Critical Voter

How to Survive the Next Election by
Making Yourself (and Your Kids) Smarter

JONATHAN HABER

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1 | Introduction

Is an election year the best of times or the worst of times to use or learn how to better use your brain?

To argue the "best of times" position, an election cycle usually includes a number of activities you often see in classrooms where critical-thinking skills are taught to students. For example, there are issues that require *background knowledge* to understand, background knowledge that is in abundant supply as newspapers, magazines, and websites provide a flood of detail on each and every matter being debated. Comparing the pros and cons of each side of an issue, standard practice whenever critical-thinking skills are taught, is supported during an election cycle by countless websites providing handy comparison charts with links to even more background data.

Of course, candidates for office may try to obscure their real positions as well as "define" themselves and their opponents through carefully crafted speeches and manipulative campaign ads. But those candidates' reliance on political rhetoric (often dismissed as "mere rhetoric") actually exemplifies the use of *persuasive communication*, another critical-thinking tool. Understanding what these tools are and how they work is crucial if you don't want to be bamboozled by them or if you want to learn how to use them yourself.

Finally, a political campaign can be seen as an endless series of arguments between the candidates, their surrogates, and media partisans, not to mention between friends, family members, and neighbors. Which is good news since understanding argumentation is probably the best means of putting critical-thinking skills to useful work.

Yet despite high volumes of information and endless opportunities to argue for or against positions and candidates, elections often seem like the worst of times when it comes to thinking about anything, much less about how to use reasoning tools such as argumentation and logic.

A majority of voters, after all, have made up their minds about who to vote for long before candidates have secured a party's nomination. In fact, party affiliation is so strong in some cases that the choice of a number of older partisans might predate when a younger candidate was born. This is an example of *bias*, one of the most important concepts to grasp when thinking about our own thinking. And while some level of bias can be justified (party affiliation is a useful tool for navigating a complex world, after all), too much bias or the wrong kinds of biases can shield us from important information, leading to error or even to catastrophe.

That enormous flood of information highlighted earlier as a plus also has a downside: the challenge of sorting through so much conflicting information in order to arrive at the truth or at least something useful for your own decision-making. For every source trying to provide quality information that will allow others to make their own informed judgments, ten

other sources have been created that provide slanted information designed to push and manipulate people one way or another.

Finally, if the arguments you might have had during the last election cycle consisted mainly of shouting at co-workers and family members too stupid to grasp that they were supporting a monster, perhaps you were not engaging in the kind of argumentation associated with critical thinking after all.

Or worse, perhaps you managed to get through the entire election without a single substantial debate due to the fact that your entire social, family, and work life only puts you in contact with people who already share your political views. While there is certainly nothing wrong with using political values as criteria for selecting friends (or even a spouse), one of the most dangerous biases, *confirmation bias*, is exacerbated when we choose to live in bubbles where "we" who are open-minded and fair never subject ourselves to the views of the stupid and mendacious "they," except in the parody form delivered to us by our chosen cable news outlet.

Given that election seasons give us so many opportunities to leverage reason or engage in folly, perhaps the best solution is to use the occasion of a US election to learn how to master reasoning in order to avoid folly, not just in the voting booth but in other areas of life. For as well as being important events in and of themselves, national elections provides shared experiences that, with a little effort, can become shared *learning experiences* for studying the

important life-long skills that make someone a critical thinker.

After all, critical-thinking skills are difficult to teach and learn as a standalone subject. Certainly it's possible, given the number of standalone critical-thinking courses taught at the college level. But thinking, particularly critical thinking, tends to take place and is best learned within some kind of a context.

That context could be a shared class, maybe a history, science, or writing course that integrates critical-thinking lessons and exercises into a broader knowledge-based curriculum. In today's schools, such classes tend to be the places where teachers at least give a nod to critical-thinking skills such as logic and argumentation. But there are a couple of challenges with this approach.

First, such courses tend to get so packed with fact-based content that little time is left to focus on critical-thinking skills. Second, a class on a single subject (say writing, which might focus on persuasive language) is not likely to introduce students to the range of critical-thinking tools needed to master other subjects or help them succeed in other non-academic aspects of their lives. Finally, a classroom can, at best, only be a shared experience for a few.

As a country, and by extension a species, we have very few large-scale shared experiences left. The last time I can think of having had a shared cultural experience with even just those around me was the last episode of *Seinfeld*, a show that went off the air in 1998, before many of today's first-time voters were born. Since then, hip shows tend to be hip

with specific demographic splinters: reality TV for certain age/gender/regional demographics, edgy dramas for premium cable subscribers, and so on.

Even our news sources are increasingly selected from a wide range of options with an eye towards filtering out stories and opinions we'd prefer not to read, see, or hear. It's been a long time since most people got their news from Walter Cronkite, or during my era, the triumvirate of Dan Rather, Peter Jennings, and Tom Brokaw. In short, even the most important events of the day don't provide us a common reference point since most of us no longer even agree on which events are "most important."

