



Election 2012: Sound Bites vs. Reality

Any good advertising man knows that a catchy slogan is worth a thousand words. A lot more customers are won by “Coke is It!” or “Just Do It” than are lost by the tedious expositions on side effects rendered at the end of drug commercials. Unfortunately, sound bites, true or not, are also effective in politics. They can even trump reality.

Consider, for instance, the rallying cry “A woman makes only 72 cents on a man’s dollar!” This is a compelling message even though it’s wholly deceptive. As I explained [here](#), if you dig into the statistics behind that statistic, you learn that this disparity is explained not by unjust discrimination but by career and lifestyle choices the sexes make, such as entering different occupations, working different numbers of hours, and taking on different amounts of responsibility. But digging is difficult and people’s attention spans are short; thus, even conservative politicians choose to mouth platitudes about women’s rights rather than dare explain the truth on the wage gap.

Another sound bite bandied about this election cycle is that Mitt Romney pays only 14 percent in tax, a class-warfare message that’s supposed to make us believe the rich don’t pony up their “fair share.” What this bit of propaganda confuses, however, are income-tax rates with the capital-gains tax rate. And fairness dictates that the latter must be lower. Why? Because if you have a job paying \$100,000 a year, that’s guaranteed income; in contrast, investing may bring great profit, but you also may lose everything. In addition, if you sell stock four years after purchase having made 100 grand, that capital gain is listed on your tax return for the year of liquidation. But was your rate of return the same as with the aforementioned income, \$100,000 a year? No, it was \$25,000 a year.

Because of this, investment would dry up if we taxed capital gains at anything approximating the rate on guaranteed income, as the risk when investing would be the same but the possible return a lot lower. Also bear in mind that while Uncle Sam is a happy partner when you make money, he disappears (except for a paltry \$3000-per-year write-off) like a thief in the night when you lose it.

The bottom line is that the top one percent of wage-earners [pay](#) 37 percent of all income taxes; the top five and 10 percent pay, respectively, 59 and 70 percent. Yet this three-paragraph explanation amounts to 236 words and is not nearly as compelling in commercials or news pieces as “Why should Warren Buffet pay a lower tax rate than his secretary?!” And, let’s face it, many voters wouldn’t read a piece of





Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on October 23, 2012

in-depth commentary if it was pasted to a stripper.

Apathy and the ignorance it breeds, however, aren't the only problems. Sure, the demagogues vying for power and their media enablers deserve much blame. But remember that a demagogue — a false leader who gains power by playing upon the emotions and prejudices of the people — holds sway only when prejudices to be played upon exist in the first place. And while everyone claims to want the truth from politicians, to paraphrase Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men*, many Americans can't handle the truth.

A lot of people simply glom onto messages that confirm their own biases. For instance, many women, and some men, will react emotionally upon hearing explanations of the true causes of the intersex wage gap and claim that they're simply justifications for perpetuating the (long-dead) patriarchy. Likewise, envy drives many others to continue to want to hammer the rich, despite the burden they already carry and the fact that lowering their tide can founder all boats (i.e., you don't get a job from a poor guy).

But while sound bites play on shallowness, they also breed it. For example, many will wonder why Mitt Romney didn't use what would appear to have been obvious comebacks in the last presidential debate. Of course, part of the reason is that "a good answer is the one you think of later," as the saying goes. But another is that politicians enter debates with well-memorized talking points, and they're reluctant to deviate from the script for fear of the bite of the sound bite.

Making one wrong move can hurt or even scuttle a campaign. Just consider how much mileage the opposition got out of Romney's [47-percent comment](#). Why, I even heard a supermarket checkout girl mention it, despite the fact that she knew little about politics, as a brief conversation with her evidenced. And, no, Romney's comment wasn't as bad as Barack Obama's clinging to "guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them" [statement](#), but sound only bites when the media actually sink their teeth into the story.

Of course, none of this is as devastating as Michael Dukakis [wearing the helmet](#) in the tank in 1988 or Howard Dean's [scream](#) while campaigning in Iowa in 2004, actions that might have been the last nails in their campaigns' coffins. But while there were good reasons to reject both candidates, was a photo-op foul-up or a two-second exultation really one of them? Is this what our electoral decisions are reduced to?

Sadly, the answer is yes. Forget about reality, it's sound that bites.



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