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To cite this article: Andrew Gooch (2017): Ripping Yarn: Experiments on Storytelling by Partisan Elites, *Political Communication*, DOI: [10.1080/10584609.2017.1336502](https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2017.1336502)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2017.1336502>



Published online: 26 Sep 2017.



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Ripping Yarn: Experiments on Storytelling by Partisan Elites

ANDREW GOOCH

This article explores the role of personalized storytelling by partisan elites using a content analysis and two experiments. By personalized storytelling, I mean a political message in the form of a narrative that includes a specific reference to an individual affected by an issue. Using a content analysis of party convention speeches, this article shows that presidential candidates tell an increasing amount of stories, particularly from 1980 onward. Through randomized Internet experiments and a general population sample, I demonstrate that personalized stories have a unique influence on the public by parsing out the independent causal effect of the storyteller's partisanship, the personalization of the story, and the content of the story. Not only can stories change attitudes about issues, but personalized stories can also change how individuals evaluate the candidate telling the story. However, an impersonal story that only references a generic group, rather than a singular individual, does not improve the partisan storyteller's favorability. Results suggest that modern presidential candidates might be motivated to tell more stories because personalizing an issue may improve their standing with the public.

Keywords Experiments, narratives, campaigns, persuasion

Introduction

“I’m getting ready to buy a company that makes about \$250,000... \$270–280,000 a year.”

The quintessential personalized story may have been Joe the Plumber during the 2008 presidential election. While campaigning door-to-door in Ohio, candidate Barack Obama met a man nicknamed “Joe the Plumber” playing catch with his son in his front yard. After Obama gave a description of his tax plan, Joe asserted that Obama’s plan would raise taxes on his plumbing business: I’m getting ready to buy a company that makes about \$250,000... \$270–280,000 a year. Your new tax plan is going to tax me more, isn’t it?” (*Associated Press*, 2008). This story quickly became a talking point for John McCain’s campaign because they believed Joe personified the type of small business owner that would be negatively affected by Obama’s tax plan. Even after

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reports surfaced that Joe's story might be more of a "ripping yarn" than an accurate representation of his life—he only made roughly \$40,000 per year and would actually benefit from Obama's tax plan (*New York Times*, 2008)—the story of Joe the Plumber still became a regularly occurring message during the 2008 campaign.

There is suggestive evidence that the story of Joe the Plumber altered McCain's favorability and how the public viewed his tax plan. For example, the name "Joe the Plumber" was mentioned 26 times during the third presidential debate in relation to Obama's tax plan (Schier and Box-Steffensmeier, 2009). Just three days after the debate, the correlation between McCain's favorability and agreeing with the statement "Obama would raise my taxes and McCain would not" increased by 37% (Kenski, Hardy, & Jamieson, 2010, p. 219). This stylized example of Joe the Plumber shows how personalized stories about individuals, even if some of the details are not wholly accurate, can be effective tools for partisan elites. In this article, I examine the role of personalized stories using a content analysis and two randomized experiments, and I show that storytelling can shape public opinion on well-known issue positions and familiar partisan elites.

My results contribute and advance knowledge on the role of political opinion formation from narratives (e.g., Aare, 2011; Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Green & Brock, 2000; Gross, 2008; Iyengar, 1991; Jamieson, 1988; Schelling, 1968; Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007). Narratives and personalization are well-researched topics, but questions about the content of stories, and the role of the storyteller, remain. First, much of the research on narratives involves interpersonal storytelling, as opposed to partisan elites communicating with the public (i.e., Baumeister & Newman, 1994). As a result, we do not know how party identification interacts with a story. Second, when partisan elites, such as presidents and vice presidents, are analyzed as storytellers, much of the analysis is descriptive and does not test their effects on persuasion (i.e., Jamieson, 1988). Third, previous research does not parse out the causal influence of the personalization from the narrative; instead, personalized stories are compared with statistical abstractions (i.e., Small et al., 2007). As a result, it is unclear if the narrative or the personalization is most influential.

In the results to follow, I show that personalization is most impactful in changing attitudes about issues and candidates. Specifically, a personalized story with a named individual, and an impersonal story about a generic group, increase support for the issue implied in the story (in this case, Social Security reform). That change in support for an issue is mainly concentrated among individuals that have the same party identification as the storyteller. However, a personalized story increases the favorability of the partisan storyteller on average across all partisan subgroups, but an impersonalized story does not. Although this increase in favorability from a personalized story occurs across all partisan groups, it is especially prominent among individuals with the same party identification as the storyteller and Independents.

I argue that the mechanism behind this favorability change is the personalization of the story—that is, referencing a specific individual by name, like Joe the Plumber, in such a way that the individual personifies the issue in the story. Voters can more easily connect an issue position with a candidate if they are given an easily identifiable individual that represents an issue or problem, and this personalized information is not captured with abstract arguments or even stories that only reference a group (i.e., "plumbers" will be hurt, instead of "Joe the Plumber" will be hurt). This personalization invokes a specific protagonist, which brings the audience closer to the experience described in the story and allows them to more easily imagine themselves in the story's circumstances. As a result, personalization sends additional information that is lost with generic group references.

This personalized information, possibly signaling that the storyteller is compassionate, causes individuals to view the storyteller more favorably.

This logic of personalization is similar to the mechanism found in charitable giving research (Schelling, 1968; Slovic, Västfjäll, Erlandsson, & Gregory, 2017; Small et al., 2007). When an identifiable victim is made into a cause, people are more likely to contribute to the organization telling the victim's story:

Let a 6-year-old girl with brown hair need thousands of dollars for an operation that will prolong her life until Christmas, and the post office will be swamped with nickels and dimes to save her. But let it be reported that without a sales tax, the hospital facilities of Massachusetts will deteriorate and cause a barely perceptible increase in preventable death—not many will drop a tear or reach for their checkbooks. (Schelling, 1968, p. 129)

By having an identifiable person attached to an issue, politicians can induce electoral support in the same way that personalization induces donations to a charity.

