

Opinion: Big Bird is a Republican

By James Poniewozik, Time

I wasn't surprised that during the Oct. 3 presidential debate in Denver, Mitt Romney pledged to defund the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). For Republicans, PBS threats are as reliable as Ken Burns reruns during pledge drives. But I was surprised by how he said it: "I like PBS. I love Big Bird ... [But] I'm not going to keep on spending money on things to borrow money from China to pay for."

That's right: Romney called Big Bird out, pulled his big yellow weave. Ordinarily it's PBS's defenders who bring up Big Bird – and Elmo, Arthur and Curious George—to emotionalize the debate, to make it about protecting your kids' favorite cuddly animals. PBS cutters usually want to talk about anything but Big Bird: liberal bias, waste, coastal elites taking your money to foist their values on you. Sesame Street, they argue, will be fine, because it makes more off licensing than the Count can calculate.

By citing Big Bird – as he has before on the stump – Romney put the argument on his opponents' favored terms. A Fired Big Bird Twitter account sprang up, and the Muppet himself responded to Romney on "Saturday Night Live". At a rally, Barack Obama quipped that Romney would "get rid of regulations on Wall Street, but he's going to crack down on Sesame Street."

Maybe Romney was trying to give austerity an empathetic face. ("You can kill things and still like them," GOPer Rick Santorum helpfully explained.) But focusing the debate on the fate of one flightless avian muddies the real issue. No, Romney's cuts wouldn't kill Big Bird. But they would deeply

hurt a program, public TV, that in fact exemplifies his party's values and serves his voters.

To understand why, you first have to look at how public broadcasting works—which is pretty much the opposite of how most people assume. A CNN poll in 2011 asked Americans what percentage of the federal budget the CPB gets; the median guess was 5 percent (\$173 billion) a year. In the 2013 budget, it actually gets \$445 million – that's million, brought to you by the letter m – in a federal budget of nearly \$4 trillion. And where does that money go? Not, mostly, to PBS headquarters. Commercial TV is top-down: NBC collects the money and programs the series. In public TV, local stations make (and buy) the shows, set their own schedules and, by law, receive most of the public money.

So “defunding PBS” wouldn't defund PBS. It's stations in poorer rural areas that would be devastated, maybe killed. Coastal elites like the Romneys and Obamas will still have Downton Abbey; Cookie Monster will not want for chocolate chips. But good luck finding a channel on which to watch him—and literacy programs and other services—in the low-population heartland regions that reliably turn GOP red every four years. As with interstate highways, it's one more way the same states that vote for small government get back more in federal spending than they contribute in taxes.

There's the irony in all this: lots of Republicans rely on Big Bird. And Big Bird is in many ways a Republican. That is, in its finances and ideals, public broadcasting is about as little-c conservative a government program as you can find.

For starters, it's frugal. We get a national TV and radio network for the kind of money Oprah has under her couch cushions. Progressives might prefer a lavish all-public program like the BBC – the single-payer plan of TV – but PBS uses its seed money to leverage corporate and charitable dollars. If PBS were a space program or a school system,

conservatives would love that. It's also decentralized: major decisions are made locally, just as Romney would have with health care.

And for all the culture warriors against it, public TV is proudly, dorkily family-values-friendly, an Edwardian hemline in a sea of booty shorts. If liberals love PBS's pluralism, cultural conservatives love that their kids can watch free TV without being bombed with ads and inappropriate content.

Frankly, cutting PBS funds might be better for me personally. Here in rich, evil, liberal New York City, I'd still have public TV, now free from political pressure to be safe and bland. And I could keep the buck and change in taxes that I spend to offer PBS to the heartland. Screw you, South Dakota. You're on your own!

But public TV is for all the public, which is why it's amazing we're fighting over one federal program that manages to be cheap and bipartisanly popular. You may think that this election is about how to best serve "the 100 percent" or that it's about using money wisely in tough times. Either way, PBS is the definition of educational TV.