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Romney, Obama, and the 47%: gaffes and representative anecdotes in the 2012 presidential campaign

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the vocabulary provided by scholarship on gaffes, narrative paradigm, and representative anecdote to suggest that both the Obama and Romney campaigns employed Mitt Romney's leaked "47%" comment as a Burkean representative anecdote in the 2012 election. The elevation of the leaked comment was possible because the gaffe held narrative fidelity for the stories proposed by both campaigns, but narrative coherence and transcendent values became contentious aspects of the respective narratives. Critically analyzing divergent meanings assigned to the leaked comment opens space to discuss the role gaffes play in campaign narratives, complicates contemporary understanding of gaffes and their integration into broader political campaigns, and illuminates the impact of particular rhetorical constructions on campaigns and public policy.

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During the 2012 presidential campaign, believing his remarks at a private \$50,000 a plate fundraiser would not be circulated publically, Republican candidate Willard "Mitt" Romney was video-recorded making the following comment on the election:

[t]here are 47% of the people who will vote for the president no matter what. All right, there are 47% who are with him, who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to healthcare, to food, to housing, to you-name-it. (Corn 2012, para. 2)

The revelation of Romney's private statement likely contributed to his electoral loss. Nate Silver (2012) argues in the *New York Times* the statement coincided with a shift in the election wherein Romney began losing to ground to Obama among swing voters. The statement generated substantive controversy, and presented a moment for both campaigns to coalesce around a rhetorical event. That event, an inelegant gaffe, presents a notable rhetorical problem of in the context of the 2012 presidential campaign.

It is not simply that the gaffe received a large amount of news coverage. In addition to being mentioned in interviews, invoked in the presidential debates, and subject of constant analysis from pundits, the leaked comment played a rhetorical role in the broader campaign narratives forwarded by both Romney and Obama. In the proceeding essay, I

argue the leaked fundraising speech was fashioned as a Burkean representative anecdote (Burke 1962, 1984; Brummett 1984a, 1984b), which crystalized both campaigns' narratives and fostered rhetorical interaction. Brummett (1984b) suggests representative anecdotes are the dramatic elements that represent "the essence of the whole discourse," a component of a broader narrative which embodies the story being formed by particular rhetors (3). In the context of political communication, representative anecdotes are those persistent and simplified examples of a significant argument that get replayed and reiterated in the course of a campaign.

Situating the leaked "47%" comment as a representative anecdote clarifies the rhetorical function of the gaffe in the context of the 2012 presidential race. This clarification is significant for two reasons. First, the use of the leaked comment is a moment where a candidate gaffe is given significant weight by pundits, the polity, and most significantly, both campaigns. Gaffes are often circulated in traditional and social media circles as embarrassing moments for a candidate, but rarely do those verbal missteps persist in the hustle and bustle of the modern campaign (Karpf 2010). Second, this gaffe was embraced by *both* campaigns, and assigned competing meanings on how the gaffe represented Romney's ideological and political leanings. Where the Romney campaign positioned the gaffe as a bald but necessary expression of conservatism, the Obama campaign elevated the leaked comment as further evidence of Romney's disconnect from the economic reality of the United States. Ultimately, the language of representative anecdote offers explanation to how and why a gaffe could be integrated into broader campaign narratives, and points toward why particular gaffes have rhetorical traction.

To build this argument, I situate extant theorizing on representative anecdotes alongside research on campaign narratives and political gaffes to demonstrate that multiple opposed meanings can be assigned to a representative anecdote in different campaign narratives. Integrating representative anecdotes with narrative analysis (Fisher 1984, 1989) offers scholars an opportunity to uncover previously unseen interactions between competing claims made by campaigns. This situated theoretical perspective on representative anecdote would empower scholars to analyze campaign gaffes more effectively in the overall narratives of given campaigns, a capability that is sorely lacking in contemporary research. Gaffes typically are written off by scholars as campaign ephemera, fleeting exchanges lost in the churn of news coverage and pundit commentary. Gaffes, in this reading, are immaterial to the elements of a campaign that matter. It is insufficient, however, to ask *whether* gaffes matter, as that question has been, and will be, parsed and answered in different ways (Karpf 2010). Rather, scholars ought to ask *in what ways* gaffes matter to better understand the interplay of micro level campaign messages and macro-level political narratives.

The present study offers a mechanism to describe and problematize the rhetorical function of gaffes relative to broader campaign messages through an analysis of the leaked "47%" comment in the 2012 presidential campaign. I first discuss the function of political narratives and the dominant narratives of the 2012 campaigns. Next, theoretical perspectives on representative anecdotes and gaffes are introduced, with subsequent analysis of each campaign's integration of the comment. Finally, I argue the crystallization of campaign narratives around a representative anecdote invites discussion on the impact narrative depictions have on political imagination, and the social implications of the employment of those narratives in campaigns.

