
Years from now, when historians chronicle the Obama era, they will situate events within an especially anxious discursive environment. Presidential history tends to survey the major exigencies of a given term in office, and the current administration has these in surplus. Since 2008, the nation has been embroiled in a diversity of passionate debates, including but not limited to those concerning gun control, religious freedom, healthcare, gay rights, and immigration. Place these between the nation’s first black president and a largely white backlash movement, at the tail end of a “Great Recession,” and amid the lingering threats of global terrorism, and you have a plausible setting for extremist rhetoric. If argumentation scholars have a public role to play in times like these, it must involve clarifying the chaos.

This is the daunting project of Joseph Zompetti’s Divisive Discourse: The Extreme Rhetoric of Contemporary American Politics, an interesting and timely read that may prove useful as a textbook for courses on argumentation. A classically trained debater, Zompetti approaches controversy with an eye for premises, contentions, evidences, and fallacies. He documents these in clear and logical fashion, always directing the reader to observe the architecture of the argument. “By focusing on the tactics and techniques of discourse rather than the content,” he writes, “my hope is that the conversations generated by this book will be about how political issues are discussed instead of what is being discussed” (p. xix). The book’s seven chapters include an introduction to theoretical foundations, a conclusion, and five analytical chapters spanning the controversies enumerated above. Admitting to but suppressing personal opinions, Zompetti attempts to dissect these debates from a position of relative impartiality.

Chapter 1 covers a great deal of conceptual ground in a concise thirteen pages, providing definitions for key terms, explaining the Toulmin model, and listing some of the most common types of fallacy. Here Zompetti equips readers with the tools for performing the work that follows. Specifically, this means recognizing the characteristics of extremist speech and analyzing them against the context and available evidence.

Chapters 2 through 6 put these tools to good use. In Chapter 2, Zompetti considers the divisive discourse surrounding gun controversies. Here, as in all subsequent chapters, he draws on Lloyd Bitzer, explaining the nature of the rhetorical situation and situating the debate in relation to its exigencies, audiences, and constraints. Having established these, he proceeds to survey the arguments that most commonly arise, including “Safety/Killing Arguments,” “Rights/Tyranny Arguments,” “Self Defense/stand your ground Arguments,” and some of the more troublesome fallacies. Observers of contemporary discourse pertaining to guns will find a host of familiar names—and quotations—represented here. Each section features arguments from politicians, lobbyists, journalists, academics, advocates, and opinionated celebrities, among others. Despite the often-chaotic nature of the discourse, Zompetti does an admirable job of corralling the disputants and presenting their arguments in an orderly fashion.

Chapter 3 continues in this vein, examining contemporary debates about religion. Contextualizing religious discourse along and within the related fields of law and politics,
Zompetti documents the most common debates and their most common claims. These include debates over public prayer, tax exemptions, holy days, public religious displays, and Islam-in-general. Because religious discourse is often the product of difference, and because it operates at the nexus of several public fields, it is often subject to faction. Zompetti concludes, therefore, that religious conflicts are deserving of more discussion, rather than less, and that discussants should resist the temptation to sequester themselves within echo chambers of like-minded people.

In Chapter 4, he turns his attention to healthcare controversies, including the heated national debate over the Affordable Care Act. The context section is extensive in this chapter, situating divisive healthcare discourse amid the competing political philosophies and interests of the past forty years. Here he analyzes the debates over abortion, contraception, and, of course, the ACA. Zompetti concludes with a call for pragmatism where healthcare is concerned, writing that, “if we can re-center our political discussions around policies instead of ideological dogma and personality attacks, then we might stand a chance at facilitating meaningful, productive democratic discourse” (p. 107).

Chapter 5 focuses on the gay rights debates. Here Zompetti is primarily concerned with same-sex marriage and with the most common arguments against. These include the claim the same-sex marriage destroys the institution of marriage, hurts children, causes a slippery slope, perpetuates big government and violates federalism, violates religious liberty, and is otherwise evil. But he also considers more general anti-gay rhetoric, such as that concerning discrimination and hate speech. There is no shortage of extremist voices where gay rights are concerned, and this chapter thus features a wealth of claims and rebuttals.