Stories Combine Narrative and Personalization

Stories told by politicians tend to have two overarching elements: (a) a narrative and (b) a reference to a person or group throughout the narrative. Research on both narratives and personalized appeals can be found across a variety of disciplines, studied independently and in combination. This section describes what a narrative is, how it can be personalized, and how presidential candidates utilize different types of stories during campaigns (including a brief content analysis). Broadly speaking, past research suggests that stories are an important mechanism for opinion formation about individuals, groups, events, and issues.

What is a Narrative?

Unlike a formal argument, a narrative establishes a time and place with a, middle, and end (Genette, 1983; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Polkinghorne, 1988; Polletta, 2006; Richardson, 2002). Narratives have characters and protagonists with points of view about the world, and these points of view encourage listeners to sympathize with the protagonists' perspective (Genette, 1983; Polkinghorne, 1988). Drawing a parallel to the 2008 campaign, Joe the Plumber was a protagonist meant to encourage voters to sympathize with his potential tax burden under an Obama presidency. In another example, African-American members of Congress recounted narratives about Martin Luther King Jr. as a way of legitimizing support for civil rights issues (Polletta, 2006).

Cognitive psychology has investigated the effect of narratives on information processing, and this work shows that narratives are a driving force behind storing information and interpreting events (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Harvey, Orbuch, & Weber, 1992; Howard, 1991 but also see Baumeister and Newman [1994] and Fiske [1993] for a comprehensive review of the literature). Some even argue that individuals do not evaluate others (or themselves) in terms of propositions and statements (i.e., formal arguments), and instead individuals recount specific incidents as a way of justifying their attitudes (DeRaad, 1984).

Why do individuals rely so heavily on narratives to process their lives? Possibly because they are easy to understand and provide a "richness" that an abstract statistic

lacks (Baumeister & Newman, 1994). For many individuals, “describing an incident as a detailed story is closer to the experience itself, and therefore requires less complex information processing, than providing an abstract summary of the principles and causal relations involved in the event” (Baumeister & Newman, 1994, p. 677). In addition, narratives can “transport” individuals into the story, making them more emotionally connected to the protagonists and their plights (Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock, 2000; Mazzocco, Green, Sasota, & Jones, 2010). This influence of a narrative can occur even if it contains factually inaccurate statements, and regardless of whether the falsehoods in the story are accidental or intentional (Green, Chatham, & Sestir, 2012; Green & Donahue, 2011).

Although this branch of research by narratologists and cognitive psychologists provides a foundation for the role of stories in information processing, much of this research examines the role of interpersonal storytelling as opposed to storytelling by politicians. For example, are narratives more or less effective when they are told by well-known partisan elites? Moreover, these studies do not parse out the causal effect of each part of the narrative—that is, which aspect of these detailed narratives is most influential on an individual’s opinions or behaviors? Do the persuasive effects from narratives change when the protagonist is a group rather than an individual? The experimental design to follow attempts to address these questions with a general population sample.

Narratives With Personalization

A detailed narrative about a political issue can be categorized as a type of “emphasis frame” that describes an individual’s (or group’s) experiences (Chong & Druckman, 2010; Druckman, 2004; Druckman, Fein, & Leeper, 2012; Druckman & Nelson, 2003; Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Hopkins, 2014; Iyengar, 1991; Jacoby, 2000; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). While describing an issue, speakers can emphasize only “a subset of potentially relevant considerations... [which can] lead individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions” (Druckman, 2001, p. 230). Coupled with previously described cognitive psychology research, an emphasis frame that includes a narrative might be an especially effective tool for shaping public opinion. Therefore, partisan elites might use emotional stories about citizens to focus the public’s attention on a particular aspect of an issue.

Emphasis frames that include narratives can be categorized as “episodic” or “thematic”, and are most notably used by the news media when describing an event, problem, or issue (Aare, 2011; Gross, 2008; Iyengar, 1991). Episodic frames are more closely related to a personalized story from politicians because these types of frames include specific individuals or groups that are affected by an event or issue (Iyengar, 1991, p. 14).¹ Political news utilizes episodic frames regularly: roughly 13% of political news is presented in the form of an episodic frame (Chong & Druckman, 2011). Experimental evidence shows that episodic frames are more likely to elicit feelings of sympathy and pity, and these feelings are strongly associated with support for issue positions (Aare, 2011; Gross, 2008). In addition, episodic frames tend to be most effective at generating support for issues when they elicit an emotional response, and so many episodic frames tell the story of a sympathetic person (Aare, 2011; Gross, 2008).

There is also evidence that personalized stories about a sympathetic individual can change behavior, not just attitudes about issues seen in the news (Small & Loewenstein, 2003; Small et al., 2007). For example, charitable giving increases when individuals are exposed to a specific individual that is affected by a disaster, but a statistical representation

of a disaster does not illicit the same response (Schelling, 1968; Small et al., 2007). “These cases demonstrate that when an identifiable victim is made into a cause, people appear to be quite compassionate and generous” (Small et al., 2007; but see Schelling [1968] for an initial theory). Recent evidence shows a similar uptick in donations to the Red Cross designated to Syrian refugee relief as a result of the now iconic image of a boy called “Aylan Kurdi” found dead on a beach in Turkey (later reports indicate that his name was actually Alan Shenu; Slovic et al., 2017). Although this is an image, and not a story, it still provides a strong example of how a singular person can affect the public’s behavior. The photo was published on the front page of numerous media outlets worldwide, and viewed roughly 20 million times on social media, and as a result, the “mean number of daily donations during the week after publication of the photo was more than 100-fold greater compared with the week before” (Slovic et al., 2017, p. 2). I argue that candidates for office personalize issues for this very reason—they are trying to bring attention to one (usually sympathetic) individual that personifies a reason to vote for them or their policies. However, candidates tend to fill in the details about a person with a narrative in a speech, advertisement, or debate and not just an image.