Narrative in the context of political campaigns

A litany of scholars have discussed in detail the political function of narrative (e.g. Fisher 1984; Levasseur and Gring-Pemble 2015; Lucaites and Condit 1985; Mumby 1987). A perspective of political narrative would suggest both voters' and politicians' decisions do not consist entirely of rational deliberation. The presence of an overarching narrative in a campaign or debate can color the audience's interpretation of events and facts, and even compel individuals to act (Bennett and Edelman 1985). Smith's (1989) treatment of the 1984 national political parties' platforms illuminates how narrative can function in political discourse. Smith, citing Fisher (1985), argues that political parties provide dramatic tension for storytellers: "therefore, an examination of the internal workings of an artifact such as a party platform—a product of an established institution—may yield insights regarding those narrators, the institutions, and their perceived conditions" (Smith 1989, 94). Smith contends that both parties in the 1984 general election offered coherent narratives under Fisher's narrative paradigm, despite the fact that they told opposing and disparate stories. By appealing to different transcendent values, both parties in the 1984 election forwarded a narrative argument for their ascension to the presidency.

Narratives, then, offer arguments for the audiences' consideration. Such arguments, according to Fisher (1984, 1989), are not evaluated exclusively on their rational merit. Instead, narratives are assessed through two criteria, narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. Narrative coherence refers to the internal consistency of a story, the extent to which the audience believes the story to "hang together" and "be free of contradictions" (Fisher 1985, 349). Narrative fidelity, conversely, discusses a narrative's relevance and external consistency of the story relative to the audience's morals. Fisher's (1985) explanation of narrative fidelity involves the truth qualities of the story, the fact, relevance, consequence, consistency, and transcendent issues of the story itself. Implicit in Fisher's criteria is the space for evaluating competing narratives, as well. That evaluative capacity is significant, as a political campaign cycle will feature numerous narratives with varying degrees of fidelity or coherence relative to audience perspectives.

Indeed, a presidential campaign is a long, arduous process that is rarely dominated by a single narrative (Levasseur and Gring-Pemble 2015; Silverstein 2011; Smith 1989). However, different narrative strains develop salience within a campaign, in part based on narrative coherence and fidelity. Particular discourses and actions are rhetorically linked to forward a story, an argument, which offers the audience competing visions of political reality. This competition is evident in the 2012 campaign between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama. The campaigns foregrounded policies, actions, and arguments to construct what Smith (1989) called transcendent values for the respective campaigns.

The Romney campaign proposed a free-market, anti-intervention narrative situated as referendum on the economic recovery orchestrated in Obama's first term. To that end, Levasseur and Gring-Pemble (2015) argue a prominent narrative of the Romney campaign focused on his business acumen and leadership as evidenced by his tenure at Bain Capital. According to Levasseur and Gring-Pemble (2015), "Romney told of his Bain Capital experience to advance the claim that he was someone who understood how to help businesses" (5). The authors suggest the introduction of the Bain Capital experience created transcendent values that championed market solvency. Romney spoke at length on the benefits of working at Bain Capital late into the campaign, routinely mentioning his

experience in stump speeches, and even writing an editorial for the *Wall Street Journal* in September titled “What I Learned at Bain Capital” (Romney 2012). Focus on the private sector empowered Romney to criticize underlying assumptions about the role of government forwarded by the Obama campaign. In January of 2012, Romney argued the Obama administration had been attempting to draw “the soul of America’ toward a ‘European-style welfare state’” (Shear and Saulny 2012, para. 1). By emphasizing the free market, the Romney campaign forwarded a clear political narrative.

Comparatively, the Obama campaign constructed a narrative of Romney as callous and out of touch. Romney was portrayed as “a bazillionaire elitist and conviction-free flip-flopper who has allied himself with the Republican Party’s most extreme positions” (Stevenson 2012). The Obama campaign framed Romney’s record at Bain Capital as cruel and disconnected from the economic every day to articulate the central issue of the campaign as a moral dilemma facing the US economy. Levasseur and Gring-Pemble (2015) suggest past successes in attacking Romney’s private sector record were repeated in 2012, with “an early Obama attack ad campaign against Romney as a ‘carbon copy’ of the approach that did such damage to Romney’s 1994 Senate candidacy” (Levasseur and Gring-Pemble 2015, 15). Obama was quick to criticize Romney’s performance at Bain, and what that performance signified in moral terms (Barabaro 2012). The Obama campaign sought an economic moral high ground, distancing itself from material reality of the economy while indicting underlying assumptions about the way the economy ought to work.

