 1989). Moreover, candidates use questions and statements throughout the debate to manage (and compete for) the interactional floor between them and their opponent (Bilmes 1999). In contrast to skeptics who refer to these debates as counterfeit debates, presidential debates seem to have a clear argumentative dimension.

What these earlier studies show – even as the format for U.S.A. presidential debates was different than it is today – is that it is important to investigate the argumentative dimension of U.S.A. presidential debates more closely. As an activity type, the argumentation is structured to realize specific institutional goals (van Eemeren 2010, Chapter 5): while debating another politician, they attempt to convince the general public to vote for them. To better understand the argumentative nature of presidential debates, we need to investigate how argumentation is patterned (van Eemeren 2017) and characterize it as an argumentative activity by itself. The best understanding of how participants argue during these debates, and attempt to manage political disagreement, is to identify how politicians attempt to convince the public to vote for them and how politicians engage with each other’s argumentation.

Investigating the argumentation in presidential debates is important, as studies suggest that presidential debates may be more conducive than other forms of campaign communication to creating rational engagement among the candidates to engage in political disagreements. In debates, candidates are juxtaposed for the audience and can directly respond and prompt each other, allowing the public to better compare the candidates and determine who is worthy of their vote. Presidential debates, compared to other forms of campaign communication, have a tone of sobriety as direct contact with their opponent encourages them to develop their argumentation more precisely (Hart and Jarvis 1997). Indeed, regarding the debates in 1960, it was found that presidential candidates provide more evidence for their positions than in other forms of campaign communication (e.g., Ellsworth 1965). However, regarding other election years, presidential candidates regularly provide evidence and arguments for their claims during the debates although they are not necessarily effective or done reasonably (e.g., Rowland 1986, 2013, 2018; Neagu 2015). More specifically, the argumentation advanced by candidates during the election debates can be grounded in each of the three classical means of persuasion, *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* (Budzyńska-Daca and Botwina 2015).

However, while disagreement is shown to be a key feature of U.S.A. presidential debates and argumentation is shown to be recurrently used to convince the audience of one's bid for the presidency, the basic dialectical argumentative pattern underlying this form of communication has not been outlined in detail yet. A more specific articulation of the structure of premises in terms of the argument schemes employed is required to gain a deeper understanding of the argumentation which is advanced through presidential debates to elucidate how disagreement with the public is managed.

The structure of the argumentation in U.S.A. presidential debates, like in other communicative activity types (van Eemeren 2010, Chapter 5), is shaped by institutional constraints. Since the 1990s, the typical format is that of a single-moderator debate. There is a moderator who asks questions to the candidates, which they can then answer. Afterwards, there is an open floor to enable a more free-flowing discussion of the issues. Central to the debate topics are campaign promises made by the candidates, and subsequently checking whether these constitute a good enough reason to vote for the candidates as well as the efficacy by which the candidates are expected to govern and implement these proposed policies. Hence, in part, the argumentation advanced in this context is comparable to argumentation advanced in other political arenas. Being a form of deliberation, candidates need to use some pragmatic problem-solving argumentation (defending a policy standpoint by pointing to the problem it will resolve, see e.g., Garssen 2017). However, as election debates are not about determining a specific policy

to be implemented, but about voting for a person to govern, the argumentation is adapted to that purpose. Candidates need to establish themselves as the best candidate for office by articulating their plans and abilities (Budzyńska-Daca and Botwina 2015).

This article is a step towards developing an account of argumentation in U.S.A. presidential debates by investigating its argumentative patterns. Specifically, the goal of this paper is to articulate the prototypical argumentative pattern—that is, the structure of argumentative discourse which is shaped by the institutional constraints (van Eemeren 2017, 20)—used by presidential candidates during the debates. In Section 2, the data and methodology are presented. In Section 3, the previous literature on prototypical argumentative patterns in political discourse is reviewed as well as relevant insights from speech act theory. In Section 4, the analyses of the underlying argumentative pattern are shown by investigating which critical questions the presidential candidates orient themselves towards in the interaction.

## 2. Data and method

To study the structure of argumentative discourse in U.S.A. presidential debates, we have analyzed the first debate in 2000, 2008 and 2016 as in each of these years no incumbent was running for president. As the structure and function of the town hall format and vice-presidential debates are different from the single-moderator presidential debates, those were not included in this study. All data can be accessed on <https://www.debates.org/>. The 2000 debate analyzed was held on October 3rd at the University of Massachusetts Boston, between governor George Bush and vice-president Al Gore, and moderated by Jim Lehrer. The 2008 debate between Senator Barack Obama and Senator John McCain was held on September 26th at the University of Mississippi and moderated by Jim Lehrer. In 2016, Donald Trump debated Secretary Hillary Clinton on September 26th at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York, moderated by Lester Holt. Each debate lasted for about 95 minutes.

While all these debates were single-moderator debates, rather than a debate in front of a press panel, they had slightly different rules (see transcripts on <https://www.debates.org/>). In 2000, the debate was divided into different questions for a candidate, who could answer in up to 2 minutes. The other candidate then received a 1-minute rebuttal. Afterwards, the moderator could ask follow-up questions for another 3,5 minutes. In 2008, candidates received a question which they both could answer with a response of up to two minutes, which was followed by 5 minutes of open discussion. In 2016, the debate was divided into segments of

15 minutes, each opening with a question to which each candidate could respond in maximally 2 minutes, followed by an open discussion.