These studies across political science, political communication, and economics demonstrate the power of a personalization, but questions remain. First, evidence on episodic frames mainly come from studies of media influence or charitable fundraising for disaster relief. Very little is known about the quantity, and causal effect, of narratives told by partisan elites during public debates and campaigns. Second, it is unclear if frames are more or less effective when the protagonist in the narrative is an individual (a personalized story) or an anonymous group of individuals (impersonalized story). Instead, previous research compares personalized narratives to completely different types of frames; that is, charitable giving research focuses on personalized stories compared to statistical representations. Moreover, previous research on episodic-thematic framing focuses on personalized stories about individuals or groups compared to an abstract retelling of an event without individual or group personalization (i.e., Iyengar, 1991), and in doing so, two types of causal factors are changing simultaneously (the type of narrative and the personalization). As a result, it is unclear if the narrative or the personalization is the most important part of these emphasis frames.

Personalized Storytelling by Presidential Candidates

Presidential candidates use various rhetorical frames when communicating with the public, and they often use storytelling as a way to create a conversation with audiences. Jamieson (1988) thoroughly documents various types of storytelling by presidents and vice presidents including personalized stories, impersonal stories about generic groups, and autobiographical stories. Autobiographical stories—a type of narrative that is more unique to candidates for office—act as a way of breaking the ice with the public who might not be familiar with them. Candidates also tell autobiographical stories in order to appear relatable. Vice President Richard Nixon, for example, “saved his place on the Republican ticket... with a speech baring his soul” about his personal life (Jamieson, 1988, p. 63).

Ronald Reagan was the first president to make storytelling a major part of his communication strategy. For Reagan, “dramatic narrative is a rhetorical staple; for his predecessors, it was an exotic dish” (Jamieson, 1988, p. 139). For example, a type of impersonal story used by Reagan and his successors involved themes of American greatness, like stories about U.S. troops abroad and the Founding Fathers, with subtle

references to present-day issues. Reagan also told personalized stories that generated public attention even when some of the details were later found to be inaccurate. At Reagan's first inauguration, he told the story of World War I soldier Martin Treptow who became associated with patriotic sacrifices and was an inspiration to persevere in the present day. Some of the details of Treptow's military service were later discredited by the media, much like some of the details about Joe the Plumber, but the symbolism represented by his personalized story remained (Jamieson, 1988, p. 126).

The types of stories told by partisan elites are well-documented qualitatively by Jamieson (1988), but previous research does not quantify the amount of storytelling by presidents. As a modest contribution to the already thorough qualitative assessment of presidential storytelling, I conducted a content analysis using 26 convention speeches by each party's nominee from 1964 to 2012. The goal of this content analysis is to (a) identify the number of stories compared to non-stories (i.e., argument) told by presidential candidates and (b) identify the prevalence of each type of story including personalized, impersonal, and autobiographical. The results that follow show that much of the observations about Reagan's use of storytelling, particularly autobiographical storytelling, have become even more prevalent among subsequent presidents.

Why are convention speeches a good place to look for stories? Unlike advertisements or debates, the structure of convention speeches has largely remained the same over time—both candidates provide a summary of their candidacy using roughly equivalent amounts of time for a given year. And both candidates only give one convention speech during their campaigns so there is not a rhetoric imbalance as with some advertising campaigns. Although this is still not a perfect comparison of rhetoric over time, using convention speeches helps minimize the amount of other confounders that are not accounted for from one presidential campaign to another. However, the length of speeches has increased over time, and so presenting raw counts of stories would be misleading for comparisons over time. As a result, content analysis results are presented in terms of percentages, and aggregated by election year. Please see supplemental Appendix Tables 5 and 6 for raw counts by candidate. Convention speeches from 1964 to 1996 came from the Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse at the University of Pennsylvania. Speeches from 2000 to 2012 came from The American Presidency Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

To generate my categories, I subset the data by appeals to certain types of rhetoric, where an appeal is a statement, or set of words, that presents the same idea consecutively (Finkel & Geer, 1998; Geer, 1998; Vavreck, 2009). Appeals were then coded into five categories: stories, arguments, partisan cues, credit claiming, and calls to action.² Table 1 provides an overview of the codes used in the content analysis. As the first two paragraphs in this subsection imply, my coding scheme accounts for three types of stories: personalized stories invoking an individual, impersonalized stories about a group or historic event, or autobiographical stories about the candidate's background. A complete story can be coded with multiple appeals; for example, a story containing four statements consecutively would receive four counted storytelling appeals.

I briefly detail the other rhetoric codes used. The two overarching types of rhetoric were argumentation or storytelling, and these codes could not overlap (i.e., both codes are mutually exclusive). Argumentation codes can take two forms: formal (complete) arguments or enthymemes. A formal argument is a series of premises with a conclusion; whereas, an incomplete argument, called an enthymeme, occurs when a premise or conclusion is in text without an obvious connection to surrounding statements (see Walton [1989] or Walton [2013] for more detailed definitions of argumentation; see Petty and Cacioppo [1986] for a theory of argumentation effects; and see Druckman and

Table 1
Content analysis codes for presidential convention speeches

Type of Rhetoric	Statement Description	Mutually Exclusive?
Storytelling	Personalized: narrative about an individual	Yes
	Impersonal: narrative about a group or historical event	Yes
	Autobiographical: narrative about self or family member	Yes
Argumentation	Formal argument: A series of premises with a single conclusion. Each statement coded individually as a premise or conclusion, usually single sentences. One to several premises occur first, then end with a conclusion statement. Or, formal arguments can appear in reverse order.	Yes
	Enthymeme: incomplete argument that includes only a premise or conclusion in isolation	Yes
Partisan cues	Statement that contains “Democrat,” “Republican,” or compliments for in-party elites (usually past presidents)	No
Credit claiming	Statement that contains past accomplishments, sometimes occurring as a series of statements consecutively	No
Call to action	Statement must explicitly ask audience to do one of the following: volunteer for campaign, donate to the campaign, or vote for the candidate	No

Notes: Overview of each type of content analysis code. Please see the supplemental Appendix for full descriptions of each type of code, examples, and inter-coder reliability statistics.

colleagues [2013] for experiments on partisan argumentation). For example, coding a formal argument could occur when three premises and one conclusion appear together, which results in four argumentation appeals counted in total (e.g., each premise and conclusion is counted independently, similar to multiple appeals within a story). Three additional codes, which represent only a small percentage of appeals, could also be assigned to statements that receive storytelling or argumentation codes: partisan cue, credit claiming, or call to action. Partisan cues reference parties, candidates, or well-known party leaders. Credit claiming occurs when candidates list past accomplishments. Call to action appeals occur when the candidate specifically asks the audience to volunteer, donate, or vote. Please see the supplemental Appendix for a detailed explanation of each code, examples, and raw code counts by candidates.