The narratives constructed by each campaign operated with what Lange (1993) calls a logic of interaction where opposed discourses were necessarily integrated into the broader narratives of the election. Asen (2002b) suggests interaction is a necessary part of negotiating meaning, as “representing entails contest and struggle as participants in public debates and controversies seek to sustain, modify, or supplant representations that circulate throughout public discourse” (12). The interaction between the campaigns is evident not only in the constant back and forth of comments, speeches, and attack ads. Interaction also exists in how campaigns respond to crisis points, and whether narratives are reframed or reevaluated. Such a point exists in the leaked “47%” comments, a gaffe embarrassing to Romney. In the next section, the leaked comment is situated alongside theorizing on representative anecdotes to suggest the gaffe presented a rhetorical opportunity to both campaigns to crystalize their narratives.

Representative anecdote and the 47%

The leaked fundraising speech impacted the narrative of each campaign in distinct but strikingly similar ways. The speech, treated as a gaffe, was taken as a sincere (albeit inelegant) representation of the Romney campaign’s ideological stance on the role of government. Holihan (2009) suggests the proliferation of new media technologies have facilitated an increased frequency of focus on gaffes, the “gotcha” moments that occur in campaigns. Holihan (2009) further suggests these political mistakes are not simply embarrassing to a candidate. Instead, gaffes have the capacity to define or alter the direction and messages of a campaign. Indeed, gaffes do not occur in the abstract, distinct from other campaign messages. Silverstein (2011) suggests gaffes are taken not as inelegant mistakes, but as genuine expressions of the candidate and their campaign. Gaffes are “frequently

turned into (...) an indexical of something deeper, an inwardly pointing sign revelatory of personality or character or identity, and thus a diagnostic bit of ‘truth’” (169). Such is the case for the leaked fundraising comments, as the “47%” gaffe is treated as a bald representation of Romney’s ideological stances. Gaffes have the capacity to alter the trajectory of a race, not necessarily because highly visible mistakes disqualify a candidate, but because the mistake itself serves a functional or narrative purpose for campaigns.

Situating gaffes relative to a broader campaign narrative is most fruitful by locating a campaign’s representative anecdote(s). Brummett (1984b) suggests that a representative anecdote is an answer to the question: “if this were a story or a play, what would the bare bones or abstract outline of the story be, what is the plot and what pattern does it follow?” (4). This is not to say, however, that representative anecdotes need have all the elements of plot to be integrated into broader discourses. Burke (1984) suggests all discourse is inherently dramatic, describing tension between forces and implying conflict. A representative anecdote, then, would condense and clarify the conflict between different actors in a particular way.

I propose a situated understanding of representative anecdotes for the analysis of gaffes within their broader campaign contexts, a methodological choice informed by Gring-Pemble’s (2001, 2003) work on anecdotal evidence in the Congressional hearings over welfare reform. Brummett (1984a) suggests locating representative anecdotes is the task of a rhetorical critic, an action designed to find the “types, components, or structures of literature [that] *recur*” (161, italics original). Brummett (1984a, 1984b) conceptualizes representative anecdote as a method, adopted to demonstrate a critic’s argument. Crable (2000) troubles this reading by explaining that Burke’s application of the concept of representative anecdote “does work” by articulating dramatism as a preferable view of interactions (318). Rather than conceive of representative anecdote as a method of critical inquiry, Crable (2000) suggests representative anecdotes conceptually demonstrate the way narratives select, reflect, and deflect the motives and assumptions of storytellers and audiences. The present study extends this conception of representative anecdotes in the context of political gaffes and campaigns by suggesting a representative anecdote is bound to the rhetorical limits of pre-existing campaign narratives. These rhetorical limits clarify the integration of specific gaffes into broader campaign narratives, and partially answer the question of *why* a gaffe may (not) generate rhetorical traction.

In the course of an election, campaign narratives may adopt particular representative anecdotes, such as statements, images, or ideas, taken to be representative of the whole. As components of a broader narrative, a campaign’s representative anecdotes would implicate, and be implicated by, those preceding arguments and discourses circulated by candidates. As such, these representative anecdotes would be subject to the same rhetorical constraints (such as fidelity and coherence) while distilling complex ideas into a single frame. By responding to these narrative limitations, a representative anecdote could crystallize the essence of a given narrative to invoke the dramatic components of a body of discourse with brevity and elegance (Burke 1984). The utility of a representative anecdote to a campaign under this interpretation is obvious. In addition to simplifying otherwise-complex narratives, representative anecdotes have the benefit of pithiness in a 24-hour news environment.

Taken as representative anecdotes, gaffes are significant because they elegantly summarize the most salient criticism of a given candidate. For example, Michael Dukakis’s

ill-fated ride in an Abrams tank captured in a single image the Bush campaign's narrative describing Dukakis. Josh King (2013) suggests in an article for *Politico* that the Bush campaign pushed serious questions about Dukakis's patriotism and competence on military matters. Gaffes provide fodder for pundits, but missteps also offer an opportunity for opposition campaigns to (re)articulate prevailing narratives to crowd out other interpretations. The image of Dukakis in a tank, perhaps initially designed to bolster the candidate's credibility on national defense, was quickly found to be an embarrassment for the Dukakis campaign. As a consequence of the way the image was (re)interpreted, Dukakis was unable to use the image to bolster his own campaign's narrative. The Bush campaign used the image to portray Dukakis as out of place on defense, a notion mutually exclusive with the Dukakis campaign's original meaning.

