1.6: Chapter 6- Making Strong Arguments

“What annoys me most is a lazy argument.”

–Christopher Hitchens (1)

Because political scientists are members of a branch of the social sciences, it’s their business to make arguments about political institutions and behavior. As citizens of a purported democracy, we all are called upon to make arguments about public policy, political campaigns, and even about the nature of reality—for example, does widespread gun ownership deter crime or cause it?

What Is an Argument?

We should be clear about what an argument is and what it is not, about an argument’s key components, and about why we should be making arguments. When my friend says that Donald Trump ranks as the worst president in U. S. history, she is making an assertion or a claim—not an argument. If, instead, she says that Donald Trump is the worst president in U. S. history because . . . followed by sufficient evidence leading to a conclusion about Trump’s failings relative to other American presidents, then she has made an argument.

We will define an argument as a claim plus evidence leading to a conclusion. The fundamental underlying question linking claim and evidence is why. Why should I believe this claim? And the immediate follow-up: What evidence would lead me to that conclusion?
Evidence in Argumentation

What passes for evidence in an argument? Much depends on the argument’s claim, but almost anything can be used effectively as evidence. Political scientists are fond of using both quantitative and qualitative evidence. **Quantitative evidence** refers to numbers: voting statistics, campaign finance figures, public opinion survey results, government revenue and spending, economic data, and so forth. **Qualitative evidence** refers to words. A political scientist might use political speeches, national constitutions, journalists’ and commentators’ writings, interviews with average people, behavior observations, historical events, and so forth. Regardless of the evidence’s nature and strength, we should always be careful about an argument’s *proof*. Instead of saying, “This evidence proves that…,” we could say, “This evidence suggests that…,” or “This evidence leads us to conclude that….” It’s part of the tentative nature of scientific claims.

Let’s say, for example, that we want to make an argument about how well our economic system is serving the needs of ordinary Americans. We could gather qualitative evidence in the form of interviews with a variety of people and sort their answers by simple scheme in which the person either does or does not believe the economic system is serving them well. We could also gather quantitative evidence of income growth over time. The [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](https://www.cbpp.org/) has done this, and we might conclude that this evidence suggests that the economy used to serve all Americans, but stopped doing so in the late 1970s.

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**Income Gains Widely Shared in Early Postwar Decades — But Not Since Then**

Real family income between 1947 and 2018, as a percentage of 1973 level

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Once we have a claim supported by quantitative or qualitative evidence pointing to a conclusion, we are faced with warranted inference—under what conditions are we warranted or justified in accepting a conclusion or inference? Warranted inference requires that we meet two conditions:

- The reasons/evidence must be true.
- The conclusion must follow from the reasons/evidence. That is, it must follow truth-preserving reasoning. This is known as *validity* in classical argument. (2)

These two conditions for warranted-inference provide a road map for anyone who wants to attack a particular argument. They can attack the evidence presented or present counter evidence that calls into question the original claim’s supporting evidence. Or, they might demonstrate that even if the evidence is true, it does not merit their opponent’s
conclusion.

Another strategic attack might be to undermine the argument’s assumptions. Arguments are often based upon one or more assumptions. Assumptions are unstated premises that the person making the argument is taking for granted or asking you to take for granted. For example, Democrats and Republicans may make different arguments about the best way to grow the economy, but both are making an assumption about the merits of a capitalist economic system, and both are making an assumption about the need for economic growth. An argument may include significant evidence but is nevertheless weak if it is based on shaky assumptions.

When making extensive arguments—as opposed to short, quick arguments—it is often a good idea to anticipate and deal with counterarguments. When preparing to make an argument, find evidence that supports your content, but also scout the arguments made on the debate’s other side. What are the weaknesses in those arguments’ evidence? How have others countered them? Once you can answer those two questions, you can paraphrase counterarguments to your position and shoot them down in ways that illustrate your own argument’s strength.