The vast majority of disagreement among coders occurred over statements being premises or conclusions (i.e., argumentation), not storytelling. Conclusions are either the first statement or last statement of an argument, and because many speeches are worded ambiguously, disagreement over the conclusion being coded first or last statement was common. Distinguishing between a story versus an argument was rarely in dispute. The Krippendorff’s alpha for four coders was .59, which is somewhat low, but rarely did disagreement exist over coding a story. Among the four coders that contributed to this study, the six pairwise agreement percentages for stories were 95%, 95%, 86%, 100%, 90%, and 90%.³

The bulk of counted appeals are either storytelling (25% of all appeals) or argumentation (61% of all appeals). For storytelling specifically, variation exists over time and within different types of storytelling. The top panel of [Figure 1](#) displays storytelling in each election year as a percentage of all possible codes with a fitted line over time. Both major candidates are combined, and each election year also includes 95% confidence intervals around each storytelling percentage. Results suggest variation across election years, but the fitted line suggests a steady increase in storytelling has occurred from 1964 to 2012. As evidenced by the bottom panel of [Figure 1](#), personalized storytelling begins in 1968 and remains relatively steady through 2012. In addition, autobiographical storytelling has increased over time while impersonal storytelling has decreased. Why an increase in autobiographical stories? Possibly because after the McGovern-Fraser reforms in 1972, conventions are no longer a behind-the-scenes negotiation among party bosses, and instead now more closely resemble well-choreographed theater. As Jamieson (1988) notes, “television is a medium conducive to autobiographical, self-disclosive discourse” (p. 63), and so an increase in autobiographical stories might coincide with the rise of modern conventions.

The results of my content analysis largely confirm previous qualitative work on partisan storytelling. However, the causal power of partisan storytelling in previous qualitative work is assumed and not directly tested. Does personalization with an

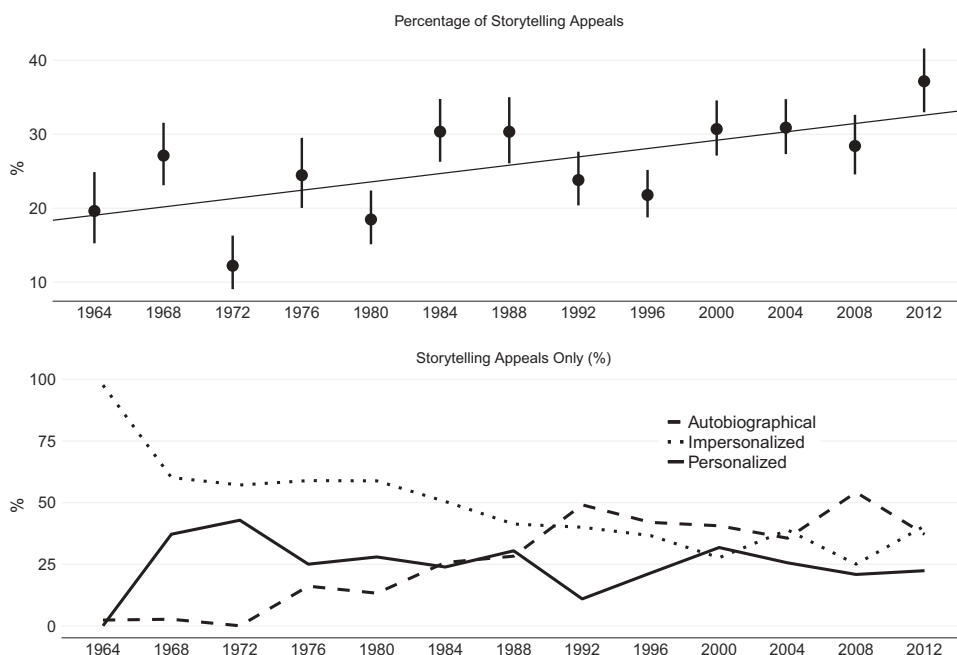


Figure 1. Storytelling content analysis: Candidate nomination speeches 1964–2012.

Notes: Top panel shows percentage of appeals to storytelling for each election year (both candidates combined). Results show an increase in storytelling over time, particularly in 1984, 1988, and 2012. Across all years, 25% of all appeals are stories. Bottom panel breaks down each storytelling appeal by type of story; each election year sums to 100% (all stories). Personalized stories (solid line) remain relatively steady around 25% starting in 1968, an increase of autobiographical (dotted line), and a decrease of impersonalized (dashed line) over time.

individual protagonist instead of a group matter? Or is the narrative (instead of an abstract statistic) most important? Are storytelling effects conditional on the partisanship of the storyteller and audience? These questions are addressed by randomized experiments in the following sections.

Experimental Design

I used two survey experiments to test the persuasive effect of personalized storytelling rhetoric (that is, a story about an individual) compared to impersonalized storytelling rhetoric (that is, a story about a group). Both experiments included the same issue and partisan cue: Social Security reform and Vice President Joe Biden. Social Security and Joe Biden were selected because of their familiarity with the public. Elites have debated various Social Security reforms for decades, and these public debates have even led to attitude change about privatizing Social Security during the 2000 presidential election (Lenz, 2012). In addition, Biden is a well-known vice president who ran for president himself and has also served 36 years in the Senate. The rationale of my story mirrored the justification used by the Obama administration to maintain realistic treatment conditions.