Mutual exclusivity does not, however, characterize the way the leaked fundraising comments were used in the 2012 campaign. The "47%" comment was a part of private speech given in May by Mitt Romney to a group of prospective campaign donors in Boca Raton, Florida. A bartender at the event took video that he then leaked to Mother Jones, a liberal news website, who released the video to the public on September 17 (Man, O'Matz, and Reid 2012). The event, a private, \$50,000-a-person affair was designed to offer donors a chance to meet with the then-presumed GOP nominee. The topics covered included immigration, foreign policy in the Middle East, and entitlement spending and taxes. At its core, the speech was a fundraising speech, designed to explain the specifics of the Republican platform to high-impact contributors and to also convince donors to further support the Republican ticket.

Though initially shocking, the "47%" number was not a fabrication by the Romney campaign. According to Bingham (2012), the comment was likely representative of the exit polling from the 2008 presidential election and statistics regarding income tax rates. However, Romney's comment conflates those individuals who do not pay income tax with those who are drawing government benefits, assigning uniform political motive to a multifaceted group. Such a conflation was likely a consequence of the fact that "low-income voters, whose incomes are too low to pay income tax and who are most likely to qualify for rental assistance, food stamps and Medicaid, overwhelmingly voted for Obama in 2008" (Bingham 2012, para. 20). Ultimately, the comment was discussed in depth by members of both campaigns and by the press.

The video of the speech immediately generated a media firestorm, leading to a wide range of criticism. GOP strategist and former Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan criticized Romney for thinking the audience did not have a detractor present, or that having a microphone at a "private" event actually made the event "private" (Noonan 2012, para. 4). Additionally, the leaked comment had a measurable impact on public opinion. On September 27, statistician Nate Silver argued Romney was losing ground to Obama due to the comment, with as much as a 2-point impact on public opinion against Romney (2012). Furthermore, Kevin Robillard (2012) reported from a Pew research poll that over two-thirds of Americans had heard the gaffe and that a majority of those polled said the statement made them less likely to vote for Romney.

The comment came to be the focus of media coverage and the campaigns themselves in the subsequent weeks. As such, candidates and surrogates were forced to respond to the leaked comment in a way consistent with the previous utterances of the campaigns.

The leaked comment as representative anecdote

The interaction between the Romney and Obama campaigns demonstrates both the way a gaffe can be translated into a representative anecdote and the complex nature by which representative anecdotes interact with the broader campaigns in which they are situated. The leaked comment represents a moment where an argument is couched within broader narratives to distinct but not mutually exclusive meanings. For Romney, the leaked speech crystalized the role of government. It was seized upon as true conservatism, something to be embraced, rather than apologized for (Walsh 2012). Within Romney's narrative, the leaked comment clearly stated the dire economic and political stakes of the status quo. The Obama campaign, comparatively, integrated the leaked comments into a broader narrative that painted Romney as an unfeeling economic elitist. In the different campaign responses to and integrations of the leaked comments, there are visible attempts to generate or problematize both narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. Narrative coherence, a narrative's internal consistency, and fidelity, the way a story resonates with an audience, are both important to the success and impact of a given narrative (Fisher 1989). The following section details, first, the way the leaked comments functioned as a representative anecdote by having narrative fidelity and coherence with the dominant economic narrative of the Romney campaign. Second, the Obama campaign's use of the comment will be discussed as a demonstration of the moral failings of the economy a Romney administration would erect. Each application of the leaked comment held both narrative fidelity and coherence for each campaign's broader audiences. The Obama campaign, however, was able to trouble Romney's narrative fidelity by demonstrating material and ideological limitations resultant from the comment. Finally, the tension between fidelity and coherence is discussed in the context of the leaked comment.

Romney's representative anecdote

Rather than fully distancing himself from the leaked fundraising video, Romney's campaign situated the comment as a representative anecdote of his own no-nonsense conservatism and business acumen. The leaked fundraising speech had narrative fidelity with past Romney campaign comments, as well as longstanding attitudes held by the GOP base. Members of the conservative media did not simply defend Romney from the blowback engendered by the comment; some went so far as to argue the leaked comment could be a successful element of the campaign. Erick Erickson (2012) suggested in an article for *Red State*, Romney should not distance himself from the leak, instead that the campaign should "double down" and "own it" (para. 4). A consistent refrain from supporters of the Romney campaign was that the comment, though inarticulate, was representative of core values of the Republican Party. Erickson suggests, "the trouble for the left and media (...) is that most Americans agree with Mitt Romney. Most Americans consider themselves part of the 53%" (para. 5). Some politicians rushed to defend Romney's argument, with former Congressman Allen West (R-FL) indicting the clumsiness of the statement but standing by the core message (Condon 2012). Michael Walsh (2012) sighed relief in an editorial for the *National Review*, as the statement made it so Romney "sounded remarkably like ... a real conservative" (para. 2). Walsh suggests the core of the comment was the ultimately defensible notion that "having no skin in the game while at the same time