In this article, the prototypical argumentative pattern for U.S.A. presidential debates is identified by analyzing which critical questions are recurrently implicitly answered by the candidates and thereby, it is determined which argument scheme is recurrently used. Taking the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation (van Eemeren 2010) as a point of departure, argumentation is conceptualized as a complex speech act used to manage disagreement, where both parties commit themselves to various premises through the course of the argumentative interaction to accomplish a rational resolution of the difference of opinion in a reasonable way (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 2). In reaction to or in anticipation of critical responses of the antagonist to their position, the protagonist offers further argumentation until the antagonist has no further objections (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 61). Thus, critical questions result in the ultimate argumentation structure used to manage the difference of opinion at hand (van Eemeren 2017, 22).

Specifically, critical questions can be used to determine the argument scheme used by the protagonist. When an argument is provided in defense of a standpoint, an *argument lever* (Wagemans 2023, 121) has to be used to enable an inference. That is, each argument consists of a substantive premise and a principle which transfers the acceptability of the premise to the standpoint (Wagemans 2023, 121). This *lever* enables to transfer the acceptability from the premise to the conclusion, as it activates an argument scheme (see van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 4; van Eemeren and Kruijer 2015, 704). Argument schemes are defined by the principle which connects the premise to the conclusion (van Eemeren and Kruijer 2015, 704). According to van Eemeren and Kruijer (2015, 705) and van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992, 96), all argument schemes can be reduced to three main types: *symptomatic*, *analogy* and *causal argumentation*. The justificatory force of an argument is thus either ‘X is symptomatic of Y’, ‘X is analogous to Y’, or ‘X causes Y’ (van Eemeren and Kruijer 2015, 705–706; also see van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, 98–99) with a specific critical question to examine this inference.

All other argument schemes are variations on one of these types: as a scheme utilizes more specific premises, the justificatory force can be formulated more precisely. For example, in the case of pragmatic argumentation, being a subtype of causal argumentation, a prescriptive standpoint is defended by pointing to its desirable consequences (van Eemeren 2017, 23). As each premise can be criticized as unacceptable and the scheme as a whole can turn out to be irrelevant to support the conclusion, subtypes of the three main types of argument schemes can

be identified not only by their unique set of premises but also by a unique set of critical questions, which correspond to potential criticisms to the reasons and the justificatory force (van Eemeren 2017, 22). Dealing with these critical questions, therefore, results in justifications for premises specific to a particular argument scheme. Hence, if an argument scheme is typical within the context in which the argumentation takes place, this scheme enables to specify the prototypical argumentative pattern of that context (van Eemeren 2017, 20). After all, the critical questions help to identify subsequent argumentation, highlighting a larger recurring argumentative structure which is functional to accomplish the aims of the context in which it occurs (van Eemeren 2017, 19).

In this study, the argumentation advanced in U.S.A. presidential debates to defend the directive *You should vote for me* (see e.g., Budzyńska-Daca and Botwina 2015, 41–42) is investigated. This standpoint defended by candidates during presidential debates is examined by considering how the argumentation is expanded through dealing with relevant critical questions. This was done first theoretically as presented in the next section, and secondly empirically. That is, all utterances which function as an argument (or a rebuttal to a criticism) for a candidate's bid for the presidency were isolated and it was determined how these utterances fit together within a larger argumentative structure by investigating which critical questions they aim to resolve.

### 3. Theoretical framework

The argumentative pattern identified in other political contexts can offer a starting point for this investigation. Regarding debates in the European Parliament, Garssen (2017) argued that participants routinely use variants of pragmatic argumentation as they defend a policy proposal by pointing to its desirable consequences. Sometimes, a problem is presumed, and candidates can just use problem-solving argumentation: a proposal should be accepted as it solves a particular problem (Garssen 2017).<sup>1</sup> Yet, in other cases, there may be disagreement regarding the underlying problem to be solved, and then complex problem-solving argumentation has to be used: an extra premise making explicit the prob-

---

1. Garssen (2017, 35) reconstructs pragmatic problem-solving argumentation as follows:

- “1. The proposed legislation X should be adopted
  - 1.1 Because: Adoption of the proposed legislation X solves problem Y
  - (1.1') (And: If a proposed legislation X solves problems such as a Y, the proposed legislation X should be adopted)”

lem at hand is added to the argument scheme (Garssen 2017).<sup>2</sup> The argumentation can be extended through answering a set of critical questions, and recurringly, argumentation by example is used to deal with criticisms (Garssen 2017).

Other scholars have also identified pragmatic argumentation to be important to political discourse. Andone (2015) has shown that in practices of *ex ante* accountability, pragmatic argumentation is used to justify measures. Similarly, Ihnen Jory (2012) shows that pragmatic argumentation is central to lawmaking debates. Regarding recommendations by committees of inquiry, Andone (2017) has argued that pragmatic argumentation is often tied to appeals to the majority. Andone and Hernández (2019) have shown that in policymaking, pragmatic argumentation is often further supplemented by arguments by authority, specifically scientific insights. All in all, pragmatic argumentation is central to political discourse.

In this pursuit, it is important to recognize that the context of election debates is different from that of law-making debates. Candidates attempt to appeal to voters to vote for them, and their policy proposals are simply a reason they provide for the public to do so. Still, at its core, this is a pragmatic argument: people are asked to vote for a candidate as that will provide desirable consequences:

1. You should vote for me (candidate X).
  - 1.1 Voting for me (candidate X) has desirable consequences.
  - 1.1' If voting for me (candidate X) has desirable consequences, then you should vote for me.

Typically, premise 1.1 is presented in debates as a policy proposal or another political commitment. The speech act which centrally defines pragmatic argumentation in election debates is the campaign promise: commitments which are realized only if the candidate is elected into office.

