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Political Stories

> Cognitive psychology has shown that the mind best understands facts when they are woven into a conceptual fabric, such as a narrative, mental map, or intuitive theory.
>
> *Steven Pinker, "College Makeover" (2005)*

On the way to exploring who tells or does not tell political stories, and to considering why that happens, we may start with the last presidential election. Barack Obama's win in 2012[1] was modest compared to those of most recent, re-elected incumbents.[2] Furthermore, his margin of victory, which was smaller than in 2008,[3] probably came more from the President's get-out-the-vote organization than from his liberal platform, which wandered from issue to issue and did not project a powerful narrative of where America was, whether that was good or bad for its people, and how the country should proceed.[4]

[1] Obama won with 332 electoral votes (compared with his rival's 206) and 64 million popular votes (compared with his rival's 60 million).

[2] The re-elected incumbents were Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936, Eisenhower in 1956, Nixon in 1972, Reagan in 1984, Clinton in 1996, and Bush in 2004. Of these, only Bush in 2004 won by a smaller margin than Obama in 2012, and this was more apparent in the Electoral College than in the popular votes. The electoral votes were: 1936 (523 vs. 8), 1956 (457 vs. 73), 1972 (520 vs. 17), 1984 (525 vs. 13), 1996 (379 vs. 159), and 2004 (286 vs. 251). The popular votes were: 1936 (27 million vs. 16 million), 1956 (35 million vs. 26 million), 1972 (47 million vs. 29 million.), 1984 (54 million vs. 37 million), 1996 (47 million vs. 39 million), and 2004 (62 million vs. 59 million).

[3] In 2008, Obama won with 365 electoral votes (compared with his rival's 173) and 69 million popular votes (compared with his rival's 59 million).

[4] On Obama's 2012 campaign, see William Crotty (ed.), *Winning the Presidency, 2012* (2013); Larry Sabato (ed.), *Barack Obama and the New America: the 2012 Election and*

Friendly journalists complained all along that the President needed an attractive narrative – or "story," in popular terms. Thus Thomas Friedman wrote in 2009:

> I don't think that President Obama has a communications problem, per se. He has given many speeches and interviews broadly explaining his policies and justifying their necessity. Rather, he has a 'narrative' problem. He has not tied all his programs into a single narrative that shows the links between his health care, banking, economic, climate, energy, education and foreign policies. Such a narrative would enable each issue and each constituency to reinforce the other and evoke the kind of popular excitement that got him elected.[5]

Or, as Paul Krugman wrote in 2011: "What have they done with President Obama? … Who is this bland, timid guy who doesn't seem to stand for anything in particular? … Arguably, all he has left is the bully pulpit. But he isn't even using that – or, rather, he's using it to reinforce his enemies' narrative."[6]

At the same time, Mitt Romney's candidacy in 2012 was weak. The former Governor went very far right during the Spring primaries. Moreover, in a leaked parlor talk to potential Republican donors, he offended many independent voters in the Fall by characterizing 47 percent of Americans as "takers" from government and therefore automatic supporters of Obama.[7] Consequently, Romney would probably have fared even worse if his campaign – which portrayed him as a family man and successful businessman – had not resonated with large and familiar conservative narratives, or stories, about traditions, markets, and limited government. In other words, if Romney had fielded a stronger election day organization and had been more charismatic as a candidate, the President's missing narrative might have cost Obama the election.

Two Questions

In light of the 2012 campaign – but also in view of the polarization of American politics since William Buckley, Jr., Barry Goldwater, Howard

the Changing Face of Politics (2013); and Richard Wolffe, *The Message: The Reselling of President Obama* (2013).

[5] Thomas Friedman, "More Poetry Please," *New York Times* (November 1, 2009).

[6] Paul Krugman, "The President Is Missing," *New York Times* (April 20, 2011).

[7] Romney's parlor talk to potential Republican donors, which characterized 47 percent of Americans as "takers" from government and therefore automatic supporters of Obama, appeared as "Full Transcript of the Mitt Romney Video," in *Mother Jones* (2012).