demanding a say in the proceedings at the federal level is fundamentally undemocratic” (2012, para. 6). These defenses of Romney go beyond calling the statement inelegant; they suggest utility and urgency for the content of the leaked comment. John O’Sullivan (2012) for the *National Review* suggested that Romney “was telling the truth about the most important issue in the election” (para. 7) on the same day that conservative commentator Ann Coulter argued that “any Republican running for president has to acknowledge we’re not going to get that 47 percent of the electorate” (Meyers and Bachman 2012, para. 10). Rather than walk the statement back, Romney was encouraged by parts of the conservative media and political establishment to pursue the argument opened by the gaffe.

Statements that promote the desirability of underlying assumptions of the gaffe echo the initial apology of the Romney campaign. Romney’s first apology suggested the leaked comments might be offensive to some, but speak a larger truth about the American electorate. In a press conference the evening of the video’s release, Romney indicated the leaked comment was “not elegantly stated, [...] I’m sure I can state it more clearly and in a more effective way than I did in a setting like that” (Mehta 2012, para. 3). Rather than being treated as one would expect a gaffe to be treated, with calls for apology from one side tempered by the offending party’s surrogates and apologists, the gaffe was actually elevated as a means to crystalize Romney’s narrative of rough-but-fair conservatism. *Fox News* Bill O’Reilly (2012) indicated puzzlement at the need for an apology, as “If I’m Governor Romney, I run with this all day long. [...] Right now the federal and state governments are spending nearly a trillion dollars a year on means-tested entitlements” (para. 4). Indeed, the apology itself was roundly criticized in conservative media circles (O’Sullivan 2012).

Furthermore, the Romney campaign’s eventual apology for the video supports the integration of the comment into the broader campaign narrative. Romney indicated, 18 days after the tape was released, “clearly in a campaign with hundreds if not thousands of speeches and question-and-answer sessions, now and then you’re going to say something that doesn’t come out right. In this case, I said something that’s just completely wrong” (Killough 2012, para. 1). Note that Romney’s statement is not an apology, merely recognition that a statement was “wrong.” In context, the apology could indicate the leaked comment was not politically ideal or gentle, but still ideologically consistent with Romney’s platform. Indeed, the notion that after hundreds of speeches a mistake may occur is more an appeal to human fallibility than an error in judgment. Rather than explain the comment as not representing reality, the Romney campaign allowed ambiguity on what constitutes “wrong” in context.

The “47%” comment was less an aberration, and more a condensation of underlying assumptions of the Romney campaign and the contemporary Republican Party. Zelenak (2014) suggests the “47%” argument has roots from conservative think tanks, such as the Tax Policy Center, who popularized estimations of non-tax paying households to be approaching 50% by 2010 in the United States. Ford O’Connell (2012) argues in an article for *US News* that the leaked video “captured conservative thinking—that continuous expansion of the entitlement state has created a substantial bloc of voters who don’t care about tax cuts and have grown too dependent on government to vote to limit its scope” (para. 3). Months prior to video’s release, Sen. Jim DeMint (R–SC) contended in an interview that “we’re on a track where 60 percent are getting something from government and 40 percent are paying for it. You can’t sustain a democracy with that mix”

(Gillespie and Welch 2012, para. 4). The leaked video was consistent, then, with many underlying assumptions of the Romney campaign's narrative.

Integration into the Obama campaign

The Obama campaign was quick to seize upon the leaked comment as not only embarrassing for Romney, but as representative of a problematic ideology inherent in Romney's narrative. Obama's campaign manager, Jim Messina, released a statement indicating "It's shocking that a candidate for president of the United States would go behind closed doors and declare to a group of wealthy donors that half the American people view themselves as 'victims'" (Mehta 2012, para. 3). The Obama campaign even went so far as to release an attack ad in October that consisted of the audio of the leaked comment overlaid on images of veterans, elderly individuals, and persons who the audience assumes were wrongfully criticized by the Romney campaign (Ball 2012). The campaign went beyond simply using the leaked comment as a gaffe, choosing instead to actively problematize the coherence of the comment and the broader narrative forwarded by the Romney campaign.