By looking at various perspectives on speech acts, it is possible to further specify the argumentative pattern. Habermas (1994, 60) argued that every speech act can be criticized as invalid in three distinct ways. It can be untrue regarding the proposition which is entailed. It can be judged as insincere when the speaker does not have the right intention. Last, it can be incorrect within a particular nor-

2. Garssen (2017, 37) reconstructs complex problem-solving argumentation as follows:  
 “1. The proposed legislation X should be adopted  
     1.1a       There is a problem Y  
     1.1b       Adoption of the proposed legislation X will solve the problem  
     (1.1a–1.1b') (If there is a problem Y and the proposed legislation X solves this problem, it should be adopted)”



mative context. Thus, in order for the campaign promise to be a convincing argument to vote for a candidate, it has to be truly beneficial to society, the speaker should be trusted to execute it if elected and it must be a discriminating feature between the two candidates. Similarly, Searle (1969, Chapter 3) has analyzed the speech act of promising in more detail and claimed that for the speech act to be done successfully, the promised act should be desired by the audience, the speaker intends and is able to do what is promised, and that what is promised is not guaranteed to happen without the speaker's commitment. These three conditions are relevant for a campaign promise to be convincing to the public and are expected to be central to the argumentation.

Following these insights from speech act theory, we expect that the prototypical argument scheme used in U.S.A. presidential debates is based on three distinct premises. The first premise (necessity premise) points to a political need/policy which has to be fulfilled by the next president. The second premise can be called the commitment premise, as the candidate states that they commit themselves to do what is being promised if elected president. The third premise is the comparison premise. Candidates recurringly claim that they are the only candidate who will achieve the desired results. This results in the following more specific scheme used in U.S.A. presidential debates:

1. You should vote for me (candidate X).
  - 1.1a Policy P should be pursued.
  - 1.1b I (candidate X) will pursue desirable policy P.
  - 1.1c The opponent (candidate Y) will not pursue desirable policy P.
  - 1.1a–1.1c' If voting for me (candidate X) has unique desirable consequences, then you should vote for me (candidate X).

Following the insights from speech act theory, we are also able to anticipate various critical questions relevant to further expand this argument scheme into a larger pattern. The first premise (the necessity premise) can be questioned by asking whether there is a problem at all or whether the consequences of this policy are desirable. Specifically, this premise is further defended by problem-solving argumentation as identified by Garssen (2017) and is similar to argumentation in legislative discourse: a course of action has to be defended. The second premise (the commitment premise) can be challenged by questioning the intentions or the ability of the candidate to pursue the proposed policy. The third premise (the comparison premise) can be questioned by raising that the opponent could enact the proposed policy too. This can be dealt with by raising that the other party has no intentions or does not have the ability to implement the desired policy. Considering these three premises and the ways they can be questioned, the following

prototypical argumentative pattern can be expected to be advanced by candidates during presidential debates. It centers on what could be called campaign promise argumentation and is expanded through dealing with (at least some of the) six distinct critical questions relevant to this argument scheme.

1. You should vote for Candidate X.
  - 1.1a A should be done.
    - 1.1a.1a A resolves problem P.
    - 1.1a.1b A results in desirable effects E.
  - 1.1b Candidate X commits to doing A.
    - 1.1b.1a Candidate X intends to do A.
    - 1.1b.1b Candidate X is able to do A.
  - 1.1c Opponent Y will not do A.
    - 1.1c.1 Opponent Y has not committed to doing A.
    - 1.1c.2 Opponent Y is not able to do A.

In the next section, we show that this argumentative structure underlies the discourse in U.S.A. presidential debates. Candidates expand the main pragmatic argument scheme by answering the six critical questions belonging to this scheme which are relevant to assessing whether a campaign promise is a good enough reason to support to vote for someone.

## 4. Analysis

Below, each premise of the campaign promise argument scheme is discussed separately, and it is shown that for each, there are at least two critical questions which guide the creation of the prototypical argumentative structure of U.S.A. presidential debates, as suggested above. This confirms the relevance of this prototypical argumentative pattern to manage disagreement in this communicative arena.

### 4.1 Defending the need for political action

In order to make a convincing argument, a candidate has to show that what they propose to do if elected is a desired course of action. If the policy proposed is not going to resolve something that needs resolving, it is unnecessary to implement it. Thus, candidates potentially have to respond to two different critical questions which expand the argumentation:

1. Is the policy/action needed to solve a problem?
2. Will the policy/action have desirable effects?

The next excerpt shows how Clinton explains why she believes her policies are worthwhile to pursue as there currently is an undesirable state of affairs.

**Excerpt 1. (Hillary Clinton, 2016)**

1. HC And I want us to do more to support people who are
2. struggling to balance family and work. I've heard
3. from so many of you about the difficult choices
4. you face and the stresses that you're under. So
5. let's have paid family leave, earned sick days.
6. Let's be sure we have affordable child care and
7. debt-free college.

Using “want” (1:1), Clinton stresses that she hopes to “support people who are struggling to balance family and work” (1:1–2). By using the verb “struggling” (1:2), Clinton brings up an undesirable situation. In the next utterance, by talking about “difficult choices” and “stresses” (1:3–4), she provides two more negative assessments of the state of affairs. Next, Clinton lists four of her policy proposals, marked through “let’s” (1:5–6), which follow as a conclusion: the cited hardships are the reason why these policies are needed. As a list of policy proposals, Clinton both commits to implementing them if elected, but also that this course of action is desirable for the addressee. Yet, in this excerpt, Clinton is only defending that her suggested course of action should be executed as it resolves problems in U.S.A. society.