Jarvis, Jerry Falwell, and Ronald Reagan set the Republican tone in national life – this book asks two large questions:

1. *While conservatives tell stories (in the sense of narratives), why don't liberals like Obama do the same? That is, what holds them back?*
2. *Furthermore, if liberals don't tell stories (again in the sense of narratives), what do they do instead? That is, how do they inspire voters to support liberal projects?*

While answering these questions, I will write mainly about "stories," because to do so is grammatically and stylistically easier than writing about "narratives." Even stories are difficult to discuss, because they are nebulous objects that cannot be investigated and described exactly. Nevertheless, stories impact importantly on politics. Therefore I will try to write about them here *plainly*, even if no one can write about them *precisely*, as we shall see in a moment.

The Electoral Problem

Now, what is the problem? News reports and campaigning are dominated by television and social media. Those forums prefer to highlight not "talking heads" but large and far-reaching "stories" – that is, tales, parables, myths, themes, chronicles, extended metaphors, and so forth. Consequently, those stories can often, but not always, generate electoral success. Therefore, failure to tell them constitutes a political liability for liberal candidates to public office.[8]

This liability appears not only at election time but also between elections in the realm of governing. That realm is not my target, so I will not dwell on it here. However, its link to stories can be explained in terms suggested by political scientist Rogers Smith. As he says, politics takes

[8] This point is made colloquially by Stanley Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good thing, Too* (1994), p. 58:

> Complexity does not play well in Peoria or anywhere else. People don't want … to think about Columbus, sexual harassment in the workplace, date rape, the war against smoking, the dilemmas of the AIDS crisis, the spiritual malaise of modern life, the budget deficit, the trade deficit, the plight of the homeless, the media explosion, the information revolution, the interplay between educational and political policy, the impossibility any longer of separating the life of the mind from the life of the legislature and the marketplace. (p. 58)
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> They prefer stories (p. 59).

place in an arena shaped by two factors. The first is "coercive force," where rules and regulations, ordinances and laws, rights and privileges, and duties and obligations are laid down by government and, if necessary, backed up by sanctions administered by soldiers and the police. The second is rhetoric, or what Smith calls "persuasive stories." This rhetoric can come from government, but it can also arise from other sources. It surrounds citizens and channels their energies into shared opinions, convictions, and aspirations.[9]

Rhetoric is an intangible power, as expressed, for example, with verbal hammer and tongs in Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776). With that power, it can challenge or complement more concrete instruments of political will, such as armies and bureaucrats.[10] Accordingly, we should not forget that, in the realm of governing, when democratic leaders want to promote a policy proposal, such as national regulation of health care, they know that clothing it in powerful rhetoric – that is, a persuasive story – can help them to enlist the political support necessary for enacting that proposal into law, even if rival leaders and a substantial part of the American population may oppose it.[11]

Returning, however, to the subject of elections, what hampers liberals is that candidates who offer no large and lasting stories – we will return to "large" and "lasting" shortly, when discussing "alpha stories" – must recreate their public image every time they run for office. Thus psychologist Drew Westen, observing the Democrats in *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (2008), says:

> the left has no brand, no counterbrand, no master narrative, no counternarrative. It has no shared terms or 'talking points' for its leaders to repeat until they are part of our political lexicon. Instead, every Democrat who runs for office, every Democrat who offers commentaries on television or radio, every Democrat who even talks with friends at the water cooler, has to reinvent what it means to be a Democrat, using his or her own words and concepts, as if the party had no history.[12]

In other words, voters look for disciples of a particular worldview, which – via consistent stories from one election to the next – conveniently labels

[9] Rogers Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (2003), pp. 43–53.

[10] The power of Paine's prose is foreshadowed in *Proverbs 29:19*: "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

[11] Again, there is a biblical insight. See *1 Corinthians 14:18*: "For if the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?"

[12] Westen, *The Political Brain*, p. 169.

candidates who espouse that view. In *Talking Right: How Conservatives Turned Liberalism into a Tax-Raising, Latte-Drinking, Sushi-Eating, Volvo-Driving, New York Times-Reading, Body-Piercing, Hollywood-Loving, Left-Wing Freak Show* (2006), linguist Geoffrey Nunberg highlights what happens to candidates who fail this test:

> Since the late 1960s, the right's appeals have rested on a collection of overlapping stories about the currents of contemporary American life – stories that illustrate declining patriotism and moral standards, the out-of-touch media and the self-righteous liberal elite, the feminization of public life, minorities demanding special privileges and unwilling to assimilate to American culture and language, growing crime and lenient judges, ludicrous restrictions on permissible speech, disrespect for religious faith, a swollen government that intrudes officiously in private life, and arching over all of them, an America divided into two nations by differences in values, culture, and lifestyle. With occasional exceptions like Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign, Democrats and liberals have not offered compelling narratives that could compete with those. And to the extent that our basic political vocabulary is fleshed out by narratives, it's no wonder that the right has been able to dominate it."[13]

