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Election Denialism as Extremism in Argumentation

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ABSTRACT: No other words better capture the polarized essence of contemporary American partisan politics than “election denialism.” Election denialism aims for a change of the status quo by overthrowing the American election systems. The paper suggests that election denialism could be the major force dividing the US political landscape; election deniers unanimously appeal to pathos in the election propaganda and argument from narrow identity could be among the most popular argumentation schemes in election denialism.

KEYWORDS: argument from narrow identity, cognitive environment, election denialism, extremist argumentation

1. INTRODUCTION

No other words better serve to capture the polarized or extremist essence of contemporary American political divisiveness than “election denialism,” which is the most symptomatic catchphrase of extremism in American political argumentation. Because this phrase means the overthrow of the American election systems on which American democracy is founded, as Sergio Peçanha comments in his Washington Post op-ed published on Jan 18, 2023: “Americans know the feeling: It’s hard to believe the sight of a capital vandalized by a mob of people who won’t accept the result of an election because their side didn’t win. It’s our country — our democracy, *ourselves* — under attack.” Thus, election deniers, election denialism, election propaganda are a trio of terms which exemplify extremism in political argumentation.

Approaching the issue from the perspective of extremism in argumentation, we propose to investigate how these election deniers as pseudo-arguers in the sense that they argue for a pseudo-political reality of “election denialism,” have managed to modify the cognitive environments of the target audience through argumentative moves. In doing so, we include the following argumentative moves in the perspectival analysis: the construction (on the arguer’s part) and reception (on the audience’s part) of a collective ethos or identity, etc. Specifically, we will look at the ways in which the audience receives the identity messages presented for their assent. As one of the political gurus for the

Republican Party, Frank Luntz offers one of his most incisive observations here in his New York Times Bestseller Book *Words That Work*:

You can have the best message in the world, but the person on the receiving end will always understand it through the prism of his or her own emotions, preconceptions, prejudices, and preexisting beliefs. It's not enough to be correct or reasonable or even brilliant. The key to successful communication is to take the imaginative leap of stuffing yourself right into your listener's shoes to know what they are thinking and feeling in the deepest recesses of their mind and heart. How that person perceives what you say is even more *real*, at least in a practical sense, than how you perceive yourself (Luntz, 2007, p. xi; emphasis original)

Luntz's point here is that what really matters in political argumentation is not "what you say," but "what people hear." The ways people hear bear some resemblance to what we call the "cognitive environment" that applies to a specific audience. Here in his approach, the focus has shifted from the arguer's intention to say something to the audience's reception of the messages. Here in his art and science of words that work, the critical task is to examine "the strategic and tactical use of language in politics, business, and everyday life, it shows how you can achieve better results by narrowing the gap between what you intend to convey and what your audiences actually interpret" (Luntz, 2007, p. xiv), or to put in his own words, "to go beyond your understanding and to look at the world from your listener's point of view." This approach could be defined as "listener-centered" because here the listeners' "perceptions trump whatever 'objective' reality a given word or phrase you use might be presumed to have" (Luntz, 2007, p. xiv).

For example, as will be shown, we could find some of the most compelling exemplifications in the Kari Lake case. Three perspectives are suggested here in this chapter to look into the rhetorical strategies employed in the right-wing extremist argumentation i.e., Kari Lake's Persona as one of the most vocal supporters for Trumpism, political ads as means of modification of the audience's cognitive environment, and political slogans as memes of modification in appealing to the audience's emotional state (Tindale, 2017). Three observations are made. First, election denialism as extremism in political argumentation could be the major force dividing the US political landscape. Second, election deniers unanimously appeal to pathos or emotion in the election propaganda. Third, argument from narrow identity (or identity politics) could be one of the most popular argumentation schemes in election denialism. First, let's look at Kari Lake's remarks at the CPAC 2022 for the construction of a collective ethos, or a collective identity of Trumpism, that simultaneously authorizes her persona.

