

George Stephanopoulos' Contraception Fixation

☒ In last Saturday's GOP presidential debate, ABC News commentator George Stephanopoulos asked Mitt Romney an unusual question. He wanted to know if the former Massachusetts governor believed that states had the right to ban the use of contraception. When Romney voiced his opinion that the question was both odd and irrelevant since no states or candidates were interested in banning contraception, Stephanopoulos was persistent in trying to get the former Massachusetts governor to answer it. His repeated attempts prompted audible groans from the audience. In the end, Romney essentially denied Stephanopoulos whatever response he was hoping to evoke.

Now, it's pretty safe to say that the question was not posed due to genuine public interest in the topic. In fact, I would very much doubt that any of the candidates have fielded such a question while talking to voters. So, one might be wondering what Stephanopoulos was trying to get at. To me, it was fairly obvious. He was trying to get Romney's contraception views on record, and he was doing it under the guise of states' rights so it wouldn't sound as obviously partisan. If Romney hadn't slapped down the question, I'm sure it would have been asked of the other candidates as well. Why does George care, or think anyone else cares? Well, he most likely doesn't. But putting forth such a question plays perfectly into a political strategy that the Democratic party found success in during the 2010 elections.

I wrote an entire column on this brainchild back in August, known to Democratic strategists as "The Colorado Model". The gist of the strategy is to highlight the personal, social beliefs of a rival candidate, form a narrative that the candidate plans on implementing those beliefs into policy if

elected, and then promote that narrative with a concentrated, relentless media attack campaign on how that candidate is “too extreme”.

The example I used was the U.S. Senatorial race here in Colorado between incumbent Michael Bennet (D) and challenger Ken Buck (R). Heading into the 2010 campaign, the political environment was looking just as good for conservatives here as it was throughout the rest of the country, thanks to the Tea Party uprising. But the tide began to turn once the Bennet campaign and outside groups focused their efforts almost entirely on the notion that Buck was “too extreme”. They did this by running an almost endless barrage of commercials that cited his personal beliefs on gay marriage, abortion exceptions, and most notably... **contraception**. Buck never ran on any of those issues, yet they became the focus of the campaign. By election day, few were talking about Bennet’s support of Obamacare and rest of the administration’s unpopular policies. Instead, they were talking about Buck being “too extreme”. This led to a narrow win for Bennet.

To my surprise, Buck actually read my column back in August and contacted me shortly after it had been posted to this site. We had a cordial conversation, and during it, he mentioned that he had actually never expressed an opposition to contraception. I was stunned by that revelation, so I researched it. Sure enough, I couldn’t find a single quote by him that even suggested it. It was apparently something that had merely been inferred by third-party, deductive reasoning and was never substantiated. Yet, it had been a key factor in the race.

With an issue so sensitive, it apparently doesn’t take all that much to transform a mere assertion into an effective weapon... And George Stephanopoulos certainly recognizes that.

From a logical standpoint, I’m somewhat surprised that ABC News even allows Stephanopoulos to moderate Republican debates

in the first place. Sure, I get it... He's no longer a professional political adviser for Bill Clinton and the Democratic party. He's now the charming commentator we see on television each morning, yucking it up with celebrities and presenting the news of the day. But something tells me that there'd be some serious criticism over the issue of objectivity if ABC News let Karl Rove moderate a Democratic debate. Really, what's the difference? Rove is still politically active, but so is George. The Politico reported in 2009 that Stephanopoulos conducts daily strategy chats with former colleagues Rahm Emanuel (Obama's chief of staff at the time), Paul Begala, and James Carville. If he's helping to shape the messaging of the Democratic party, why is he helping to shape the questioning at Republican debates?

I guess I've got to hand it to the Republican candidates for agreeing to participate in a debate moderated by a seasoned political opponent. It at least brought a little attention to how ideologically-driven the media really is. And that's always welcome.