Collective Action

"Social choice theory" explains what liberals lack on this score. Thus, in *Narrative Politics: Stories and Collective Action* (2014), political scientist Frederick Mayer writes that "free ridership" is a major factor in public life, because individual citizens may calculate that their votes are so numerically negligible that they may as well stay home and stand aside – that is, ride free – while other citizens invest the time, energy, and money necessary to unite and produce "public" or "collective" goods such as clean air, parks, and public transportation.[14]

In those circumstances, the key to successful collective action is not a rational parsing of expected benefits but the projection of sweeping "narratives" – which Mayer sometimes calls "schemas" – which are capable of defining "shared interests" so powerfully that citizens will rally and work together to achieve them.[15] In literature, this point was foreshadowed long ago – albeit more floridly – by British-Prime-Minister-to-be Benjamin Disraeli in his novel *Coningsby, or the New Generation* (1844):

> "Pray what is the country?" inquired Mr. Rigby. "The country is nothing; it is the constituency you have to deal with. And to manage them you have to have a good

[13] Nunberg, *Talking Right*, p. 35.
[14] Mayer, *Narrative Politics*, pp. 1–29.
[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 39–49.

cry," said Taper. "All now depends upon a good cry." "So much for the science of politics," said the Duke.[16]

The Categorical Heuristic

Technically speaking, the tendency to vote with stories in mind flows from citizens applying a cognitive shortcut which we may call a "categorical heuristic," where "heuristic" equals, roughly speaking, a rule of thumb. The point here, from behavioral psychology, is that in a world of incomplete information, bounded rationality, "satisficing,"[17] and adequate but not optimal decision-making, any candidate who tells a familiar story is likely to be remembered by voters on election day as a person embodying whatever virtues that story promotes.[18]

Some voters may relate to a candidate via an instinct for "name recognition." That instinct responds to personal qualities, real or assumed. For instance, the name of a latter-day Robert Kennedy III or IV reminds us of the martyred president and his fallen brother. However, aside from assuming personal qualities from candidates' names, other voters are spurred by the categorical heuristic. Therefore they recognize the candidate via stories, as part of a category that bears a collective appellation and denotes shared beliefs. For example, they see the candidate as a Christian, an Australian, a conservative, a philatelist, or a vegetarian.

Conservative Stories

Conservatives today are not hard to categorize. Day after day – for example, on Fox News and in the *Weekly Standard* and *National Review* – their talk moves from subject to subject, proposal to proposal. Nevertheless, right-wing advocates over the years – such as publicist William Buckley, direct-mailer Richard Viguerie, talk show host Rush Limbaugh, Congressmen Tom Delay, Senator Ted Cruz, think-tanker

[16] Disraeli, *Coningsby, or the New Generation* (1844, 1962), pp. 110–111.
[17] Herbert Simon, *Administrative Behavior* (1997), pp. 118–120.
[18] Thus Mayer, *Narrative Politics*, p. 39:

> [To] a very great extent, human thought is schematic rather than analytic. It is structured by pre-existing schemas, "data structures for representing the generic concepts stored in memory." Schemas organize our world into categories, things sufficiently similar to constitute a type: a "car," a "tree," a "liberal," and so on. Associated with these types are certain attributes. "Lumberjacks" are people who wear flannel shirts, live vigorously, and like their beer. Understanding, therefore, is essentially an act of recognition, of slotting the unfamiliar in familiar patterns.

Myron Magnet, and Heritage Foundation president Edwin Feulner – have promoted and continue to promote, repeatedly and consistently, concepts that together add up to stories praising traditional values, free markets, and small government.[19]

For example, on "values," we can note George W. Bush's "First Inaugural Address" (January 20, 2001):