2. DEFINING ELECTION DENIALISM

In the years or decades to come, if historians look back and think about an umbrella term for describing the political climate of the U.S. for the first three decades of the 21st century, which culminates unfortunately in the Jan 6, 2021 Insurrection on the U.S. Capitol Hill,¹ a

¹ The Insurrection, being a violent uprising in nature aiming for a rejection of the result of a democratic election and rarely seen in the history of American democracy, is beyond the scope of our discussion here, since we define extremism as a position of a radical nature which bears little resemblance to terrorism, fundamentalism, or radicalism. See Ch.1 for our definition of extremism.

newly invented term like “deep partisanship” could possibly have turned out to be a better alternative for “deep disagreement” in a traditional sense from among their historiographical toolbars in the describing efforts.² People could be surprised to find that in “the-then” political climate, emotion rather than reason reigns in the time; some people but not all on the political spectrum have consciously chosen to live in the pseudo-reality of “election denialism”; by drawing upon the distinction between “publics” and “counterpublics” made by Palczewski et al. (2022, pp. 283-312), American people are hierarchically classified roughly into publics and counterpublics of a divisive nature (republicans vs. democrats, conservatives vs. liberals, etc.) according to their political identities, with both groups of publics being pitted over against each other on many political debates in civic engagement; the postmodern discursive principle of “believing is seeing” has been provided as a substitute for the once-holy one of “seeing is believing” that many people still hold dear, so on and so forth. All in all, “Polarization has become the new normal in American society.”³

It is against the backdrop of this new political reality in the U.S. that I would argue here, probably no other words serve better to capture the polarized or extremist essence of contemporary American partisan politics than “election denialism,” which is the most symptomatic catchphrase of extremism in American political argumentation. Because this phrase means the overthrow of the American election systems on which American democracy is founded, as Tim Ryan, Democratic nominee for Senate from Ohio said in his concession speech, “We can’t have a system where if you win, it’s a legitimate election, and if you lose, someone stole it.” Thus, election deniers, election denialism, election propaganda are a trio of terms which exemplifies extremism in political argumentation. In this respect, as I argue, no better example provides a more compelling explanation than the one exemplified in the Kari Lake case. Election deniers are identified as those political candidates who “directly questioned Biden’s victory, opposed the counting of Biden’s electoral college votes, expressed support for a partisan post-election ballot review, signed onto a lawsuit seeking to overturn the 2020 result or attended or expressed support for the rally on the day of the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol.”

3. APPEALING TO A COLLECTIVE ETHOS: CONSTRUCTING AN “I” OUT OF A “WE”

Ethos could be understood a conceptual “common ground” between an arguer and the target audience. In this sense, the essential concern is the relationship between the arguer and his or her audience. In order to secure the audience’s assent to his or her thesis, an ethtoic argument could be the most authoritative form of persuasion in the Aristotelian sense. However, as is rightly pointed out by Maurice Charland (1987), Aristotle stops short

² A recent poll entitled “Daily Survey: Unity in the U.S.” conducted by YouGov tells us how divisive or polarized the American society is today. According to this poll, 76 percent of American citizens aged 18 and over consider the country “divided.” Only 23 percent say Mr. Biden has made the nation “more united,” while 44 percent say he has made it “more divided,” and 24 percent say he has made “little difference.” (tabs_unity_in_the_us_updated2.pdf (documentcloud.org))

³ Peter Baker, “For Biden, a Chance for a Fresh Start in a New Era of Divided Government,” *The New York Times*, Feb 5, 2023.
(<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/05/us/politics/biden-state-of-the-union-republicans.html>)

of conceptualizing a rhetorical ethos from the audience's perspective. In other words, the version of ethos or the audience's anchorage of the arguer or speaker's image seems to be lacking in Aristotle's conception of rhetorical ethos. In addressing this issue, Kenneth Burke has advanced the Aristotelian concept of ethos with his proposal for identification through means of consubstantiality:

A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so (Burke, 1969, p. 20).

