An Analysis of the Strengths of Arguments of the 2012 United States' Presidential Debate: The Case of Barrack Obama vs Mitt Romney

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to measure arguments' strength of the 2012 the United States' presidential candidates, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, in their latest presidential debate. The researcher selected 41 arguments from the debate transcription, based on the completeness requirement of the primary elements of Toulmin's Argumentation Model (1958), such as *claim*, *ground* and *warrants*. The data are analyzed through the three stages of analysis, namely *cogency analysis*, *soundness analysis,* and *strength level analysis*. Based on the data analysis, three qualifications are found: *strong argument, weak argument* and *very weak argument*. The analysis shows that Barrack Obama is the winner of the latest U.S presidential debate. Obama won the debate because his strong arguments' frequency is higher than Romney's strong argument in the debate. Furthermore, most of Obama's arguments, either strong or weak, are constructed in the form of deductive arguments. As the nature of deductive argument, which guarantees the cogency and the validity of its conclusion, Obama's arguments in the latest presidential debate 2012 are mostly cogent and valid.

Keywords: *Argument Strength, Cogency Analysis, Soundness Analysis, Strength Level Analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

As a democratic country debates in the United States are very common and can also take place during the presidential election campaign. In general, the purpose of a presidential debate is to provide an overview to the public about their leaders' figure by comparing their plans for the country which are delivered through arguments in the debate. The latest American presidential debate was conducted on October 22, 2012 at Lynn University, Boca Raton-Florida. The debate involved the two American presidential candidates, namely Barrack Obama from Democratic Party and his opponent Mitt Romney from the Republican Party. In the debate, both presidential candidates argued about the security flaws in Libya, how to restrain Iran's nuclear project, the turbulent crisis in Syria, the rise of China, and an end to the war in Afghanistan.

Even though there are many compliments and flatteries for their latest debate, however, the winner of the debate is still questioned. The number of emerging polls and opinions certainly does not provide an adequate answer for this question. The polls only represent the number of persons who like or do not like the performance of their presidential candidates without knowing the factors that influence them to make such a decision. Thus, those internal factors such as the power of language they used in the debate, and their effort to attract public attention, of course, could never be discussed in a poll. However, they can be identified by conducting linguistic research on them. Through linguistic research, the winner of the debate can be determined theoretically by using an appropriate language approach.

The study employed the theory of measuring arguments' strength proposed by Toulmin (1984). The framework is well known as 'Toulmin's Argumentation Model' which contains two levels of analysis, namely: *soundness analysis* and *strength level analysis*. In this study, the researcher also adopted the term 'cogency' from Birkett (2005) as the initial level to further simplify

the study in determining the feasibility of argument.

Thus, there were three stages of analysis in this research. The stages include: *cogency analysis*, *soundness analysis* and *strength level* analysis. At the cogency analysis, an argument is analyzed according to the factuality of its grounds and the validity of its warrant. Then, the researcher looks for the presence of backing element that is required to determine an argument's soundness. The last, the strength of an argument is measured and determined based on its appropriate qualification (qualifier).

By implementing the three stages of analysis, the researcher attempts to determine the winner of the latest debate of U.S. presidential debate 2012.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The followings are the review of related theories that are used as the framework in this study. The review includes, arguments' cogency according to the types of argument and the two levels of arguments' strength analysis by Toulmin (1984).

Arguments' Cogency According to The Kinds of Argument

In general, there are three types of arguments to be considered in this study. These three types of arguments include deductive arguments, inductive arguments and conductive arguments. The explanation of the kinds of arguments that relate to this study was mostly taken from Birkett (2005: 226-228).

Deductive argument

The first type of argument is a deductive argument. Deductive argument is defined as "an argument which, if it is cogent, shows that its conclusion must be true" (Birkett, 2005: 226). It is impossible for a cogent deductive argument to have a false conclusion because a cogent deductive argument must be followed by good premises and valid reasoning. Birkett (2005) explains that good premises are occupied by factual data(s) or verifiable premises, whereas good reasoning is occupied by a valid deductive argument. Chudnoff (2007) added that the term "validity" is a special feature of

deductive argument where the conclusion is required by the presence of premises. In other words, "it must not be possible for an argument of its form to have true premises and a false conclusion" (Birket, 2005: 226). Therefore, it can be concluded that "if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true" (chudnoff, 2007: 9).