> We have a place, all of us, in a long story – a story we continue, but whose end we will not see. It is the story of a new world that became a friend and liberator of the old, a story of a slave-holding society that became a servant of freedom, the story of a power that went into the world to protect but not to possess, to defend but not to conquer. It is the American story – a story of flawed and fallible people, united across the generations by grand and enduring ideals. The grandest of these ideals is an unfolding promise that everyone belongs, that everyone deserves a chance, that no insignificant person was ever born. Americans are called to enact this promise in our lives and in our laws. And though our nation has sometimes halted, and sometimes delayed, we must follow no other course. Through much of the last century, America's faith in freedom and democracy was a rock in a raging sea. Now it is a seed upon the wind, taking root in many nations. Our democratic faith is more than the creed of our country, it is the inborn hope of our humanity, an ideal we carry but do not own, a trust we bear and pass along … While many of our citizens prosper, others doubt the promise, even the justice, of our own country. The ambitions of some Americans are limited by failing schools and hidden prejudice and the circumstances of their birth … We do not accept this, and we will not allow it. Our unity, our union, is the serious work of leaders and citizens in every generation. And this is my solemn pledge: I will work to build a single nation of justice and opportunity. I know this is in our reach

[19] Thus Richard Viguerie, *The New Right: We're Ready to Lead* (1980), p. 11:

> [A] conservative believes in six basic things: (1) a moral order, based on God; (2) the individual as the center of political and social action; (3) limited government; (4) a free as contrasted to a planned society; (5) the Constitution of the United States, as originally conceived by the Founding Fathers; and (6) the recognition of Communism as an unchanging enemy of the Free World.

Or, Newt Gingrich and Richard Armey, *Contract with America: The Bold Plan by Rep. Newt Gingrich, Rep. Dick Armey, and the House Republicans to Change the Nation* (1994), p. 4: "five principles … describe … the basic [conservative] philosophy of American civilization: individual liberty, economic opportunity, limited government, personal responsibility, security at home and abroad." For similar lists of conservative principles, see William Buckley, "Publisher's Statement" and "Credenda," *National Review* (November 19, 1955), pp. 5–6; Frank Meyer, "Conservatism," in Robert Goldwin (ed.), *Left, Right, and Center: Essays on Liberalism and Conservatism in the United States* (1966), pp. 5–8; Myron Magnet, *The Dream and the Nightmare: The Sixties' Legacy to the Underclass* (1993), p. 227; Rush Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be* (1994), pp. 2–3; Tom Delay, *No Retreat, No Surrender: One American's Fight* (2007), p. 5; and Edwin Feulner, *Getting America Right: The True Conservative Values Our Nation Needs Today*, (2007), pp. 2–3.

because we are guided by a power larger than ourselves who creates us equal in His image.[20]

On "markets," many conservatives argue that "free enterprise" permits Americans to exercise freedom and personal responsibility, in which case efficiency will be generated by making and selling, getting and spending. In the market, private wealth is generated and helps to keep citizens strong against potential political tyrants. Moreover, the private division of labor facilitates scientific and technological innovation that leads to progress (railroads, electric lights, skyscrapers, penicillin, and computers) and economic growth, which is assumed to promote wellbeing because, as the aphorism says, "a rising tide lifts all boats."[21] Above all, a market-driven society seems justified to conservatives because of their conviction that, in a free market, justice is served and virtue rewarded. As Milton and Rose Friedman put it, "In a free trade world … The terms at which any transaction takes place are agreed on by all the parties to that transaction. The transaction will not take place unless all parties believe they will benefit from it. As a result, the interests of the various parties are harmonized."[22]

Then there is conservative praise for "small government." People on the right regard such government as a corollary of free markets in the sense that government must be limited so that (among other things) markets can thrive. This point was famously elaborated on January 20, 1981 by Ronald Reagan in his "First Inaugural Address" (my observations are added in brackets):

> In the present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem … If we look to the answer as to why, for so many years, we achieved so much, prospered as no other people on Earth, it was because here, in this land, we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before [*here is the market*] … It is no coincidence that our present troubles parallel and are proportionate to the intervention and intrusion in our lives that result from unnecessary and excessive growth of government … In the days ahead I will propose removing the roadblocks that have slowed our

[20] Bush, "Inaugural Address."

[21] The aphorism is associated with the idea that economic growth will benefit all citizens. This distillation of market fundamentalism is based on Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962); George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (1981); Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (1982); and Thomas Sowell, *Basic Economics: A Common Sense Guide to the Economy*, (2010).