In my first experiment, subjects were randomly assigned to a control or personalized story group (text of questions and experimental treatment can be seen in Table 2). The control group simply asked whether individuals favored or opposed an issue, which acted as the counterfactual average of not receiving any information or cue. The personalized story group contained three pieces of information: a partisan cue (the person telling the story), a narrative about needing more from Social Security, and the name of a specific woman in the narrative (Barbara Johnson). The goal in this first experiment is to assess whether or not subjects are more favorable of an issue, and the storyteller, when they are exposed to a story relative to no information in the control group.

The personalized story condition was valuable as a first experiment because positive treatment effects would indicate that stories, in general, are useful for partisan elites. However, my first experiment did not fully rule out all possible causal factors because the personalized story group contains multiple considerations that might influence subjects (i.e., the partisan cue, the narrative, and the personalization). In other words, potential exclusion restrictions might be violated without a second experiment parsing out each aspect of the personalized story (Green & Gerber, 2012). If I find that opinion changes from the personalized story in Experiment 1, I cannot adjudicate which of the three parts of the story is driving opinion change. Therefore, my second experiment addresses these concerns.

My second experiment contained a control group again (identical to the control group in my first experiment) and two treatment groups found in Table 3. The first treatment group was a partisan cue only. This condition asked subjects if they support or oppose an issue if it were proposed by a partisan elite without any text beyond the endorsement. For some voters, simply mentioning the name of a well-known politician, regardless of rhetoric, will alter their opinions on issues (Lenz, 2012; Zaller, 1992; see Nicholson, 2011 for experimental evidence). And so without this condition, it would be impossible to determine if the content of the story or the partisan cue is influencing opinion.

For the second treatment condition, subjects were exposed to the same partisan cue plus an *impersonal* story that references “seniors” instead of “Barbara Johnson”. The stories in both experiments were identical except for the personalization. Therefore, this impersonal story treatment condition represents the unobserved counterfactual of an elite telling the exact same story but not mentioning a person by name. Moreover, using the

Table 2
Experiment 1: Randomized conditions and sample sizes

	Question Wording	Sample Sizes
Control	Would you favor or oppose a proposal to raise the Social Security contribution rate for high-income individuals, or haven't you thought much about this?	Randomized into condition: 508 Excluded nonresponse: 92 Analyzed sample: 416
Cue plus personalized story	When talking about Social Security, Vice President Joe Biden said the following: I recently met Barbara Johnson. She worked as an administrative assistant in a children's hospital for almost 40 years, caring for others. She's 70 years old now and happily retired. But like most seniors nowadays, Barbara cannot afford medication, medical supplies, and nursing care from her Social Security benefits. Day-to-day expenses are impossible for Barbara to meet. She worked hard her whole life and deserves more from an outdated Social Security program.	Randomized into condition: 498 Excluded nonresponse: 98 Analyzed sample: 400

exact same language in both experiments allows me to control for the simplicity of each story. As a result, I can measure the causal effect of each possible factor.

Both experiments included two outcome measures: support for Social Security reform and favorability of Vice President Joe Biden (both are 5-point scales plus a non-response option). Because of the importance of partisan cues, results will be separated out by the subjects' party identification, but overall treatment effects are noted in text. Last, please see the supplemental Appendix for full questionnaires and balance assessment tests showing that each randomized group is equivalent with respect to pretreatment covariates.

My results include a combined sample size of 2,016 likely voters conducted online in 2015. The survey research firm Penn, Schoen & Berland fielded my experiments with a regularly maintained pool of opt-in respondents from which I constructed samples that mirror the voting population. Penn, Schoen & Berland use click-testing, time-monitoring, and other tools to ensure that subjects are not "professional survey-takers" who rush through questionnaires or simply guess at questions. In order to make my sample representative, I used post-stratification weights for gender, age, and race. All the sizes of my weights are below 2.5 and above 0.50, which demonstrates that my sample construction is not overly dependent on weights. In addition, my results do not change with or without weights added (see supplemental Appendix for more detailed information on weighting).

Table 3
Experiment 2: Randomized conditions and sample sizes

	Question Wording	Sample Sizes
Control	Would you favor or oppose a proposal to raise the Social Security contribution rate for high-income individuals, or haven't you thought much about this?	Randomized into condition: 328 Excluded nonresponse: 70 Analyzed sample: 258
Elite cue only	Would you favor or oppose a proposal by Vice President Joe Biden to raise the Social Security contribution rate for high-income individuals, or haven't you thought much about this?	Randomized into condition: 362 Excluded nonresponse: 104 Analyzed sample: 258
Cue plus impersonalized story	When talking about Social Security, Vice President Joe Biden said the following: I recently met with seniors. Many have worked for almost 40 years, caring for others. They're 70 years old now and happily retired. But like most seniors nowadays, they cannot afford medication, medical supplies, and nursing care from their Social Security benefits. Day-to-day expenses are impossible for them to meet. They worked hard their whole life and deserve more from an outdated Social Security program.	Randomized into condition: 320 Excluded nonresponse: 47 Analyzed sample: 273

Experimental Results

Attitudes About Social Security Reform From Stories

I start with my first outcome measure, attitudes toward Social Security reform. Social Security reform is scaled from 0 (strongly oppose) to 1 (strongly support) on a 5-point scale with nonresponse excluded. My first experiment contained a control group and a personalized story group only. Differences between treatment and control are significant at a 95% level, where control group mean is .68 [.65, .71] and the personalized storytelling group mean is .72 [.69, .75] for an average treatment effect of .04.

These results are broken out by party identification with 95% confidence intervals in Figure 2. First, differences exist in the control group by party identification, demonstrating that Social Security is a familiar partisan issue to the public with some build-up considerations (Zaller, 1992). Second, differences by party identification are only significant at a 95% level for the Democrats (in-party relative to the partisan cue). The personalized story increases Democratic and Independent support by .04, while Republican support increases by .03.⁴ These results suggest that a personalized story can change support for Social Security reform relative to no information at all, but most of the opinion change is concentrated among subjects who identify with the partisan cue.