In general, the term 'cogent' can be found in all of the three types of arguments, whereas the terms 'sound' and 'valid' are specifically used for a deductive argument (Birkett, 2005: 226).

Inductive argument

The second type of argument is an inductive argument. Inductive argument is defined as "an argument that if it is cogent, shows that its conclusion is probably true" (Birkett, 2005: 226). In contrast to a cogent deductive argument, a cogent inductive argument tends to confirm its conclusion, but it does not indicate that the conclusion is true. This is in accordance with LaBossiere's (2010) statement that a cogent inductive argument is something that "if its premises are true, the conclusion is likely to be true." (LaBossiere, 2010: 1). In other words, a conclusion that is generated from a cogent inductive argument is not able to give a certainty as produced by a cogent deductive argument.

If the premises of inductive argument are true or based on fact, the pattern of reasoning only guarantees the probability of its conclusion. On the other hand, "the requirement of reasoning that demonstrates probability is a weaker requirement than the requirement for validity, the standard of reasoning applicable to deductive arguments." (Birkett, 2012: 227). Thus, even though the inductive argument is cogent, it does not guarantee the validity of its reasoning.

In general, inductive argument is a type of argument that is mostly used in daily life. In fact, "most of what people know about the world is also based on inductive arguments" (Birkett, 2010:227).

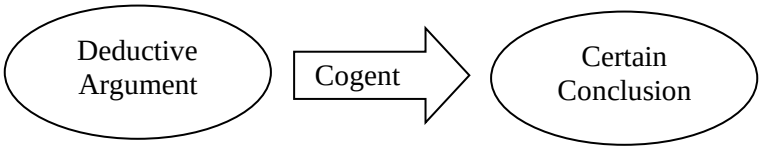
Conductive arguments

The third type of argument is the conductive argument. According to Birkett (2010: 227) conductive argument is an argument that involves the process of weighing the evidences in the balance or on both sides of a question. A conductive argument is often called as a defensible argument. A defensible argument is "an argument where its conclusion can be called into question by considerations that are consistent with its premises and that do not call those premises into question." (Pinto, 2010: 2).

Birkett's explanation of the types of arguments has shown that if the conclusions of deductive argument are certain and the conclusions of inductive arguments are probable, then the conclusion of a cogent conductive argument is likely to be preferred over one or more alternative conclusion (Birkett, 2010: 228). He added, for a cogent conductive argument to be cogent, three things must be fulfilled. First, it must have factual premises. Second, the conductive argument must be complete or must take into account all the relevant information needed. Third, in order to have a correct conclusion, the reasoning must correctly weigh all the premises in the balance.

Thus, while deductive arguments have the potential to show that their conclusions are certain and inductive arguments have the potential to show that their conclusions are probable, conductive arguments can only show their conclusions to be preferable, or to be better than some other conclusions (Birkett, 2010: 227-228).

The following is the summary of the types of arguments based on their characteristics:



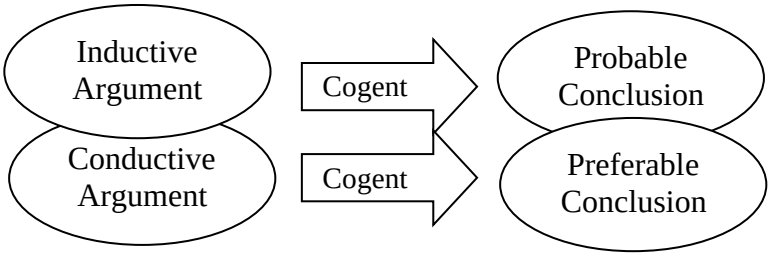


Figure 1 distinguishing the three kinds of arguments

(Adapted from Brickett 2005:229)

The Measurement of Arguments' Strength

Toulmin (1984) proposes the measurement of arguments' strength analysis in two levels of analysis, namely, soundness level, and strength level. The explanation concerning these two levels of analysis are presented below.