Next, consider the following argument made by Obama, who also stresses that what he wants to do if elected is relevant to the U.S.A. public.

**Excerpt 2. (Barack Obama, 2008)**

1. B0 And there are folks out there who've been struggling
2. before this crisis took place. And that's why it's
3. so important, as we solve this short-term problem,
4. that we look at some of the underlying issues that
5. have led to wages and incomes for ordinary Americans
6. to go down, the the a health care system that is
7. broken, energy policies that are not working

As Obama discusses the impact and significance of the 2008 Financial Crisis, he claims that people “[ha]ve been struggling before this crisis took place” (2:1–2). He uses the verb “struggling” (2:1), signaling a negative stance towards this situation. Then, Obama shares what he thinks should happen. He presumes that “this short-term problem” (2:3), the 2008 financial crisis, has to be solved, but that simultaneously (“as,” 2:3), the “underlying issues” (2:4) which have led to the just-identified problem of people struggling, should be “look[ed] at” (2:4). The expression “that’s why” (2:2) is an argumentative indicator suggesting that the preceding utterance

is a response to an anticipated critical question for his position that the “underlying issues” (2:4) have to be “looked at” (2:4). The critical question addressed is whether the proposed action of looking at “the underlying issues” (2:4) is necessary. Obama explains that a problem has to be solved.

Hence, candidates routinely defend a premise concerning what should be done by presenting a problem that needs to be solved. Alternatively, candidates also routinely point to the desirable effects of a policy. After all, what we should do is not just dependent on what is currently the case, but also on what should be the case in the future. In the following excerpt, Gore defends the need for a future action by stressing that a particular desirable outcome should be realized.

**Excerpt 3. (Al Gore, 2000)**

1. AG If I'm entrusted with the presidency, I will help
2. parents and strengthen families because, you know,
3. if we have prosperity that grows and grows, we
4. still won't be successful unless we strengthen
5. families by, for example, ensuring that children
6. can always go to schools that are safe.

Gore is committing here to “help[ing] parents and strengthen[ing] families” (3:1–2). Next, he provides reasons for why he wants to do this. He claims that, in case that the country has “prosperity that grows and grows” (3:3), the U.S.A. will not accomplish success “unless children can always go to schools that are safe” (3:6). Gore supports his call for action of helping parents and families by raising that it is a necessary condition (“unless”) for ensuring success in the future. The policy should be implemented as it has desirable effects. Thus, Gore articulates the necessity of this course of action not by raising a problem to be solved, but by pointing to positive outcomes. Gore defends his argument by responding to a different critical question than presented above: rather than focusing on the present, he focuses on the future to defend his proposed policy.

In the following excerpt, Gore also argues that his proposed course of action has desirable outcomes, but in conjunction with stressing that it resolves current problems.

**Excerpt 4. (Al Gore, 2000)**

1. AG And in the long term we have to give new incentives
2. for the development of domestic resources like
3. deep gas in the western Gulf, like eh stripper wells
4. for oil but also renewable sources of energy. Ah and
5. domestic sources that are cleaner and better. An- and
6. I'm proposing a plan that will give tax credits
7. and ta- tax incentives for the rapid development of
8. new kinds of cars and trucks and buses and
9. factories and boilers and furnaces that don't have
10. as much pollution, that don't burn as much energy,

11. eh and that help us get out on the cutting edge of
12. the new technologies that will create millions of
13. new jobs, because, when we sell these new products
14. here, we'll then be able to sell them overseas and
15. there is a ravenous demand for them overseas.

After having been asked how he would control future oil prices and oil supply, Gore shares his long-term vision. He claims that “we have to give new incentives” (4:1) to develop domestic sources of energy. He adds that this can, however, not be the sole focus of the U.S.A. energy policy. The focus should also be on “renewable sources of energy” (4:4) and “domestic sources that are cleaner and better” (4:5). Gore stresses that this leads to less “pollution,” being more energy efficient, and making the U.S.A. “cutting edge” (4:8–12) with respect to new technologies. The first two reasons concern current problems. Regarding the latter, Gore points to additional desirable consequences of pursuing “renewable sources of energy” (4:4). After all, being “cutting edge” can deliver “millions of new jobs” (4:12–13). By implementing this policy, the technology can “then” (4:14) be sold overseas, as there is “ravenous demand for them overseas” (4:15). Thus, besides pointing to domestic problems which would be resolved, he also points to additional positive consequences in the future due to implementing his plans. In conclusion, the premise that a particular policy has to be implemented is routinely defended by pointing to current problems or future desirable effects. These premises can become a part of the argumentation within a coordinative structure, as they can strengthen each other.

#### 4.2 Defending one's own commitment to execute a proposed policy

A candidate also has to defend that they will execute what they promise they will do if elected. A policy proposal can only function as a successful argument to vote for someone, if the public is also convinced that that candidate will implement it. Again, candidates potentially have to respond to two different critical questions dealing with this dimension of the argumentation:

1. Does the candidate intend to execute the proposed policy?
2. Can the candidate execute the proposed policy?

In the following excerpt, Clinton anticipates such a potential criticism regarding her intention to execute the policy she is proposing. She affirms that she has the intention to follow up on her campaign promise. Earlier in this turn, she argued that independent experts have looked at both her and Trump's proposals (not shown), and after having raised their criticisms on Trump's plans, she continues as follows.