Burke proposes here that a rhetor or arguer could be identified with his or her audience through means of identification. The means here could include shared interests between two parties, or if shared interests are not available, but potential or seeable, they could still feel like being identified with each other. Burke (1969, p. 21) also warns against the fear of being "consubstantial" in the process of being identified. The result of this identification is meant more in the sense of a shared or collective identity or ethos rather than a physical identity combining the two individuals:

In being identified with B, A is "substantially one" with a person other than himself. Yet, at the same time, he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus, he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another.

Clearly, being identified with another person is meant more in a conceptual sense rather than a physical sense. By being identified with another person, one does not necessarily lose his idiosyncratic characteristics. In the words of Kenneth Burke, "two persons may be identified in terms of some principles they share in common, an 'identification' that does not deny its distinctness" (p. 21). Therefore, "to identify A with B is not to make A 'consubstantial' with B" (p. 21).

In 2016, I declared I am your voice. Today, I add I am your warrior, I am your justice. And for those who have been wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution. I am your retribution (Trump CPAC 2023 Speech).

Also, in conceptualizing rhetorical ethos, we need to take into consideration both the spatial and temporal senses. For example, in the Burkean dramatism, one of the pentadic terms is "scene," along with "act," "agent," "agency," and "purpose." In rendering many of the ratios that constitute the complex relationships between the five terms, Kenneth Burke calls our attention to the "scene-act," "scene-agent" ratios, "whereby the quality of the context in which a subject is placed will affect the quality of the subject placed in that context" (Burke, 1969, pp. 77-78; Tindale, 2020). Burke's (1969, p. 78) idea here is that "we get a different definition" or meaning by "locating the human agent and his act in terms of a scene" that could be as broad as "the concept of a supernatural Creator," and as narrow as the "minutely particularized situation of back-stairs gossip". Therefore, the construction of a collective ethos necessarily involves the dimensions of "place" and "time" (Tindale, 2020; Wang, 2020), i.e., there are the spatial and temporal dimensions in constructing a collective image.

In this line of rhetorical thought, an individual's ethos is not one-dimensional, but multidimensional. In this sense, Maurice Charland (2001) proposes his theory of

Constitutive Rhetoric, with its focus on “constructing and providing its addressed audience with an identity,” especially a collective identity, for instance, a national identity. Being “fundamental to collectivization and the emergence of nations,” “constitutive rhetoric” could be understood as both a “genre of discourse” and a “theory for understanding rhetorical processes.” Constitutive rhetoric defines the following means of identification as its theoretical agenda: (1) to “provide a collective identity for an addressed audience”; (2) to “construct the audience as a subject in history”; (3) to “demand that subjects act in accordance with their collective identity as enacted in history” (Charland, 2001).

For example, in the Kari Lake case,⁴ for the construction of such a collective ethos, i.e., a “We” defined by Trumpism and her version of American patriotism, Lake begins her CPAC remarks by declaring “Thank you, so much. Well, *we* won.” Of course, here “we” indicates all the voters who supported her in the Arizona 2022 primaries. There and then, she greets the audience present on the CPAC 2022 occasion in Dallas, Texas by addressing them as “patriotic Americans.” She also indicates the occasion as the only “place” in the world that “she would rather be there to share a space with the greatest president” they’ve known. Of course, in announcing the presence of President Donald J. Trump, an “amazing man” she saw at the backstage by appealing to a peculiar “shared space” here, she also makes *presence* before the audience there her status as a Trump-endorsed nominee for the Arizona governor. She keeps on calling the audience’s attention to this symbiotic relationship between her and President Donald J. Trump by calling the audience’s attention to his inspiring God-like role model in emotional words: “How many of you are inspired by President Trump at some point in your life? [Applause] He inspired me. I would not be here without that man.” Also, she takes the advantage of the opportunity to project her prior ethos as an “honest journalist” who has served Arizonans in that role for 27 years (Amossy, 2001), for the purpose of constructing a new persona of devout and selfless Christian, who listens to and follows God’s words:

And how many of you were inspired by President Trump at some point in your life? [Applause] He inspired me. I would not be here without that man. I would not be on this stage. When I walked away from my career as an honest journalist of 27 years covering Arizona, honestly, I had no idea that I would ever end up right here. I did not know what was in store for me. I did not. I promised you this. I never imagined this. It is not what I thought I would be doing. I walked away and I truly handed my life over to God 100%. [Applause] 100%.