Soundness level

The soundness level of an argument is delivered from a pattern of analysis where the elements of an argument are 'hanged' together (Toulmin's Argumentation Pattern). In this part of the analysis, the presence of claim, grounds, warrant and backing are required. The reason of structuring an argument through these four elements is because "these are the basic instruments we shall need in order to understand what is involved in the rational criticism of arguments" (Toulmin, 1984: 25). Here are some brief explanations of these four kinds of elements.

Claim

A claim is the first element that can be identified in any argument. Toulmin (1984) has explained a claim as the starting point and the destination of the force and the procedure of any argument. He added that someone must convince the correctness of that claim because the audience, the hearer or interrogators can judge for themselves the justice or acceptability of that claim.

In general, every argument can be categorized according to their types of claim. There are four basic types of claim: Claim of Fact (claims which assert that something is true or

not true and focus on empirically verifiable phenomena), Claim of Definition/classification (a claim which indicates what criteria are being used to define a term), Claim of Judgment/value (claims which assert that something is good or bad, more or less desirable. It involves opinions, attitudes, and subjective evaluations of things), Claim of Policy (claims which assert that one course of action is superior to another. It advocates courses of action that should be undertaken (eng101online.com). Table 2.1 shows four types of claim, including the examples.

Grounds

Through his explanation on argument, Toulmin (1984) notes the importance of grounds as the evidence that is appealed by someone as a basis for their claim. Producing grounds or information on which the claim is based may serve to answer the question 'What have you got to go on?'(Toulmin, 1958: 89). Grounds can be based on evidence (facts, statistics, reports, or physical proof), source credibility (authorities, experts, celebrity endorsers, a close friend, or someone's say-so) and analysis and reasoning (reasons may be offered as proof) (eng101online.com).

Even after the grounds have produced, someone may find themselves being asked for another kind of questions 'How do you get there?'(Toulmin, 1984: 46). In order to answer the question, the quality of the relationship between the grounds and the claim or the element that is called as "warrant" must be considered.

Warrant

A good quality of warrant will not only able to make the grounds produce a conclusion to the claim, but also make the grounds in accordance to the claim that has been made. Warrants can be based on *ethos* (source credibility, authority logos: reason-giving, induction, deduction), *pathos* (emotional or motivational appeals) and *shared values* (free speech, right to know and fairness). However, these categories are not mutually exclusive because there is a considerable overlap among them (Toulmin,

1984). Table 2.3 shows the four types of grounds, including the examples

Backing

An argument will carry real weight and support its conclusions only if the warrant is reliable and also to the point (Toulmin, 1984). Thus, the presence of backing in an argument is required to make the reasoning or the warrant more 'sound' and relevant. Therefore, an important part of 'sound reasoning' consists of 'critical thinking'. Murray (2005) assumed that critical thinking in reasoning is intended to figure out what is the foundation of our rational ways of thinking of making an argument.

Strength level

This level of analysis deals with the strength on which an argument depends. Arguments' strength depends entirely on the circumstances and the conditions of its presentation. In this condition, the researcher has to pay particular attention to the terms *qualifier* and *rebuttal*. Qualifier has a function to show the sort of 'rational strength' to be attributed to Claim on the foundation of its relationship to Grounds, Warrant and Backing. Whereas Rebuttal is very important because sometimes "we present arguments which we have reason to believe are strong arguments, but we do not state explicitly all of the conditions and assumptions on which that confidence rests" (Toulmin, 1984:82).

Qualifier

The strength of an argument can be measured because every argument has a certain kind of strength and its claim is presented with a certain strength or weakness, conditions, and limitations (Toulmin, 1984). Toulmin (1958) proposes a familiar set of colloquial adverbs and adverbial phrases that are used customarily to mark these qualifications. Their function is to indicate the kind of rational strength to be attributed to *claim* (C) on the basis of its relationship to *grounds* (G), *warrant* (W) and *backing* (B). Such adverbs and adverbial phrases include the following: *necessarily*, *certainly*, *presumably*, *in all*

probability, so far as the evidence goes, for all that we can tell, very likely, very possibly, maybe, apparently, plausibly, or so it seems (Toulmin, 1984:87).