**Excerpt 5. (Hillary Clinton, 2016)**

1. HC They've looked at my plans and they've said, OK,
2. if we can do this, and I intend to get it done, we
3. will have ten million more new jobs, because we
4. will be making investments where we can grow the
5. economy.

Clinton stresses here that her plans have been evaluated positively by independent experts (“they,” 5:1), and by referring to these ideas as her “plans” (5:1), Clinton commits to executing them. She follows up with an if-then statement (5:2–3): if it gets implemented, then there are various positive effects as predicted by the experts referenced. The experts, by uttering this conditional statement, only defend that the policy would have these outcomes and leave it open as to whether Clinton can or will actually implement it. Only if the conditional is affirmed, it is worthwhile for the audience to vote for Clinton, as otherwise the desirable effects will not be realized. Clinton’s stressing that she “intend[s] to get it done” (5:2) is a response to doubts as to her intention to follow up on her commitment, while still leaving open the possibility that she might fail due to external factors beyond her control. Thus, the audience is presented with a proposal which has desirable effects, but also with the assurance that Clinton actually has the intention to implement it.

Candidates also often refer to their records to stress that they can be trusted to follow up on their campaign promises. Then, they can show that they have acted in a particular way in the past and that the public can expect them to continue to do so.

**Excerpt 6. (George Bush, 2000)**

1. GB I also want to go to Washington to get some positive
2. things done. It's going to require a new spirit. A
3. spirit of cooperation. It's gonna require the
4. ability of a Republican president to reach out
5. across the partisan divide and to say to Democrats,
6. let's come together to do what is right for America.
7. It's been my record as Governor of Texas, it'll be
8. how I conduct myself if f- I'm fortunate enough to earn
9. your vote as president of the United States.

Bush posits here that he “want[s] to go to Washington to get some positive things done” (6:1–2). These things, being discussed by Bush and Gore before this excerpt, were mostly regarding getting medication to seniors. Gore had not been able to deliver on that during his time as vice-president in the Clinton Administration. Bush claims that to get this need of getting prescription drugs to seniors fulfilled, “a new spirit” (6:2) is required, one of “cooperation” (6:3). It requires “to reach out across the partisan divide” (6:4–5). What is first and foremost required of the president is thus a willingness to do this. Next, Bush affirms this willingness

by claiming that he has done so “as Governor of Texas” (6:7) and then he commits himself to do so if elected president (6:7–9). Thus, Bush asks people to vote for him as some course of action (“a spirit of cooperation”) is needed, which he will provide if elected president. Bush defends that he is going to act in this way by invoking his record: he can be trusted to have the intention to act accordingly.

In the following excerpt, Trump also declares that he can be trusted to execute his proposed policy. Rather than simply stating that he intends to do so or pointing to his past achievements, Trump stresses that he looks forward to executing his plan.

**Excerpt 7. (Donald Trump, 2016)**

1. DT Under my plan, I’ll be reducing taxes tremendously,
2. from thirty-five percent to fifteen percent for
3. companies, small and big businesses. That’s going
4. to be a job creator like we haven’t seen since
5. Ronald Reagan. It’s going to be a beautiful thing
6. to watch. Companies will come. They will build. They
7. will expand. New companies will start. And I look
8. very, very much forward to doing it.

Trump presents his plan to “[reduce] taxes tremendously” (7:1). Then, after Trump specifies his plans (7:2–3), he points towards the positive consequences of his plan, as referenced through “that” (7:3). He claims it is a “job creator” (7:4) as it leads to more business activity (7:6–7). Last, Trump adds that he “look[s] very, very much forward to doing it” (7:7–8), explicitly describing his own attitude towards the policy he is proposing, making explicit that he has the intention to implement these desirable policies.

Thus, candidates reassure their commitment to a particular course of action by asserting that they have the intention, a past record, or some attitude which illustrates their commitment to following up on their proposal if elected president. Yet, another possible criticism could concern the ability of the candidate to execute the policy. If a candidate cannot execute a policy, the policy is not a convincing argument to the public. In the next excerpt, McCain elaborates on why he can effectively control government spending.

**Excerpt 8. (John McCain, 2008)**

1. JM We need to have fixed-cost contracts. We need
2. very badly to understand that defense spending is
3. very important and vital, particularly in the new
4. challenges we face in the world, but we have to
5. get a lot of the cost overruns under control. I
6. know how to do that. I saved the taxpayers six
7. point eight billion dollars by fighting a contract
8. that was negotiated between Boeing and DOD that
9. was completely wrong. And we fixed it and we
10. killed it and people ended up in federal prison so

11. I know how to do this because I've been involved
12. these issues for many, many years.

After an explanation that the current system of awarding defense contracts costs the U.S.A. government too much money, McCain concludes that it needs “fixed-cost contracts” (8:1). Next, McCain deals with the question of whether he can accomplish this move and asserts he “know[s] how to do that” (8:5–6) as he has “been involved in these issues for many, many years” (8:11–12). He also provides a specific example, showing that his actions resulted in “people end[ing] up in federal prison” (8:10). Thus, McCain claims that he has the ability to do what he is proposing based on his past record.

Besides mentioning their past, candidates can also stress their skills. For example, Trump often raised that he has a “kind of thinking” that he could employ to serve the country, as is shown in the next excerpt.

**Excerpt 9. (Donald Trump, 2016)**

1. DT Well, for one thing eh and before we start on that my
2. father eh gave me a very small loan in 1975, and I
3. built it into a company that's worth many, many
4. billions of dollars, with some of the greatest
5. assets in the world, and I say that only because
6. that's the kind of thinking that our country
7. needs.