But there is one major thing we still all share every four years: we all participate in a national presidential election. Even if we only choose to observe it from the sidelines (which is hard to do in our media-saturated, chaotic age), there is no escaping the shared experience of being exposed to a major political campaign.

And the particular shared experience of a presidential contest turns out to be the perfect subject for studying the various skills that fall under the heading of "critical thinking."

As I just mentioned, learning how to understand and make arguments is a cornerstone critical-thinking skill. And what is a presidential contest if not an argument or series of arguments between two and sometimes more individuals trying to convince us they are right and their opponent is wrong? In fact, presidential campaigns consist of almost nothing but arguments: every debate is an argument, every

interview, and every ad, even the negative ones (especially the negative ones!), arguments that can be analyzed and evaluated for effectiveness and quality using standard, easy-to-learn critical-thinking techniques.

Similarly, attempts at persuasive speech also surround us during an election campaign. The candidates use persuasive speech. Their surrogates use it. The media uses it. It appears in TV ads, direct mail pieces, e-mail blasts, and Internet communications. Despite the fact that some of the technologies used to communicate these persuasive messages are modern, the techniques themselves have been well understood for more than two thousand years.

This brings us to the issue of why study a subject that might seem ancient, especially since no one seems to think it's important enough to teach in K-12 or college except inside some specialized classes taught by the philosophy department.

That question is all the more puzzling since the subject we now call "critical thinking," which includes logic and rhetoric, had formed the backbone of all Western education until very recently.

From the time of Ancient Greece through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the Western educational canon was based on something called the trivium, a group of studies consisting of grammar (reading and writing), rhetoric (persuasive speech), and logic. Once students had mastered these three core disciplines, they would move on to studying a group of four additional subjects called the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). To succeed in

these more advanced subjects, students needed to know and apply what they learned during the trivium (logic, rhetoric, and grammar) portion of their education.

There are a number of reasons why this strict canon began to fade around the time of the Enlightenment and pretty much disappeared from general education during the nineteenth century. The overarching reason is that the scientific revolution occurring then introduced so many new branches of knowledge that a classical education covering just seven subjects was too constrained to address all the new material and the associated new teaching techniques generated in recent centuries.

Now I should pause here to let you know that I'm not one of those cranks who shows up at school committee meetings complaining that no one learns logic or Latin any longer. Like most of you, I have gone through the full course of K-12 public schooling. And like many of you, I supplemented that with several years of higher education. I can comfortably state that I and my fellow students benefited from being able to study subjects like Asian history and quantum mechanics rather than focus all of our studies on just seven things.

The problem is that as these new, important subjects crowded out older ones, we began to forget how to use those previously prioritized skills—especially the trivium skills of grammar, logic, and rhetoric—that were once the foundation of being an educated person and a good citizen.

This problem is particularly acute since not everyone has forgotten these subjects. For example, advertisers and

politicians are highly skilled in areas like argumentation and the persuasive arts, which they use to get us to do what they want us to do.

But if we as citizens can master these techniques ourselves, then they become our tools as well. And even if we don't put them to use to convince friends, family members, and business associates to do what we know is the right thing, at the very least they can provide us a protective shield by helping us understand exactly what is going on whenever an advertiser or candidate uses those tools to get us to do what *they* want.

Another reason why I hope you'll stick with this book is that the skills that make up critical thinking can be learned in a relatively short amount of time. One of the dirty little secrets of this subject is that the number of things you need to learn to think critically is pretty small. Certainly, there is enough material to fit into a full semester course, and some people have the good fortune of being able to dedicate their life to studying or teaching the subject full time. But this level of depth and mastery is not required to become an effective critical thinker.

To explain what I mean, let's talk about a related subject briefly: karate movies, specifically the original *Karate Kid* starring Ralph Macchio. In that film, the Karate Kid's teacher Mr. Miyagi only had time to teach his young protégé Daniel a small number of martial arts techniques. He dealt with Daniel's disappointment by informing him that quality would have to trump quantity. Quantity, in this case, meant years of studying far more martial arts moves. Quality meant

picking just the right moves needed to win the big tournament *and* internalizing those moves so deeply in Daniel's muscle memory that they became second nature, making him unstoppable.

So to qualify what I just said, while one can learn the right critical-thinking "moves" in the few short lessons taught in this book, truly mastering these skills requires making use of them in your daily life until they become second nature, that is, part of the memory of that critical "muscle" located inside your skull.

Another reason I recommend that you use the presidential election period to learn critical-thinking skills is that most of you will have very little else to do election-wise.

What do I mean by that?

Well, as recent elections have revealed, during most presidential races fewer than half the states are up for grabs, which means that the political campaigns need only work the vote in those few locations, commonly referred to as "swing states." Given our winner-take-all electoral college system, what this effectively means is that if you live in a state where the outcome of the vote is pretty much assured, that means the campaigns are going to ignore you, preferring to spend their time in places like Florida and Ohio where which party the state goes to is often critical to winning or losing a national presidential race. In fact, those who live in non-swing states can expect the campaigns to manifest primarily as people asking you to write checks to help pay for TV ads running in Dayton and Fort Myers.