By resorting to the God talk here, Lake’s argument is apparently that it is out of God’s will that she walks away from her job as an “honest journalist” and runs for the governorship. In conjuring up God’s image here, she is urging her audience to listen to God’s order and be what she calls “the good people of Arizona.” By mentioning “what was in store for me,” she also hints that God has actually prepared or put something in her “store” for the role she will be performing in the future. In other words, she is doing all this in the Will of God. It is God who let her “walk away” from her current job, lead her into the current place that she has “never imagined.” She unconsciously listens to God’s order without knowing exactly where she will be heading, what she will be doing and whatever situation she will end up being thrown into. All in all, that’s why she “hands over” herself to God. So, here, an individual ethos is manifested in a tri-fold way in the person of Kari Lake: an honest

⁴ For Kari Lake’s CPAC remarks, please click the link here at: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?522155-5/conservative-political-action-conference-kari-lake-remarks>.

journalist, a former TV anchor as a public servant for the people of Arizona, a devout Christian who follows God's will 100%. Now, in the name of God's will or order, she sets herself as an example for the audience to follow in what she calls the holy cause of "tak[ing] back the country," in the fight against the enemies to "save America." Out of the blue, for this common cause to be realized, the collective ethos in the form of a political party of "We the People" is now coming into its being.

4. THE RECEPTION OF A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY: A RECEPTIVE AUDIENCE

One of the argumentative strategies election deniers adopt is appealing to a collective identity, i.e., an identity consisting of American patriots or an identity of "We the People." "We the People" as a political term has its own long history. They are the very debut words that announces the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. Abraham Lincoln, in his famous Gettysburg Address, proposes the three political principles for the American democratic system, i.e., the governing principles *of the people, by the people, and for the people*. On March 18, 2008, in addressing the racial issue, Barack Obama began his "A More Perfect Union" speech with the sentence: "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union." On January 21, 2017, Donald Trump begins his inauguration speech with the "We, the...people" sentence structure: "We, the [citizens of America, are now joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and to restore its promise for all of our] people," and echoes somewhere in the speech Abraham Lincoln's notion of "the people": "What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people."

Similarly, in Kari Lake's CPAC remarks, the party of "We the People" is composed of the following groups of "people": Trump supporters in the Republican Party, those who support her in her bid for the Arizona governorship manifested in the sentence "we won," "the conservatives, but not just the conservatives who got our welcome in the independence," and last but not least, new comers who may be "any patriot who loves this country" and "any democrat disillusioned with the dead-end ideas of the Democratic Party." And "we the people" here are exactly the chosen people of God, as is manifested in the sentence here. Noteworthy is the fact that "We the People" are the very first three words coming out of the opening statement of the U.S. Constitution:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

By analogical reasoning, here in Lake's remarks patriotic Republicans as members of the Party of "We the People" are now likened to "We the People of the United States." Also, by alluding to "We the People" as "the public" authorized by the U.S. Constitution, what she calls patriotic Republicans or Trump-supporters now automatically translate into the very "public" constituting American citizens. By the same token, she depicts a counterpublic in these lines:

The lies, the nastiness, the endless attacks on myself and my family, my children, they follow us, they follow my children, take pictures of them, they parked outside of our house. These people are evil bastards. Just look at what they put President Trump and his family through for several years. He has got the globalist against him; he's got the fake news against him; he's got the left against him, and he even has got people in our own party against him, we call them the RINOs.⁵