Also, to create an effective argument, you must define its critical terms. If we consider the Democratic and Republican argument over the best way to stimulate economic growth, we would want both sides to define economic growth. Does it mean increase in the gross domestic product (GDP)—the total value of all goods and services produced over a specified time period? Or maybe it means increase in the gross domestic product per capita over that time period? Or maybe one of the arguments rests on an economic growth definition that replaces the outdated notion of GDP with the more people-friendly genuine progress indicator (GPI), which adds the goods and services value but subtracts for expenses like crime and ecological destruction. In any case, arguments without well-defined terms are often a waste of time.

Why Do We Make Arguments?

In large part, we make arguments because of a foundational philosophy that author Connie Missimer called progressivism, which holds that the truth is real and that we are on a never-ending journey towards it. (3) Don’t confuse this with political progressivism, which we’ll talk about in a later chapter. According to this philosophical brand of progressivism, we will never reach the truth. But through careful argumentation, we can reject various falsehoods and begin to glean a better understanding of reality. Let’s contrast the progressivist tradition with two anti-intellectual perspectives that many people unfortunately find attractive: dogmatism and relativism.

Dogmatism is a philosophy that says we have already arrived at the truth, so no new claims or evidence need to be entertained. Revealed religious teachings are almost always dogmatic, therefore, anti-intellectual in nature. This is not to say that such teachings have no value to individuals as personal comforts, but they have no place in rational argument. Similarly, dogmatism often accompanies political ideologues’ arguments. Under Vladimir Lenin and subsequent leaders, the Soviet Union’s Communist Party would not deviate from the established party line. Adherents to religious and ideological dogmatism proceed from the assumption that their world view is complete in and of itself.

In fleeing dogmatism’s obvious constraints, some people run right past progressivism and settle on relativism. Relativism posits that there is no ultimate truth, so there is no basis to reject one argument in favor of another. Under relativism, truth becomes a personal possession: “What is true for me may not be true for you,” or “Objective reality is always filtered through the individual observer’s context and situation, so everything we might say about it is suspect.” There is some validity to these statements but taking them seriously means that every bit of an argument’s supporting
evidence is contestable due to its context. What would be the point of arguing? Cultural relativism is a common manifestation of this philosophy, where people refuse to pass judgment on ethnic or religious groups’ cultural practices. Relativism manifests itself in many other ways as well and is a constituent part of what author Susan Jacoby labels “junk thought.” She writes that “the real power of junk thought lies in its status as a centrist phenomenon, fueled by the American credo of tolerance that places all opinions on an equal footing and makes little effort to separate fact from opinion.” (4)

Other Considerations When Making and Responding to Arguments

We’ve already talked a bit about logical fallacies. We should keep in mind several other considerations when making and responding to arguments. These are not fallacies per se but are elements of argumentation that are frequently abused.

**Correlation Does Not, Necessarily, Equal Causation**—As we saw in the *post hoc* fallacy, the fact that A happens before B does not mean that A caused B. We should always be careful about making claims that suggest movement in one variable is causing movement in another or that one condition occurring with another condition means that one caused the other.

Variables can be correlated with each other in several ways, only one of which is a causal relationship. Let’s say that variables A and B are correlated. One possibility is that A might in fact be causing B, or vice versa. Another possibility is that a third variable, C, is simultaneously causing A and B, without there being a direct relationship between A and B. Also, maybe A is actually causing C, which is then causing B, in which case C is called an intermediate variable. Finally, A and B may be correlated, but there is actually no relationship between them.