[22] Milton Friedman and Rose Friedman, *Free To Choose: A Personal Statement* (1979, 1990), p. 51. On some of the ways in which "free trades" are neither free nor just, see Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (2009), pp. 49–73.

economy and reduced productivity … It is time to reawaken this industrial giant, to get government back within its means, and to lighten our punitive tax burden … It is my intention to curb the size and influence of the Federal establishment [*here is the preference for small government*] and to demand recognition of the distinction between the powers granted to the Federal Government and those reserved to the States or to the people.[23]

Reagan summed up these sentiments a little less famously – but very vividly – in 1986, when he declared that the nine "most terrifying" words in the English language were: "I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help."[24]

The Liberal Shortfall

In sum, rightists tell stories about values, markets, and government size. What leftists stand for is harder to say, because most liberals don't tell stories in the sense of together offering the public a broad vision or overarching narrative.[25] This is the storytelling gap. Some liberals may tell small tales (say, anecdotes) or recount a personal odyssey (say, Obama's life story) for specific occasions. However, those don't add up to a large and shared narrative. Obama's story, for example, tells us little or nothing about where Hillary Clinton came from and what she stands for.[26]

But wait. It seems obvious that some liberals – such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and other social justice activists – are now, or have been in the past, inspired by great stories, including some of religious origin. I will say something about these people later on, and then we will see that most articulate liberals – such as John F. Kennedy – set the tone for expressing their camp's views on public issues but do not address the nation via stories of the large and shared kind.[27] Therefore, I want only to stipulate

[23] Ronald Reagan, "First Inaugural Address."
[24] Ronald Reagan, "News Conference."
[25] Therefore Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (1953), p. viii, said that liberalism is "a large tendency rather than a concise body of doctrine."
[26] One can argue that Obama fitted his personal story into a wider tale of American exceptionalism, where pluralism is the basis of national unity. This is the central contention in Stefanie Hammer, "The Role of Narrative in Political Campaigning: An Analysis of Speeches by Barack Obama," *National Identities*, 12:3 (September, 2010), pp. 269–290.
[27] For example, Kennedy feared losing electoral support in the South and therefore did not set the rhetorical or political stage with a great narrative that would free African Americans from juridical segregation in America. See the early chapters in Todd Purdum, *An Idea Whose Time Has Come: Two Presidents, Two Parties, and the Battle for the Civil Rights Act of 1964* (2014).

now that – for the most part, and in most cases – liberals don't have a narrative which they promote with other liberals and repeat over time.[28] I will return to this contention.

Defining Stories

Before exploring the storytelling gap, I should address the issue of exactly what I am writing about, which is stories. Defining research terms can be difficult, because sometimes a real-life issue that is important and worthy of exploring relates to something that is not tangible enough to be pinpointed and studied precisely.[29] For example, modern scientists are increasingly able to map out tangible parts of the brain, but are still unable to say exactly what they mean when they talk about the existence of "thoughts" and the "mind." In this case, I searched for but did not discover a scholarly vocabulary that can pinpoint the kind of "stories" that I wish to explore. In other words, I have yet to discover a definition of things popularly described as political stories, narratives, or visions that would be satisfactory for my purposes.

The Problem of Power

The difficulty arises in the first place because the sort of stories that intrigue me unfold in the realm of politics, which is a matter of power.

[28] Repetition is a crucial rhetorical tool. For example, it reinforced Reagan's speeches. Thus his "A Time for Choosing" speech (1964), his "First Inaugural Address" (1981), his "Second Inaugural Address" (1985), and his "Farewell Address to the Nation" (1989), were all essentially the same speech, with fresh anecdotes provided for successive editions so that those editions would project one basic story as powerfully as four separate gospels.

[29] For example, before writing about the history of American political science in David Ricci, *The Tragedy of Political Science: Politics, Scholarship, and Democracy* (1983), I searched for a scholarly definition of academic "disciplines," each of which I understood to be a scattered entity composed of thousands of colleagues interacting vocationally and intellectually, mostly in colleges and universities. I hoped that such a definition would help me to arrange what I wanted to say about professors who study politics. However, I did not find what I was looking for. Sociologically speaking, each academic discipline was obviously a large *organization* of people working together. But that organization was neither located in a particular place (like the Treasury Department), nor run by a formal hierarchy (like the Catholic Church), nor held together by production imperatives (like General Motors), nor dedicated to a distinctive mission (like the Strategic Air Command). Therefore, in *The Tragedy of Political Science*, I wrote about what happens professionally among political scientists but could not line up my observations according to a convenient scholarly model.