The Obama narrative argues the comments misdiagnose the problem, and demonstrate a fundamental lack of empathy for many of Americans. The comment surfaced in different media contexts following its initial release. Obama used an interview with David Letterman to indict the narrative coherence of the leaked comment, arguing that:

There are not a lot of people out there who think they're victims. There are not a lot of people who think they're entitled to something. What I think the majority of people, Democrats and Republicans, believe is that we've got some obligations to each other and there's nothing wrong with us giving each other a helping hand. (Farley 2012, para. 7)

The Obama campaign was not simply using the leaked comment as a means to embarrass their opponent for speaking inelegantly. In indicting the narrative coherence of the leaked comment, implicit questions are raised about the fidelity of broader political narratives. The Obama campaign used the leaked comment to criticize the underlying assumptions of the Romney campaign narrative, indicating "People understand, I think, that you're going to make mistakes on the campaign trail. What I think people want to make sure of though is that you're not writing off a big chunk of the country" (Farley 2012, para. 9). By elevating the comment as a representative anecdote of a problematic ideology, the Obama campaign sought to disrupt the narrative coherence of the broader Romney narrative.

Similarly, Obama integrated the leaked comment into the second Presidential debate to further problematize the coherence of the Romney campaign's narrative. Obama argued that his campaign was weary of "when [Romney] said behind closed doors that 47 percent of the country considered themselves victims, who refuse personal responsibility," as the public should:

Think about who he was talking about (...) Folks on Social Security who have worked all their lives. Veterans who have sacrificed for this country. Students who are out there trying to hopefully advance their own dreams, but also this country's dreams. Soldiers who are overseas fighting for us right now. People who are working hard every day, paying payroll tax, gas tax, but don't make enough income. (Johnson 2012, para. 3)

The implicit argument made by the Obama campaign was that the leaked comment was not only inconsistent with the material reality of tax payment in the United States, but that the underlying ideological assumption in such a statement invites criticism that goes beyond the statement itself. David Brooks (2012) argues in the *New York Times* that the leaked comment threw into stark relief the implicit assumptions of the Romney campaign, arguing the gaffe was the type of statement that “self-satisfied millionaires say to each other. It reinforces every negative view people have about Romney” (para. 14). The leaked comment was discordant with both the material reality of the American economy, and the perceived reality of everyday Americans.

The Obama campaign’s use of the leaked comment as a representative anecdote opens room for a discussion of the tension between narrative coherence and narrative fidelity of the comment relative to different campaign narratives. According to Fisher (1985, 1989), a narrative must display both fidelity and coherence in order to be accepted by the audience. Fisher argues a narrative must both make sense when compared to the audience’s own lived experience and be internally consistent in order to be deemed worthwhile. As demonstrated by integration in the Romney campaign as a representative anecdote, the leaked comment held ideological consistency with Romney’s campaign narrative. From the onset, the anecdote appears coherent, despite the Obama campaign’s criticism.

Further investigation demonstrates that coherence and fidelity are at odds for different audiences in the leaked speech. It is difficult for Romney’s narrative to simultaneously have coherence and fidelity for multiple audiences, as to meet the criteria of one would complicate the other. Much of Romney’s discussion of entitlement spending has, for a politically conservative audience, both coherence and fidelity. Romney is appealing to both their lived experience, and their preconceived political notions about the world. The notion of “undeserving poor” and “entitled” individuals has been embedded in American politics for centuries, becoming incredibly salient in the Reagan administration (Asen 2002b; Zinn 2014). The appeal is not just unique to conservative individuals; American audiences are uniquely susceptible to a narrative that prioritizes hard work and demonizes individuals who were reliant on others, as such an ethos is routinely used by politicians and forwarded in political spheres (Adkisson and Mohammed 2012). The internal coherence of the narrative is ruptured in favor of fidelity, however, when Romney argues “there are 47 percent who are with [Obama], who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims” (Corn 2012, para. 2). Recall that coherence refers to whether or not the story “hangs together” and whether the narrative is internally consistent (Fisher 1985). Contending that political enemies are entitled and reliant on the government may resonate with conservative audiences (thus achieving fidelity), but such a contention is disconnected from the material reality of social programs and tax systems in the United States. The 47% were not all politically powerful ne’er-do-wells hell bent on bringing down the well-intentioned entrepreneur. Instead, they were the recently unemployed, the elderly, and the disabled (Bennett 2012). Those 47% of Americans who do not pay income taxes continue to pay sales tax, and estimations from Dashiell Bennett (2012) in the *Atlantic* suggest that 28% of Americans who do not pay income tax still pay payroll taxes, thus helping to fund entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicare. It is close to impossible, in light of this reading, for Romney’s narrative to simultaneously have coherence and fidelity for audiences who understand the actual composition of the 47%. By using the 53/47 frames to increase his narrative’s fidelity, Romney implicates the

narrative's coherence for many audiences. Similarly, if Romney were to draw attention to the material reality of those who do not pay income taxes, the fidelity of his campaign's narrative of free market solvency would be disrupted.