My second experiment contains the same outcome measure, but now with a control group, a partisan cue-only group, and an impersonalized story group. Results show differences from the control group, but none of the average treatment effects are significant. Control group mean is .68 [.64, .72], partisan cue group mean is .66 [.62, .69], and the impersonal storytelling group mean is .70 [.66, .74] for an average treatment effects result of $-.02$ for the partisan cue group and $.02$ for the impersonal story. These average treatment effects compared with the first experiment suggest that a personalized story (that is, a story about an individual) is more influential than an impersonal story (that is, a story about a group) across partisan subgroup. However, when results are broken out by party

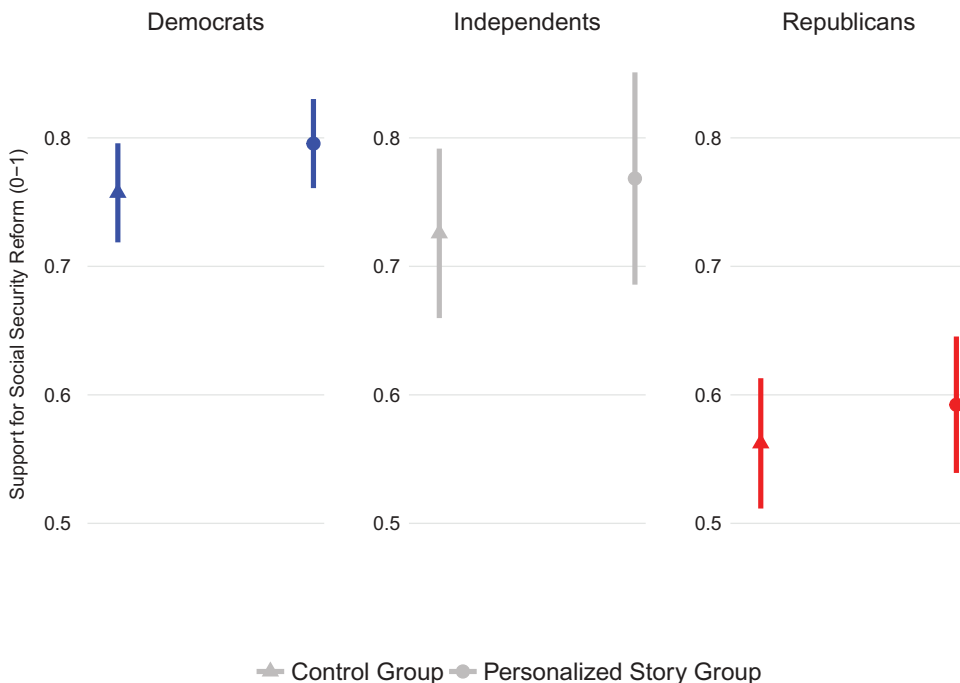


Figure 2. Support for Social Security reform by party identification in each experimental condition, Experiment 1.

Notes: Plots show the average support for Social Security reform, scaled from 0 to 1 on a 5-point scale. Each point contains a 95% confidence interval. Democratic and Republican points include Independent leaners. Data came from an Internet sample size of 816 likely voters; nonresponse is excluded. A personalized story from an elite significantly increases support for an issue among in-party respondents.

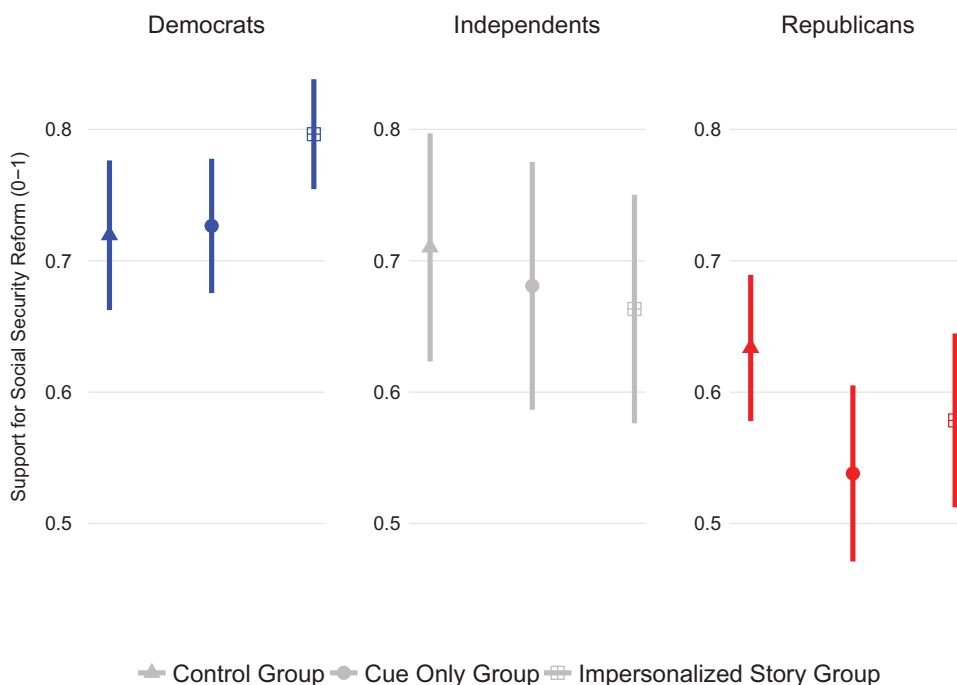


Figure 3. Support for Social Security reform by party identification in each experimental condition, Experiment 2.

Notes: Plots show the average support for Social Security reform, scaled from 0 to 1 on a 5-point scale. Each point contains a 95% confidence interval. Democratic and Republican points include Independent leaners. Data came from an Internet sample size of 789 likely voters; nonresponse is excluded. An impersonalized story significantly increases support among the in-party, and a partisan cue alone significantly reduces support among the out-party.

identification in Figure 3, the impersonalized story is even more effective among Democrats than the personalized story experiment (.08 compared to .04). Unlike personalized stories, however, impersonalized stories cause a reduction in support among Independents and Republicans (out-party). The difference between the control group and the impersonalized story group is $-.05$ for Independents and $-.06$ for Republicans (compared to an increase of .04 and .03 in the first experiment, respectively).