Here, Trump responds to Clinton’s argument that he cannot be trusted to implement the right economic policies. She claimed that Trump was lucky to get a loan from his father but has never worked hard. He does not understand the world like normal people do. Trump counters this by telling what kind of person he is: he got “a very small loan” (9:2) which was “built [...] into a company that’s worth many, many billions of dollars” (9:3–4). Thus, Trump claims that he has relevant experience: due to a small loan, he had to use his “kind of thinking” (9:6) to become successful. Thus, Trump claims he knows how the economy works and how to benefit from it. He stresses that the U.S.A. needs this business thinking in order to be better off. He shows that he has that and is thus able to be an effective president. Both concerns of intention and ability are recurrently used to claim that a candidate will execute their proposed policies if elected president.

### 4.3 Defending the differentiating relevance of the policy proposal

Third, a candidate has to clarify that the differences between what they proclaim they will do if elected are significant when compared to their opponent’s claims. If the policy proposed is not able to show a difference between the two candidates, it cannot function as an argument to vote for one candidate over the other. Again,



candidates potentially have to respond to two different critical questions to resolve this potential issue:

1. Is the candidate the only one to propose the desired policy?
2. Will the opponent not be able to implement the desired policy?

Candidates frequently compare themselves to their opponent to convince the public. In the following excerpt, after Gore presents his plan, he claims that Bush will not protect Medicare.

**Excerpt 10. (Al Gore, 2000)**

1. AG Under my plan I will put Medicare in an iron-clad
2. lockbox and prevent the money from being used for
3. anything other than Medicare. The governor has
4. declined to endorse that idea even though the
5. Republican as well as Democratic leaders of
6. Congress have endorsed it. I'd be interested if
7. this ev- if he would this evening say that
8. he would put Medicare in a lockbox. I don't
9. think he will because under his plan if you
10. work out the numbers a hundred billion dollar
11. comes out of Medicare just for the wealthiest
12. one percent in the tax cut.

Gore commits himself to “put[ting] Medicare in an iron-clad lockbox” (10:1–2). Next, he claims his opponent, Governor Bush, “declined to endorse that idea” (10:4) while accepted across partisan lines (10:5–6). This implies that putting “Medicare in an iron-clad lockbox” (10:1–2) is something that is agreed upon that needs to be done. Then, Gore elucidates the relevance of him critiquing Bush, by saying he does not “think he [Bush] will commit to putting Medicare in a lockbox” (10:8–9). He presents a policy contrast between himself and his opponent to make his case. Gore defends this claim (“because,” 10:9) by referencing Bush’s plans (10:9). Gore explicitly juxtaposes his plan to the fact that Bush will not implement it, suggesting that people should vote for Gore as he is the only one to propose this course of action.

In the next excerpt, McCain invokes his ability to curb spending in Washington, and also stresses that Obama is not going to do this.

**Excerpt 11. (John McCain, 2008)**

1. JM It's a system that's got to be cleaned up. I have
2. fought against it my career. I have fought against it.
3. I was called the sheriff, by the hehe eh one of the
4. senior members of the Appropriations Committee. I
5. didn't win Miss Congeniality in the United States
6. Senate. Now, Senator Obama didn't mention that
7. along with his tax cuts he is also proposing some
8. eight hundred billion dollars in new spendings on

9. new programs. Now, that’s a fundamental difference
10. between myself and Senator Obama. I want to cut
11. spending. I want to keep taxes low. The worst
12. thing we could do in this economic climate is to
13. raise people’s taxes.

McCain commits himself to cleaning up the spending culture in Washington by advancing the normative claim that “it’s a system that’s got to be cleaned up” (11:1). McCain supports that he will do so if elected by invoking his record in fighting this unacceptable spending culture, resulting in being called “the Sheriff” (11:2–3). Additionally, McCain argues that Obama is not going to accomplish this as Obama is proposing “tax cuts” and a lot of money “in new spending on new programs” (11:8–9). This opposition is characterized by McCain as “a fundamental difference” (11:9) between himself and his opponent. In contrast, McCain “want[s] to cut spending” (11:10–11) and “keep taxes low” (11:11). This shows that Obama is not the candidate who has the plans to curb government spending.

To differentiate between themselves and their opponent, focusing on the opponent’s plans can introduce a relevant difference to help the audience decide who to vote for as it shows that the implementation of the policy currently under discussion would make a meaningful difference. Another way in which candidates can differentiate themselves from each other is to stress that the opponent is not going to be able to implement a desirable policy. In the following excerpt, both Clinton and Trump argue that they are committed to keeping the world safe from a nuclear war. Clinton stresses that there is a meaningful difference: she can be successful, while her opponent, Trump, cannot.

**Excerpt 12. (Hillary Clinton, 2016)**

1. HC And, in fact, his cavalier attitude about nuclear
2. weapons is so deeply troubling. That is the number
3. one threat we face in the world. And it becomes
4. particularly threatening if terrorists ever get
5. their hands on any nuclear material. So a man who
6. can be provoked by a tweet should not have his
7. fingers anywhere near the nuclear codes, as far as
8. I think anyone with any sense about this should be
9. concerned.

Clinton stresses Trump’s “cavalier attitude about nuclear weapons” (12:1–2). Namely, she believes this is “so deeply troubling” (12:2) as nuclear weapons become “particularly threatening” (12:4) if terrorists gain access to them. Then, Clinton shifts to claiming that Trump (“a man who can be provoked by a tweet,” 12:5–6) should not be elected (“should not have his fingers anywhere near the nuclear codes,” 12:6–7) as he is easily provoked. Hence, Clinton argues that Trump is not going to be able to do the right thing. In either case, Trump is going to be unable to ensure the safety of the U.S.A. people.