Discussion and implications

The preceding analysis sought to accomplish two goals. First, a theoretical conception of gaffes as representative anecdotes in campaign narratives was forwarded to develop and refine a critical vocabulary. Second, that vocabulary was applied to Romney's leaked fundraising speech to demonstrate the way the comments functioned in broader campaign narratives as a representative anecdote. The following section will cover the theoretical implications of using representative anecdote in the context of a well-publicized gaffe and conclude with a discussion of the social implications of the comment's integration in the 2012 campaign.

The present study demonstrates the complex meanings sometimes ascribed to gaffes in the context of campaigns. Obviously, not every gaffe generates substantive media coverage in the course of a campaign. As Karpf (2010) notes, the tendency for gaffes to proliferate is contingent on a number of factors, including technological access, interest, and the nature of the comment itself. There are gaffes, however, which capture the essence of a criticism of a candidate, as was the case in Bush's criticism of Dukakis on national security. These essentialized criticisms are complicated when gaffes are assigned differing meanings by opposed campaigns. These competing claims articulate the complex meanings that seemingly innocuous verbal missteps can acquire. Through the situated use of representative anecdote, gaffes can be understood not as trivialities, but as rhetorically rich campaign strategies.

In light of the myriad potential meanings ascribed to gaffes, it is curious that their rhetorical power has been understudied to date. One reason, one may surmise, is that not every gaffe has the potential to become a representative anecdote. Constant news coverage and the proliferation of information technology make rapid dissemination of campaign information possible and irreversible, which has contributed to an increased visibility of campaign statements that could be called gaffes (Karpf 2010). As representative anecdotes must entail the essence of the thing they purport to depict, a number of historical, political, and social factors must converge (Gring-Pemble 2001). This is to say that gaffes in themselves will not always become representative anecdotes of a campaign, and attempts to center a campaign's attacks around an opponent's statements may fall short. When a gaffe is integrated into broader campaign messages, however, the result may have combined pithiness and elegance to spread widely through constant repetition and reiteration. Under this framework a campaign's use of a gaffe does not exist simply alongside a broader campaign narrative. Rather, the gaffe can become a crystallization of a narrative, a concise conveyance of an otherwise complicated set of values and beliefs. The "47%" comment became a defining example of the broader values the candidate represented. Similarly, the Obama campaign did not use the comment just to embarrass or criticize their opponent. The comment was framed as an unfiltered expression of a candidate's ideology, a clear example of the morally bankrupt economic vision of the Romney campaign.

Envisioning gaffes as representative anecdotes in some instances is a useful analytic tool for scholars of both argumentation, and political rhetoric. Though Silverstein (2011)

suggests gaffes are treated in part as expressions of candidate ideologies, the minutia of campaigns largely is forgotten in favor of large-scale events and messages. There are times, however, where elements of a campaign narrative will coalesce around a statement, image, or event and that condensation will be elevated for public consumption. The situated use of representative anecdotes provides a vocabulary for analyzing salient moments in a campaign relative to broader campaign narratives. This framework facilitates analysis of campaign moments, and offers the capacity to isolate and problematize particular ideological configurations in a given campaign.

Indeed, the rhetorical traction of the “47%” comment belies the social and political stakes of the 2012 election. As argued above, not every gaffe will become a representative anecdote. There will be, however, moments in which an inelegant statement will clearly speak to social, political, or ideological configurations. In those instances, gaffes can be mobilized as enthymemes to argue for complicated and nuanced positions. To wit, the interaction between the 2012 campaigns suggests competing ideological and moral forces on the role of government in the economy. Campaign discourse suggests the gaffe was representative of the Romney campaign’s underlying philosophy on the role of hard work and the government. Though Romney eventually sought to distance himself from the leaked video, that distancing occurred after days of media cycles debating the speech and its impact on the campaign. The public debate featured numerous voices that integrated the comment into a broader campaign narrative of bootstrapping and free market economics. Framing the debate in stark economic terms, the individual entrepreneur versus the entitled masses, the small government versus the big, can have broader meanings outside of the confines of a given election. The narratives used to frame the national debate on the role of government may be problematic, as the narratives forwarded by the Romney campaign serve to “construct a cumulative imaginary field that constrains the deliberations of successive participants” (Asen 2002a, 358).