The addition of the adverb or the adverbial phrase has the effect of showing what sort of dependence the supporting material entitles us to place on the claim (C). According to Toulmin (1984), there is a situation in which (1) we have all the grounds we could reasonably need, (2) our warrant is unambiguous and clearly relevant, and (3) the solidity of its backing is unchallenged. In that event, it may be legitimate to say that the claim is emphatically and unconditionally:

"G, so certainly c."

Toulmin (1984) mentions that an argument can be in a weaker position. It happens because "the available grounds may point toward C strongly, but not conclusively, or else the backing for the warrant may indicate a stronger rather than a 100 percent correlation between the relevant facts and the present claim" (Toulmin, 1984: 87). Based on that event, it is appropriate to say that the argument is in a less emphatic condition in more qualified manner, such as:

"G, so probably c."

The warrant may be one that applies in cases like the present one but in certain conditions. In certain conditions, there may be exception(s) or disqualification(s) that would invalidate the application of the warrant even though in the present situation, they are assumed not to do so (Toulmin, 1984: 87). Toulmin (1984) has made an appropriate qualification to indicate this kind of situation, such as:

"G, so presumably c."

Rebuttals

Rebuttal is defined as "the extraordinary or exceptional circumstances that might undermine the force of the supporting arguments" (Toulmin et al. 1984: 95). Therefore, an argument that would ordinarily have been sound is invalidated by the breakthrough of those exceptional conditions. In practice, this last element of the

Toulmin's Argumentation Model is also one of the most important parts of debating.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method in order to describe and interpret the data. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (1990:10) "qualitative approach is employed when a researcher wants to acquire a holistic depiction of what actually happens in particular circumstances or situation".

In collecting the data, the researcher used the debate transcription of the latest American presidential debates in 2012. The transcription was taken from www.debates.org. From the main transcription, the researcher selected 40 arguments which contain at least the three primary elements, such as claim, ground and warrant. The selected arguments consist of 20 arguments from Obama and 20 arguments from Romney. Then, the selected arguments were analyzed in the data analysis section.

The data analysis is divided into several steps. The first step is the observation of Toulmin's argumentation elements in the debate. Each transcription that has been collected is then examined and marked according to the type of element contained therein. The second step was restating the data that have been marked into an indirect form which involved the assignment of reporting and paraphrasing. This step was intended to shorten a very long statement so that the data become easier to understand, and facilitate further analysis. Later, in the third step of analysis, the researcher implemented the three stages of analysis to the research data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study finds three qualifications of the strength of an argument, such as *a strong argument* (where an argument has passed the three stages of analysis), *a weak argument* (where an argument has only passed at least one of the three stages of analysis) and *a very weak argument* (where an argument does not pass all of the three stages of analysis).

Strong Argument

In the study, a strong argument is indicated by the presence of all Toulmin's argumentation elements. It happens because a strong argument has to be cogent, sound, and valid (Zenker, 2009). From the results of the data analysis, the research finds 9 strong arguments. The strong arguments in the research were found at the transcriptions No. 2, 4, 5, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24 and 40.

Weak Argument

Based on the analysis, 'weak arguments' were caused by several factors, such as: *missing backing (unsound), missing rebuttal, missing backing and rebuttal*, *uncogent and missing backing (unsound)* and *uncogent and missing rebuttal.* Bellow is the explanation of each argument's strength qualification along with its example.

Weak argument that are from 'the missing backing' (unsound)

The presence of backing strengthens the reasoning or warrant of an argument. Without the presence of backing, an argument will be considered unsound. Weak arguments that resulted from 'the missing backing' (unsound) were discovered in the transcription 3, 6 ,8,11, 13, 31, 33 and 34. The following is an example of an argument structure that lack of backing.

Weak argument that derives from 'the missing rebuttal'

Rebuttal is an important addition element of an argument. It directly strengthens the 'claim' and makes it able to be qualified. Without the presence of 'rebuttal', an argument's 'qualifier' will be difficult to be determined. Weak argument that derives from 'the missing rebuttal' were discovered in the transcription 18, 26, 27, 32 and 35.