Another way in which candidates can defend that their opponent is not going to be able to act in the right way is to claim that they do not have the required knowledge. In the following excerpt, McCain attempts to disqualify Obama by arguing that Obama does not understand what is going on in Iraq and Afghanistan and how to properly deal with the situation there.

**Excerpt 13. (John McCain, 2008)**

1. JM So the point is that we will prevail in Afghanistan,
2. but we need the new strategy and we need it to
3. succeed. But the important thing is, if we suffer
4. defeat in Iraq, which General Petraeus predicts we
5. will, if we adopted Senator Obama's set date for
6. withdrawal, then that will have a a calamitous effect
7. on Afghanistan and American national security eh
8. interests in the region. Senator Obama doesn't seem
9. to understand there is a connection between the two.

McCain argues here that in order for the U.S.A. to “prevail in Afghanistan” (13:1), the U.S.A. needs to employ a “new strategy” which needs “to succeed” (13:2–3). Then, McCain continues to claim that “defeat in Iraq” (13:4) is predicted “if we adopted Senator Obama’s set date for withdrawal” (13:5–6). And “defeat in Iraq” (13:4) “will have a calamitous effect in Afghanistan” (13:6–7). McCain here refers to what Obama has proposed as a senator and what he still proposes as a presidential candidate, and remarks that that is a bad idea. Obama does not just have a bad proposal, according to McCain, but he also “doesn’t seem to understand” (13:8–9) the situation itself. McCain suggests that Obama cannot be expected to adjust his position based on military advice. He uses both critical questions to expand his argumentation: Obama both does not intend and is unable to execute the preferred policy. These two critical questions are recurrently used to develop the prototypical argumentative pattern presented in Section 3.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, the prototypical argumentative structure of talk on U.S.A. presidential debates has been determined. We have shown that the standpoint “vote for me” is defended by making campaign promises/committing to political actions if elected, as well as providing further reasons ensuring that the commitment is sufficient to defend that people should vote for the speaking candidate. Besides making a commitment, the public should become convinced of the fact that the candidate will execute what was promised and that this is a meaningful difference between the two candidates. This argument scheme is at the core of the prototypical argumentative pattern advanced in U.S.A. presidential debates, as the six

critical questions which belong to this subtype of the pragmatic argument scheme regarding a campaign promise explain how the argumentative structure which is recurrently used in this context is functional for the institutional aims. Namely, the critical questions are closely tied to the speech act of making a campaign promise, and thus, we could refer to this centrally used argument scheme as campaign promise checking argumentation.

More generally, this study has shown that presidential debates are a communicative arena where disagreements have to be managed: the public has to become convinced of the fact that one is the right candidate for office and that they deserve the public's votes. Through the pragma-dialectical approach, we have shown that candidates anticipate criticisms the public might have regarding their proposals as sufficient arguments to warrant their being elected. By systematically shaping contributions to the debate in light of these anticipated criticisms, disagreement is systematically addressed. In light of a long discussion on the nature of the 'debate' happening in presidential debates, candidates clearly argue for their case to the public. This shows the importance of studying the management of conflict from a pragmatic perspective: it shows how democracy is being conducted through our communication.

Understanding how disagreement is managed in debates opens up opportunities for future pragmatic research on this arena of communication. Subsequent research should tackle how interactions and specific clashes between the candidates are connected to this prototypical argumentative structure. By understanding which argumentative concerns are made relevant by the candidates, it is possible to focus closely on how counter-argumentation, reformulations and denials are strategically used to engage with the demands of advancing one's own argumentation and undermining the argumentation of the opponent. In addition, evidentiary practices that make the argumentation more persuasive should be investigated in detail. However, to do this systematically, the prototypically used pattern needed to be expounded on, which is what this study has done; this allows describing how such moves contribute to convincing an audience.

All in all, this study has shown that campaign promises are defended against potential criticisms in light of the standpoint generally adhered to throughout the campaign. While this study did not yet engage with the interactional dimension of the argumentative exchange, it offers a basis to do so in the future. In any case, it is clear that as an arena of communication, presidential debates ensure that candidates embed their campaign promises in an argumentative structure to convince the wider public, showing the importance of election debates as a tool to inform and empower voters to determine their choice.

## Funding

Open Access publication of this article was funded through a Transformative Agreement with University of Amsterdam.




## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the editors of this special issue, Steve Oswald and Jennifer Schumann, for their feedback on this paper, as well as the anonymous reviewers. In addition, valuable comments were given by Gonen Dori-Hacohen and by participants at the International Pragmatics Conference in 2021.