To treat a gaffe as a representative anecdote assumes a level of fidelity and explanatory power when that gaffe is situated in a broader campaign discourse. That fidelity, however, may be based in discourses that have reified visions of impoverished individuals and subjects of political action. Asen (2002b) argues policy-makers have the capacity to influence the dominant discourse that contributes to the socio-political context of a given time period. The author suggests the way politicians have discussed disenfranchised groups acts as a sort of double-edged sword, serving to both harm and help political subjects. Discussion of how a government might alleviate the suffering of citizens is preferable to keeping that marginalized population invisible. It is possible, however, that the way individuals articulate marginalized groups will constrain future discourse, and establish a rhetorical field that is uniquely problematic. Asen (2002b) suggests the use of particular images, tropes, or narratives “may disable even if more citizens participate in public policy debate and even if deliberation is open to various topics and different ways of speaking” (15). In the context of the leaked speech, it is fascinating to see that competing narratives adopted the same comment as representative of broader ideologies, only to then frame those ideologies as incompatible and opposed. Here, one can see Asen’s (2002b) double-edged discourse; though a narrative regarding the poor was featured prominently in 2012, the way that narrative is discussed ultimately may serve to reify damaging power structures. That the Romney campaign, as well as Republican politicians and pundits, would hold up the leaked comment as a bald representation of its economic platform is troubling, as the

comment itself constructed impoverished individuals as entitled political enemies. That frame stigmatizes an already disenfranchised group, and furthers narratives of economic determinism that ultimately justify retrenchment.

As Gring-Pemble (2001, 2003) persuasively argues in her work on welfare reform, anecdotes have the capacity to dominate public debates by speaking to existing social stigma. The leaked comment and its subsequent integration in the GOP campaign narrative may access longstanding American ideas on bootstrapping and small government based in racial and social biases. Indeed, Romney's comments, that almost half the country is entitled and unable to care for themselves, harken back to Reagan's "welfare queen" and the demonizing of welfare recipients in the minds of the American public. The "welfare queen," a representative anecdote in and of itself, served to gender and race government programs as part of a broader electoral strategy to roll back government spending on entitlement programs (Gustaferson 2011). In the context of the 2012 campaign, the broader adoption of a representative anecdote with such ideological baggage may have signified substantial reductions in the United States safety net, as well as continued stigmatization of government assistance.

Indeed, there is a certain amount of danger in each campaign's adoption of the representative anecdote. Burke (1984) argues, "if we use the wrong words, words that divide up the field inadequately, we obey false cues" (4). In this instance, the "47%" anecdote may center the public debate on individual responsibility in such a way that warrants criticism. Marston (2008) argues that on social policy where "much research has been conducted into what these policy changes mean in material terms, far less attention has been paid to the significance of the language that has sought to legitimize these policy shifts" (360). Ultimately, many of the ways policy-makers and lay people talk about welfare stigmatizes recipients by characterizing them as lazy, irresponsible, and undeserving (Katz 1989; Walters 1999). The integration of the leaked comment as a representative anecdote does not simply serve to reify campaign messages. By focusing on individual responsibility and denigrating government, the leaked comment is a reiteration of an anti-poor mindset that existed in American colonial settlers (Zinn 2014), and anti-minority sentiment which influences the way contemporary Americans feel about entitlement programs (e.g. Gilens 1999; Dyck and Hussey 2008). The leaked comment, located at the intersection of a number of historical, social, and political attitudes, presents as a prototypical representative anecdote that articulates prescriptive policy and value claims. Those same qualities that facilitated the gaffe's integration in broader campaign discourse ought to trouble those concerned with stigmatization of the poor. The rhetorical construction of wide tracts of people as undesirable political obstacles creates an adversarial frame with which individuals view political affairs. Rather than construct poverty as an abstract economic issue that should be resolved through policy action, the discussion is framed around the people who are actively trying to pull themselves out of poverty through government programs. The problem becomes not that government programs are failing to alleviate poverty, but that the individuals using government programs are wrong for doing so.

Narratives forwarded by the campaigns of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney dominated the 2012 presidential contest, each building on, or tearing down, prior campaign discourses. Crisis points, such as the introduction of leaked embarrassing campaign footage forced each campaign to alter their rhetorical strategies to integrate, employ, or downplay the impact of the comment. The way the "47%" comment interacted with prevailing

campaign narratives is analyzed here, with special attention paid to the way the gaffe acted as a representative anecdote (Burke 1984) for both campaigns. Future scholarship may consider the varying interpretations of moments in campaigns as fruitful beginnings for studies. Rather than attempt to discern campaign meta-narratives, it may be useful to isolate particular moments of interaction between campaigns as illustrated by the way comments are discussed. Gaffes are unique iterations of those moments, as current rhetorical and political communication research will often forget the way gaffes are situated within a given campaign narrative. Asen (2002b) suggests it is not the meta-narrative presented by elites that ultimately matters. Rather, public political imaginations of topics, populations, or ideas are informed by the prevalence of particular narratives and examples that impact the trajectory of future policy actions.

The “47%” comment may enter the public political lexicon as a campaign mistake, the verbal equivalent of Michael Dukakis posing in a tank. However, to think of the leaked video as simply another part of politics as usual ignores the significant role campaigns serve in the construction of broader political imaginations. In the “47%” comment, one can see an ideology that has manifest and multifold political consequences. That ideology, we may find, will continue to resurface, constantly rearticulated in events, statements, and gaffes which crystalize dominant political messages.

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