But before we let ourselves off the hook, keep in mind that taking voters for granted is not something we can blame on candidates alone.

According to Bill Bishop, author of the 2009 book *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*, the number of people living in so-called "landslide districts," that is, voting districts where one party's candidate beats the other by more than twenty percentage points, rose from 26 percent of the population in 1976 to 48 percent in 2004. While I don't have any new data to go by, I would guess this number has risen still higher since *Big Sort* was published.

Many of you may already have experienced the consequences of Americans self-sorting themselves into communities of the like-minded. As I asked earlier, has it been a while since you had a solid political conversation, much less a genuine argument, with a friend or neighbor about an important political issue rather than just trying to one-up them on how much you like the candidate you both prefer or despise the one you shun? Or if you hold the minority opinion in one of these landslide districts, do people go out of their way to engage with you, or is the subject of politics avoided altogether, especially now that many of us have online communities where we can hang out with people who already agree with us if our real-world neighborhoods don't represent the consensus we prefer?

Now I'm not urging cynicism, certainly not the type of cynicism that says our votes are meaningless so we should skip the whole election and focus on sports or video games

until the whole circus has left town. The popular vote a presidential candidate receives is still important in establishing a mandate, especially in elections where the electoral vote is close, as it has been in the recent past. So voting is still imbued with practical political importance, as well as being our most sacred civic responsibility.

But as many voters have discovered in recent years, it's easy to get to the end of an election cycle without experiencing much of the campaign or having many genuine political discussions with those we interact with every day. Given this, why not use an election to master the valuable life skills associated with critical thinking, especially given that the campaigns will be spending millions of dollars generating material to study and learn from?

As you prepare to begin the next chapter (one on a vital first principle: understanding and dealing with bias), I should let you know that as you have been reading this introduction you have been exposed to many of the techniques we will be discussing in this book.

For example, the presentation you have just read is part of a logical argument, or more specifically a linked set of logical arguments that goes something like this:

> **Premise 1**: A US election offers a wide variety of examples that can be analyzed to help us learn critical-thinking techniques.
>
> **Premise 2**: Critical-thinking techniques are important skills that everyone should know, at least to avoid being manipulated by others.

Conclusion: Therefore, we should use the period of a US election campaign to study critical-thinking skills and master important skills everyone should know.

Linked to this argument is another one that goes something like this:

Premise 1: We should use the period of a US election campaign to learn critical-thinking skills everyone should know.
Premise 2: This book will help you use the US election campaign to learn critical-thinking skills.
Conclusion: Therefore, you should read this book.

I've also used several rhetorical devices in several ways to perk up several parts of my presentation. For example, that last sentence you read is an example of a rhetorical device called *anaphora*, the intentional repeating of a word or phrase, in this case the word "several," for effect.

When that sentence is read on the page instead of being spoken, it probably comes off a bit awkward. A simpler sentence such as "I've used several rhetorical devices throughout this presentation" would probably read better. But when said aloud, statements containing anaphora come off as more persuasive. If you read both my original anaphora and the simpler substitute out loud, you will see what I mean. This effect is why persuasive speakers like presidential candidates use this device all the time.

Also, my use of pop culture references (admittedly "classic" ones) like *Seinfeld* and *The Karate Kid* serves multiple purposes such as building a rapport, also called an *ethos* bond, with you by demonstrating that we share things in common and implying we should agree on other things as well, including the positions I'm arguing.

These popular culture touchpoints are also coupled with my use of informal language (including contractions and parenthetical asides like the one you're reading now).

Part of the reason this book is written with a less-than-scholarly tone is that much of the material originated in a podcast which, like a blog, is meant to be conversational in nature and so not only forgives but requires a certain level of informality.

People tend to react negatively when they listen to a podcast that's a recording of a classroom lecture or business presentation, events that take place in a more formal setting where language is meant to reflect the power relationships between people in the room. I've read a number of books and articles about blogging that highlight the need for a blog author to have what they call an "authentic voice," with "authenticity" simply meaning the ability to master the cultural norms of a specific medium. And as these new forms of media have become more popular, their norms have seeped into other types of communication such as books like this one.

Finally, in addition to the logical appeals I've been making to you, I've also been pushing a few emotional

buttons. (The appeal to emotion is commonly referred to as *pathos*, something you'll read more about in Chapter 3.)

I'd like to claim that these appeals have all been to your virtuous pursuit of civic duty and your desire for freedom and independence. But I've also made a tribal appeal, setting "us" (people who want to enjoy the freedom derived from becoming critical thinkers) against "them" (the advertisers and politicians who are cynically trying to manipulate us).

Is this a fair way to divide the world? Well as you'll discover as you read this book, fairness is not necessarily a required virtue when it comes to the persuasive arts.

Intrigued? If you are, then turn the page to begin a journey that will teach you one of life's most important skills: how to think for yourself.