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The Political Lie, From Cicero to Joe McCarthy

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September 5, 2012

As a core campaign tactic, lying is nothing new.



Senator McCarthy in 1954 (Wikimedia Commons)

The point-counter point after Paul Ryan's convention speech has raised many questions -- about, for instance, the role of the media and the role of self-appointed "fact-checkers." But none is more important than the question of whether both campaigns have chosen direct lies as a core campaign tactic and whether, if so, this will increase cynicism and foster distrust in the electorate. Are we doomed from now until the election to calculated political demagoguery in highly distorted negative ads fueled by gobs of unaccountable money?

Let me emphasize that this concern about direct lying applies to both parties. Brooks Jackson, the director of FactCheck.org, a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, is [quoted](#) as saying that both parties have lied knowingly: "They don't care because it gets votes." After skewering Ryan's misleading statements on Obama's role in a GM plant closing and his own support of Simpson Bowles ("Paul, sometimes you just have to put your own foot down and tell the campaign you won't do it"), columnist David Brooks went on to [define](#) "the larger issue": Both campaigns have decided that deceptiveness carries no penalty. I know from conversations I've had that both campaigns do rigorous fact-checking. When the candidates say something wholly or partially false, they know exactly what they are doing.

I subscribe to the view that this is a critical election, because the two parties actually have very different views of the role of government. But those who hoped for a national "policy" debate (and liberal friends of mine welcomed Ryan's nomination on just this grounds) must be a bit chagrined now that it isn't likely to happen. For example, the conversation about Medicare's future -- surely one of the most important and difficult national policy issues -- has been reduced to out-of-context, close-to-incomprehensible mud-slinging about which party is going to hurt seniors most. When the stakes are seen by partisans as so high, the ancient issue of ends justifying means comes to the fore. In this case, those "means" mean deliberate falsehoods, or statements that are so incomplete that they are effectively false.

Stepping back for a moment, we can view this issue of "facts" and "falsehoods" from two opposite perspectives. First, political campaigns for two millennia have tried to sway voters with half-truths, innuendo, emotional appeals, whoppers, and direct lies. (See advisor Quintus Tullius Cicero's recently published advice to his candidate brother in 64 BC -- *How to Win an Election*.) Nothing new; no big deal; voters have common sense; it will all get sorted out in the marketplace of "ideas."

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But a second perspective is the dangerous -- fatally dangerous -- use of the Big Lie to pervert democracy: Repeat a falsehood long enough and it becomes political if not actual truth. This tactic characterized Senator Joseph McCarthy's campaign of fear and his baseless charges that, in large (if shifting) numbers, Communists had infiltrated U.S. national security institutions, especially the State Department. A corollary of the Big Lie, propounded by *New Yorker* writer Richard Rovere, one of McCarthy's severest critics, was "Multiple Untruths" (smaller lies) that could be thrown at opponents in profusion and were confused, confusing, and hard to refute.

"McCarthyism" in the sense of "red-baiting" is not part of today's politics. But demonizing opponents with emotive untruths -- at least by the extreme wings of each party -- is certainly in vogue.

Another issue in dealing with lies is the complexity of untangling fact and opinion. It is opinion that President Obama has mishandled the economy. It would be a factual lie to say that no new jobs have been added to the economy since the recession ended (there have been 2.5 million new ones). But it is a mixture of fact and opinion to say that the job recovery since the last recession has been slower than in other recessions (true) and that this slow rate of growth is due to the failure of President Obama's policies (opinion). And this mixture of fact and opinion relates to most backward-looking statements of causality (President Obama caused the slow rate of jobs growth) or forward-looking predictions (if the Democrats are re-elected jobs, growth will continue to languish).

Another complexity is the spectrum between truth and gross falsehood. This is reflected in the "truth-o-meter" from the Pulitzer prize-winning website PolitiFact.com, which rates (with explanations) the accuracy or inaccuracy of statements as true, mostly true, half true, mostly false, false, and pants on fire.

Although these gradations may be hard for voters to understand, they can comprehend, if they are paying any attention, the "false" and "pants on fire" conclusions, and the reasoning behind them. According to the site, about 15 percent of the claims by Obama Campaign have been in those two categories, and 26 percent of the Romney campaign's claims (my point is not that Republicans exceed Democrats somewhat on the site's measures but the relatively high percentage of rank falsehoods for both). In the "pants on fire" category, for example, the [site](#) showcases an Obama ad that falsely said Romney opposes abortion even in the cases of rape and incest, and a Romney statement that Obama began his presidency with "an apology tour."

But the fact-checking sites sponsored by the mainstream media or by academic centers are now routinely charged with their own bias by partisan "counter-fact-checkers," who add their facts, opinions, and mixed fact-opinions to the debate, often increasing the confusion and cacophony. (See this take in the [Wall Street Journal](#).) In this age of public distrust and skepticism, it is an open question whether the unmasking of demonstrable falsehoods -- that simple statement of fact or partial statement of fact that is clearly wrong or misleading -- will hurt candidates with an already cynical independent voter, or with the "decided" voters the politicians are trying to "turn out" in historically high percentages.

The role of lies in this campaign is, moreover, likely to be even greater than in the past, thanks to the gushers of money from partisan Super-PACs, which will create an unceasing cascade of attack ads crafted, as always, for emotive political impact. The adage that the first casualty of war is the truth will surely apply to the bitter blood feud of this year's political wars. So lies seem destined to become standard operating procedure of both parties and their supporters to a greater extent than ever before,

perhaps with little embarrassment, little accountability, and thus little adverse impact -- except to our democracy, as citizens become ever more cynical and the factual underpinnings of decisions become ever more debased.

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<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/09/the-political-lie-from-cicero-to-joe-mccarthy/261973/>