Taken together, when the rhetoric is in the form of a narrative, the inclusion of personalization can help mitigate backlash among out-partisans—that is, the Republican increase in support in the first experiment compared to a reduction in support in the second experiment, netting an increase of .09 between personalized and impersonalized stories. But when it comes to in-partisan subjects, any story will change their opinions on issues regardless of personalization.⁵

Personalization Increases Elite Favorability

This section evaluates the second outcome measure, candidate favorability. After the experimental randomizations, I asked a follow-up candidate favorability question to evaluate if opinions of the storyteller changed as well. This favorability question appeared on the webpage just after the experiment, so that the treatment conditions and favorability

question do not appear together. Favorability is especially important in public opinion research because of its strong correlation to vote choice. Favorability is scaled as Social Security reform, from 0 (very unfavorable) to 1 (very favorable) on a 5-point scale with nonresponse excluded.

I start with the first experiment to demonstrate the effect of a personalized story (that is, a story about an individual). Differences between treatment and control are significant at a 95% level, where control group mean is .45 [.42, .48] and the personalized storytelling group mean is .52 [.48, .55] for an average treatment effect of .06. As in the previous subsection, these results are broken out by party identification with 95% confidence intervals in Figure 4. First, differences in favorability by party identification and treatment arm are significant at a 95% level for the Democrats and are significant at a 90% level for Independents (increases in favorability of .10 and .07, respectively), while Republicans insignificantly increased by .03. Compared with the previous outcome measure, these results suggest that the effect of personalized storytelling has a greater impact on views of the storyteller than support for the issue discussed in the story.

These large treatment effects on favorability, however, do not hold for impersonalized stories. Control group mean is .45 [.41, .49], partisan cue group mean is .48 [.44, .52], and the impersonal storytelling group mean is .48 [.44, .51] for average treatment effects result of .03 for both the partisan cue group and the impersonalized story. These average treatment effects compared with the first experiment suggest that a personalized story is more influential than an impersonalized story across partisan subgroup. Figure 5 shows

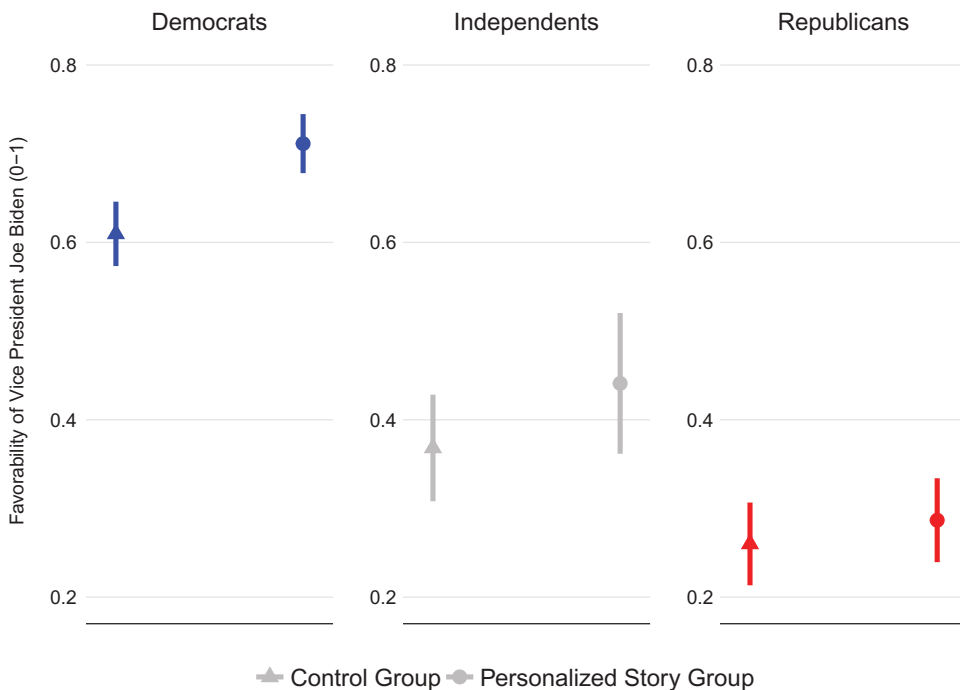


Figure 4. Vice President Joe Biden favorability by party identification, Experiment 1.

Notes: Favorability was asked of all respondents after the randomized experiments. Each point has a 95% confidence interval. Data came from an Internet sample size of 816 likely voters. Nonresponse to the favorability question is excluded.

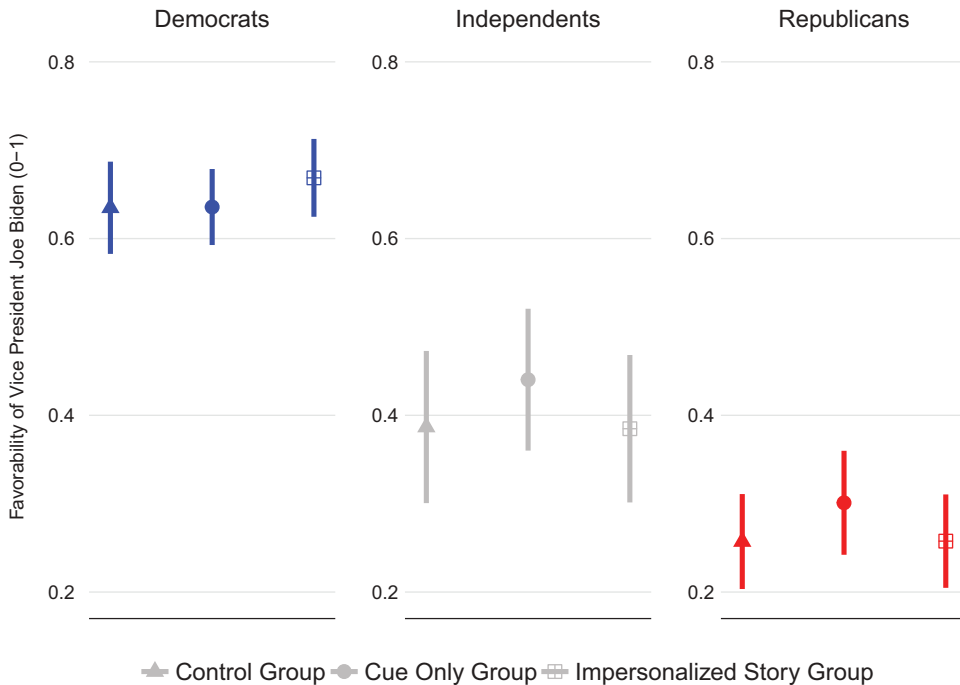


Figure 5. Vice President Joe Biden favorability by party identification, Experiment 2.