## References

- Andone, Corina. 2015. "Pragmatic Argumentation in European Practices of Political Accountability." *Argumentation* 29 (1): 1–18.
- Andone, Corina. 2017. "The Role of Pragmatic and Majority Argumentation in Reports of European Parliamentary Committees of Inquiry." In *Prototypical Argumentative Patterns. Exploring the Relationship between Argumentative Discourse and Institutional Context*, ed. by Frans H. van Eemeren, 53–70. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Andone, Corina, and José Alfonso Lomelí Hernández. 2019. "Scientific Arguments in Policy-Making." *Journal of Argumentation in Context* 8 (2): 195–213.
- Auer, Jeffery J. 1968. "The Counterfeit Debates." In *The Great Debates. Background – Perspective – Effects*, ed. by Sidney Kraus, 142–150. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith.
- Benoit, William L., and William T. Wells. 1996. *Candidates in Conflict: Persuasive Attack and Defense in the 1992 Presidential Debates*. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press.
- Bilmes, Jack. 1999. "Questions, Answers, and the Organization of Talk in the 1992 Vice Presidential Debate: Fundamental Considerations." *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 32 (3): 213–242.
- Bitzer, Lloyd F., and Theodore Rueter. 1980. *Carter vs. Ford: The Counterfeit Debates of 1976*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Budzyńska-Daca, Agnieszka, and Renata Botwina. 2015. "Pre-Election TV Debates – Persuasive Games between Ethos, Logos, and Pathos." In *Persuasive Games in Political and Professional Dialogue*, ed. by Răzvan Săftoiu, Maria-Ionela Neagu, and Stanca Măda, 39–54. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Carlin, Diana B., Eric Morris, and Shawna Smith. 2001. "The Influence of Format and Questions on Candidates' Strategic Argument Choices in the 2000 Presidential Debates." *American Behavioral Scientist* 44 (12): 2196–2218.
- Carlin, Diana Prentice, Charles Howard, Susan Stanfield, and Larry Reynolds. 1991. "The Effects of Presidential Debate Formats on Clash: A Comparative Analysis." *Argumentation and Advocacy* 27 (3): 126–136.

- doi Eemeren, Frans H. van. 2010. *Strategic Maneuvering in Argumentative Discourse. Extending the Pragma-Dialectical Theory of Argumentation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- doi Eemeren, Frans H. van. 2017. “Argumentative Patterns Viewed from a Pragma-Dialectical Perspective.” In *Prototypical Argumentative Patterns. Exploring the Relationship between Argumentative Discourse and Institutional Context*, ed. by Frans H. van Eemeren, 7–29. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Eemeren, Frans H. van, and Rob Grootendorst. 1992. *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies. A Pragma-Dialectical Perspective*. Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Eemeren, Frans H. van, and Rob Grootendorst. 2004. *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation. The Pragma-Dialectical Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- doi Eemeren, Frans H. van, and Tjark Kruijer. 2015. “Identifying Argumentation Schemes.” In *Reasonableness and Effectiveness in Argumentative Discourse: Fifty Contributions to the Development of Pragma-Dialectics*, ed. by Frans H. van Eemeren, 703–712. Springer.
- doi Ellsworth, John W. 1965. “Rationality and Campaigning: A Content Analysis of the 1960 Presidential Campaign Debates.” *Western Political Quarterly* 18 (4): 794–802.
- doi Garssen, Bart. 2017. “The Role of Pragmatic Problem-Solving Argumentation in Plenary Debate in the European Parliament.” In *Prototypical Argumentative Patterns. Exploring the Relationship between Argumentative Discourse and Institutional Context*, ed. by Frans H. van Eemeren, 31–51. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1994. “Actions, Speech Acts, Linguistically Mediated Interactions and the Lifeworld.” In *Philosophical Problems Today*, ed. by Guttorm Fløistad, 45–74. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- doi Hart, Roderick P., and Sharon E. Jarvis. 1997. “Political Debate: Forms, Styles, and Media.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 40 (8): 1095–1122.
- Ihnen Jory, Constanza. 2012. *Pragmatic Argumentation in Law-Making Debates. Instruments for the Analysis and Evaluation of Pragmatic Argumentation at the Second Reading of the British Parliament*. Amsterdam: SicSat.
- Lamoureux, Elizabeth R., Heather S. Entrekin, and Mitchell S. McKinney. 1994. “Debating the Debates.” In *The 1992 Presidential Debates in Focus*, ed. by Diana B. Carlin and Mitchell S. McKinney, 55–67. Praeger.
- Lanoue, David J., and Peter Richard Schrott. 1991. *The Joint Press Conference. The History, Impact, and Prospects of American Presidential Debates*. Praeger.
- Mouffe, Chantal. 2013. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. Verso Books.
- doi Neagu, Maria-Ionela. 2015. “Political Debates: Deliberation, Persuasion, and Ethos Construction.” In *Persuasive Games in Political and Professional Dialogue*, ed. by Răzvan Săftoiu, Maria-Ionela Neagu, and Stanca Măda, 85–100. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. <https://benjamins.com/catalog/ds.26.05nea>.
- doi Rowland, Robert C. 1986. “The Substance of the 1980 Carter-Reagan Debate.” *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 51 (2): 142–165.
- doi Rowland, Robert C. 2013. “The First 2012 Presidential Campaign Debate: The Decline of Reason in Presidential Debates.” *Communication Studies* 64 (5): 528–547.
- doi Rowland, Robert C. 2018. “Implicit Standards of Public Argument in Presidential Debates: What the 2016 Debates Reveal about Public Deliberation.” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 54 (1–2): 76–94.

-  Searle, John R. 1969. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
-  Wagemans, Jean H. M. 2023. "How to Identify an Argument Type? On the Hermeneutics of Persuasive Discourse." *Journal of Pragmatics* 203: 117–129.
-  Weiler, Michael. 1989. "The 1988 Electoral Debates and Debate Theory." *The Journal of the American Forensic Association* 25 (4): 214–219.

## Address for correspondence

Menno H. Reijven  
Faculty of Humanities  
University of Amsterdam  
Postbus 1637  
1000 BP Amsterdam  
The Netherlands  
m.h.reijven@uva.nl  
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8014-5098>

## Publication history

Date received: 23 April 2023

Date accepted: 30 January 2024