Here what she calls the “evil bastards,” the globalists, fake newsmen and newswomen, leftists, all the “RINO-Republicans” are classified as the “counterpublics.” More importantly, between the lines here, whoever supports her is following the God’s will, while those who do not support her is disobeying God’s will and will be punished in certain ways. That also justifies her claim that these people are what she calls “evil bastards.” In terms of argumentation schemes here, she is appealing to argument from sacred authority (God) and also argument from secular authority (President Trump, a person of God-like presence in the Republican Party). For her, President Trump certainly enjoys God-like authority in the Republican Party, at least among the far-rightist Republicans. The ethos of a God-like Trump is established in the following words:

Just look at what they put President Trump and his family through for several years. He has got the globalist against him; he's got the fake news against him; he's got the left against him, and he's even got people in our own party against him, we call them the RINOs.

Here, Lake not only appeals to ad hominem arguments, but also argument from comparison, and the implicit argument from threat. Because those republicans who are not Trump-supporters are called “RINOs,” while those supporters belong to “we the people.” The exclusivity of the term “we the people” is just between the lines, easily available to the receptivity of the audience. Then after the utterance of these words, she likens her own persona to that of President Trump: “Now, listen, I feel for him because I actually got a taste of it myself. I actually kind of understand what it feels like to be President Trump. It is not fun, not fun at all.” In this way, her own persona is now connected to that of President Donald Trump. By appealing to the holy authority and stoking fear for losing one’s identity as belonging to “We the People,” the audience’s cognitive environments could be modified. Apparently, throughout the CPAC remarks, one of the most frequent argumentation schemes Kari Lake employs is the arguments from comparison and contrast. To further differentiate the “we” from the “them,” and to consolidate the collective identity of patriotic Americans as “We the People,” Lake intends to modify the audiences’ cognitive environments by making comparison and contrast between different individual and collective identities such as an honest journalist v. fake newsmen and newswomen, the rightists v. the leftists, the globalists v. localists, republicans v. democrats, republicans as Trump-supporters v. those who are republicans “RINOs,” the good people of Arizona v. the “evil bastards,” “those who want to save America” v. “those who want to destroy her,” those who are unscathed v. those who have the scars, nonpolitical people v. politicians, etc. Lake also intends to induce some modifications in the audience’s cognitive environments, because metaphoric languages are vivid, more intelligible, and more familiar, such as the RINOs, the McCain machine, an epic battle in Arizona, a battle between those who want to save America and those want to destroy her, etc. By the projection of many personasto

⁵ Here, “RINO” is an acronym for “Republicans in Names Only,” which is obviously meant in a negative sense in the referenced context.

appeal to different audiences, she also puts on a brave face: “You know what I say to them. Bring it on. [Applause] Bring it on. I welcome this strife, I welcome the attack, I welcome every bit of it with ultimate gladness.” She projects herself as a political novice in order to cover up her purpose in running for the governorship. To this end, she uses narratives to project a persona of selflessness, a devout Christian, a political novice. Seen from the above discussions, Kari Lake proves herself to be a politician par excellence in the sense of politician as is generally understood.

5. CONCLUSION

Does reason or emotion reign in our time? Why do people choose to live in the pseudo- reality of “election denialism”? Why does the power of “seeing is believing” not apply here? How should we understand strategies or schemes of arguing from narrow or broad identity in today’s political discourse? Three perspectives are suggested here in this paper to look into the rhetorical strategies employed in the right-wing extremist argumentation i.e., Kari Lake’s Persona as one of the most vocal supporters for Trumpism, political ads as means of modification of the audience’s cognitive environment, and political slogans as memes of modification in appealing to the audience’s emotional state. Three observations are made. First, election denialism as extremism in political argumentation could be the major force dividing the US political landscape. Second, election deniers unanimously appeal to pathos or emotion in the election propaganda. Third, argument from narrow identity (or identity politics) could be one of the most popular argumentation schemes in election denialism. First, let’s look at Kari Lake’s remarks at the CPAC 2022 for the construction of a collective ethos, or a collective identity of Trumpism, that simultaneously authorizes her persona.

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