Weak argument that result from the missing backing (unsound) and rebuttal Weak argument that derives from missing backing and rebuttal were discovered in transcriptions No. 1, 7, 9, 10, 23, 28, 29, 30, 38 and 39.

Weak argument that derives from the uncogent and missing backing (unsound)

An argument will be considered uncogent if the grounds are not based on fact and the validity of its warrant is still questioned (Birkett, 2005). Weak arguments that derive from uncogent and missing backing were discovered in transcriptions No.15 and 17.

Weak argument that derive from uncogent and missing rebuttal

Weak arguments that derive from uncogent and missing backing were found at the transcription No.36.

Very Weak Argument

The study finds 5 arguments that have been qualified as very weak arguments. Those arguments did not pass all of the three stages of analysis. The very weak arguments were discovered in transcriptions No.12, 14, 16, 25 and 37.

Fallacy

Generally, a fallacy is "an argument which the premises give for the conclusion do not provide the needed degree of support" (LaBossiere, 2010: 1). In other words, a fallacy, either accidental or deliberate, honest or dishonest mistakes can make an argument seems persuasive despite being unsound (Toulmin, 1984: 132). There are five broad types of fallacies in Toumin's model:

1. Fallacies that result from missing grounds;
2. Fallacies that result from irrelevant grounds;
3. Fallacies that result from defective grounds;
4. Fallacies that result from unwarranted assumptions; and
5. Fallacies that result from ambiguities in our arguments.

In the study, the study finds a fallacy that results from unwarranted assumptions. The fallacy was found in Romney's argument in transcription No.37.

Obama's Arguments vs Romney's Arguments

This section presents the calculation of each arguments' strength qualifications between the two presidential candidates. This is done to determine the winner of the

latest debate of the 2012 U.S presidential candidates.

In the study, Obama supports the highest number of strong arguments by having 8 strong arguments or contributing approximately 40% from the his overall arguments in the debate. These have defeated Romney, who only made 1 strong argument or contributed 5% from his overall arguments in the debate.

However, in the frequency of weak and very weak arguments, Romney holds the highest number by having 14 weak arguments or contribute approximately 70% from his overall arguments. Moreover, the highest number of very weak arguments is also owned by Romney by having 5 arguments or approximately 25% from his overall arguments in the debate.

Thus, the calculation of arguments' strength qualifications between the two presidential candidates is presented in the following table:

Table 4.6 The Percentage of Each Argument' Strength Qualification Between the Two Candidates

Speaker	Strong Argument Frequency (%)	Weak Argument Frequency (%)	Very Weak Argument Frequency (%)
Obama	40.00	60.00	0.00
Romney	5.00	70.00	25.00

From the above table, it can be concluded that Obama's argumentation in the latest debate is stronger compared to Romney's argumentation. Therefore, without doubt **the latest U.S presidential debate in 2012 was won by Obama.**

CONCLUSION

The overall strong arguments in this study are constructed in the form of deductive argument. This has made Barrack Obama the winner of the latest U.S presidential debate. Most

of Obama's arguments are in the form of deductive arguments. Even in a weak form, Obama's arguments in the debate are mostly accompanied by factual grounds to support his claims. The example of this phenomenon is shown in the transcription No.13. In the transcription, Obama's claim concerning the reality that America is now stronger than the first time Obama came into the office is supported by several facts which contain the U.S. advances under the Obama administration. Even though the argument is a cogent argument, in Toulmin's Model (1958), this argument cannot be mentioned as 'a strong argument'. This argument only contains the primary elements without the addition of backing, rebuttal and qualifiers. In other words, in Toulmin's Model 'a strong argument' is not only *cogent,* but also *needs to be sound* and *valid*.

Therefore, not every argument in the form of deductive argument is 'a strong argument' according to the Toulmin's Argumentation Model (1958). In conclusion, the type of argument does not indicate the strengths of an argument in Toulmin's Model of Argumentation.

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