Notes: Favorability was asked of all respondents after the randomized experiments. Each point has a 95% confidence interval. Data came from an Internet sample size of 789 likely voters. Nonresponse to the favorability question is excluded.

that personalized stories are also more influential than impersonalized stories within partisan subgroups because no difference exists in [Figure 5](#) for Democrats, Independents, or Republicans. Favorability in the control group and impersonalized story group are almost identical. A slight increase in favorability exists among the in-party, but these results are also consistent with sampling variability. Taken together, these results suggest that partisan elites can increase their own favorability with a personalized story. An identical story that references “seniors” instead of “Barbara Johnson” does not alter views of the partisan storyteller.

Discussion and Implications

Personalized Stories and Partisan Elites

Presidential candidates are more frequently telling personalized stories about specific individuals, impersonal stories about groups or historic events, and autobiographical stories. Why are they telling more stories? Potentially because stories have a unique influence on public opinion. Using randomized experiments, I demonstrated that personalized stories can increase support for an issue on average, but this effect is largely driven by in-party subjects. Personalized stories can also change the favorability of the elite telling the story, but unlike an issue position, these effects occur among all partisan groups. Impersonal stories, however, only increase support for an issue among in-party subjects

while potentially having a negative effect on Independents and out-party subjects. Moreover, impersonal stories have no effect on favorability even among in-partisan subjects. These results suggest that a story with a sympathetic figure is closer to the experience itself than an equivalent story using an abstract group. This personalization might give politicians a level of credibility, compassion, or genuineness that abstractions do not, and as a result, politicians are viewed more favorably for telling the personalized story.

My results contribute to the larger debate about narratives and personalization in several ways. If storytelling is “closer to the experience itself,” then a story from a candidate might be more palatable to the public than an argument about their candidacy that only serves to summarize the “principles and causal relations” (Baumeister & Newman, 1994, p. 677). Second, my results that compare personalization and generic group references, while holding the story constant, suggest that the charitable giving effects documented in previous studies might be driven by the personalization. Third, these results contribute to the framing literature by demonstrating that strong emphasis frames about issue positions might be rooted in emotional narratives with individuals.

However, there are limits to my analysis. Because I only use one issue position and one partisan cue, my results might be idiosyncratic to the position and/or storyteller chosen, and future research should include a variety of issues and elites at different levels of government to generalize the results further (for example, district representatives with local issues). Although this is a concern I share, the issue of Social Security has been part of American politics since the New Deal, and my elite is a well-known vice president who ran for president himself and has also served 36 years in the Senate. Opinion change on familiar issues and politicians is potentially more difficult than unfamiliar ones because of a larger store of considerations held by the public (e.g., Zaller, 1992). And differences in my control group by party identification demonstrate that opinions about Social Security and Biden are already divided by party identification, which suggests that my experiments are a potentially harder test for personalized stories due to familiarity.

Finally, my results have implications for campaigns and elections. First, I show that stories are effective even in the presence of partisan attachment; however, most of the opinion change on Social Security reform is concentrated among in-party subjects. But in an era of politics where rallying the base of partisan supporters is important for turnout (e.g., Sides & Vavreck, 2013), telling stories (personal or impersonal) in speeches, debates, and advertisements may be an effective part of a larger campaign strategy targeting in-partisans. That being said, a personalized story can also influence support for Joe Biden across partisan subgroups. Therefore, personalized stories might also be an effective strategy for reaching Independents and potentially even out-party voters.

Acknowledgments

I greatly appreciate helpful comments from Lynn Vavreck, John Zaller, Jeff Lewis, Michael Tesler, Chris Tausanovitch, Alan Gerber, Greg Huber, Kim Fridkin, John Henderson, Celia Paris, and participants at the Experiments Workshop at Yale University’s Institution for Social and Policy Studies. I also thank Robert Green and Adam Rosenblatt at Penn, Schoen & Berland for fielding my experiments. I thank my research assistants Katerina Bernasek, Megan Couch, Joseph Malhas, and Anaika Miller for help with the content analysis. Finally, I thank the three anonymous reviewers and two editors for helpful comments and criticisms during the review process.

Notes

1. By contrast, thematic frames involve more abstract and impersonal narratives that try to connect to a larger, ongoing theme without chronicling the life of an individual or group.

2. Appeals to stories are mutually exclusive from appeals coded as arguments. A complete argument is built from premises and conclusions that work together to create a complete argument. An appeal is only coded as a premise or conclusion if it is part of a complete argument; otherwise, the appeal is coded as an enthymeme (a premise without a conclusion, or a conclusion without a premise). Both subcodes are considered “argumentation.” See supplemental Appendix for greater detail on the coding scheme.

3. The three storytelling subcodes were identified qualitatively as appeals to stories before undertaking the content analysis, but each type of story was not formally coded and counted until the review process. As a result, I cannot report reliability statistics for specific storytelling subcodes.

4. Sample size limitation potentially makes the Independent difference insignificant at a 95% level.

5. Focusing solely on the partisan cue group, these results provide further evidence that simply associating a policy with a political elite acts as a “polarizing cue” (Nicholson, 2011), meaning that a partisan cue by itself can act to reduce support among out-partisans, but it does very little to increase support among in-partisans. This result suggests that candidates have to provide additional reasoning (like a story or an argument) to generate support.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed on the publisher’s website at <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2017.1336502>

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