Chapter 6, Zompetti’s final analytical chapter, is concerned with immigration. In another extensive context section, he casts contemporary immigration debates against a backdrop of American history and self-concept, approaching current controversy as just another chapter in the turbulent tale of an immigrant nation. In this chapter, Zompetti demonstrates his attention to detail and nuance, tracing a variety of arguments back to a variety of related but separate issues. Prefaced by a discussion of the contested terms—including “illegal alien” and “undocumented immigrant”—this analysis examines concerns about jobs, wage suppression, race and racism, welfare, healthcare, education, housing, crime, terrorism, disease, and the supposed threat of “invasion,” especially from Mexico. As an amalgam of loosely related cultural anxieties, the immigration debate defies easy explanation. Still, Zompetti argues, it can be clarified, perhaps en route to more intelligent discussion.

Finally, in Chapter 7, Zompetti meditates on the current state of public discourse, lamenting its extremist nature and presenting strategies for moderation. Concluding that “democracy matters,” he encourages readers to contribute something to the great project of improving the discourse. “As I have clearly and not so clearly intimated throughout this book,” Zompetti writes:

the way we talk about politics is the way we think about politics. As such we really need to talk about politics in a way that is pertinent and enticing to the average citizen. When we disagree, and we will, we should learn how to communicate in a civil manner so that everyone’s voice is heard. (p. 196)

Having devoted his text to documenting controversy and division, Zompetti closes with a call to civility.

The book examines an intimidating quantity of evidence, and so contains some factual problems that will need to be corrected in subsequent editions. In Chapter 2, for instance, Zompetti writes that alleged Arizona shooter Jared Lee Loughner “blamed his actions on
Sarah Palin’s confrontational discourse.” Specifically, “the gunman claimed he was fulfilling what he thought was an urgent call from Palin” (p. 24). This is untrue. Though certain pundits did draw a connection from Palin’s “crosshairs” website to the shooting, Loughner never claimed that connection himself. In Chapter 3, Zompetti mentions Pat Buchanan’s 1992 Republican National Convention address, quoting Buchanan as saying, “Millions of political extremists on both the left and the right believe in a culture war and they have enlisted in it. The culture war is primarily being waged over the issues of abortion, gay marriage, school prayer, and, more recently, stem-cell research” (p. 39). But these lines do not appear in Buchanan’s speech. The quote is likely from some time later, as gay marriage and stem cell research were not yet hot button issues in 1992. Other problems are more minor. Jeremy Engels, cited often in Chapter 2, always appears as “Engles.”

Another potential issue concerns Zompetti’s habit of dismissing extremist figures with flippant terms, a practice that may enthrall in some readers even as it irritates others. He refers, for instance, to “windbag Charles Krauthammer” (p. 18), “liberal commentator of political fanaticism Rachel Maddow” (p. 30), “liberal agitator Ed Schultz” (p. 31), and “crazed, conservative huckster Newt Gingrich” (p. 57). He also occasionally cites extreme voices as expert critics of other extreme voices. Journalist Chris Hedges, for example, has accused the Christian Right of being “fascist,” a charge that could be characterized as extreme and divisive. But Zompetti cites Hedges approvingly when critiquing the extreme rhetoric of the Christian Right (p. 63–64). Arianna Huffington, who is dismissed as a “liberal media provocateur” in the second chapter (p. 31), is cited approvingly as a “renowned liberal commentator and editor of her own online magazine” when she appears as an expert in the fourth (p. 77).

All this to say that Divisive Discourse is a good and timely book that may benefit from some further revision. Zompetti takes the key terms and concepts of argumentation and debate and applies them to real world case studies. His work provides instructors an opportunity to train their students in the elements of debate while also educating them about contemporary politics and current events. It would be very hard to come away from this book without feeling better informed and more conversant in the central issues of our time. It would be practically impossible to come away without improving as a consumer and analyst of political information. Argumentation is—arguably—among the most important intellectual skills a student can cultivate. Zompetti’s book is an important and accessible resource for those who guide that process.

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