**Appealing to Authority**—Appealing to authority is another fallacy if the authority in question lacks credibility. We commit this fallacy when we make arguments and use evidence from sources who are not qualified in a given area, for example, religious texts or authorities who cannot be questioned or whose motivation comes into question because of partisan interests or financial interest conflicts. If I make an argument that my state should open more charter schools, and I quote a state legislator who is also on the board of a company that builds charter schools, I would have committed this fallacy. I’m expecting that my state legislator’s authority will convince my audience, but I have used a person whose “expertise” is questionable. However, appealing to authority has many legitimate uses. In fact, in making effective arguments, it is a common and totally valid strategy since the authority being cited may be more knowledgeable in a given area. This seems like a good time to defer to the wisdom of two philosophy professors and critical-rethinking authorities, Robert Fogelin and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, who wrote,

“Since some people stand in a better position to know things than others, there is nothing wrong with citing them as authorities. In fact, an appeal to experts and authorities is essential if we are to make up our minds on subjects outside our own range of competence.” (5)

**Argument by Analogy**—People often use analogies when they make an argument. An analogy is linking or comparing two things, typically to explain or clarify. The first President Bush said that Saddam Hussein was “worse than Hitler.” John Dean, President Nixon’s White House counsel, wrote a book arguing that the skullduggery in the George W. Bush administration was “worse than Watergate.” Gay rights advocates argue that bans against gay marriage are akin to the bans against interracial marriage, which existed well into the 1960s.
Are these analogies helpful or not? Using a false or distorted analogy is clearly a fallacy and really should belong in the fallacies list above. But using a well-crafted analogy in arguments can be very effective. To judge an analogy’s usefulness in linking A with B, we need to follow a few simple criteria:

- Note the number of similarities between A and B.
- Are A and B’s similarities relevant?
- Are there differences between A and B?
- Are A and B’s differences relevant? (6)

This is a judgment call. When you are making or responding to an analogy in an argument, go through this quick checklist to see if the analogy is fallacious or not.

**Slippery Slope**—As with analogies, using slippery-slope arguments improperly can be fallacious. A slippery-slope argument occurs when a person suggests that if we take one action, it will lead to a chain of disastrous events. A common slippery-slope argument said that if we legalized gay marriage, we’d have to legalize polygamy, and then pedophilia, incest, and bestiality. During the Cold War, the domino theory, was a popular political argument and a form of the slippery-slope argument used to justify America’s involvement in the Vietnam War: “If we don’t stop the commies there, then Laos and Cambodia will go Red, followed by Thailand, Australia…and then we’ll be fighting the communists on the beaches of California, or at least the communists will be in a position to strangle us without actually invading.” Of course, South Vietnam fell in 1975, but the subsequent cascade of dominoes failed to happen. Slippery-slope arguments can be effective if the arguer clearly lays out the progression down the slope. For example, if a white Southerner in the 1940s argued that any cracks in segregation’s bedrock will lead to its complete collapse, namely, the end of segregated schools, the end of interracial-marriage bans, the end of employment discrimination, etc., she would have been obviously predicting exactly what happened.

**Generalization, Hasty Generalization, and Over Generalization**—Perhaps the trickiest part of sophisticated argumentation is making generalizations versus over generalizations. We are often counseled against making generalizations, particularly if they involve stereotyping people based on their race, gender, religion, national origin, and so forth. This is good advice, for such stereotypes are often as wrong as they are accurate, so it’s better to treat people as individuals rather than representatives of some larger group. Making a generalization from an atypical example is a fallacy called *hasty generalization*.

However, we should also keep in mind that very little social science analysis could take place without some well-considered and carefully stated generalizations. If we gather and analyze data that falls into certain patterns, we would be remiss as political scientists if we failed to point that out. Therefore, I am on safe ground if I make the generalization that older Americans tend to vote at higher rates than do younger Americans, because that’s the story the data tell after every election. Notice that I phrased the generalization in a nuanced way using the word “tend,” instead of distorting reality by saying, “Old people vote, and young people don’t.”

What if . . . ?

What if you were the superintendent of a public school system and you wanted to make sure that students graduated high school with the ability to recognize fallacious arguments and the ability to make strong arguments of their own?
How would you change the curriculum to accomplish that? How early would you start? What would you have students do?

References

1. Original source unknown. This quote is attributed to author Christopher Hitchens all over the Web: “There are all kinds of stupid people that annoy me but what annoys me most is a lazy argument.” I’m not a fan of references to “stupid people,” so I cut that part of the quote.

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