

Catholic and Evangelical Religious-Political Narratives About the Contraceptive Coverage Requirement Policy

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Qualitative, document analysis



Catholic and Evangelical narratives opposing the contraceptive coverage requirement (CCR).



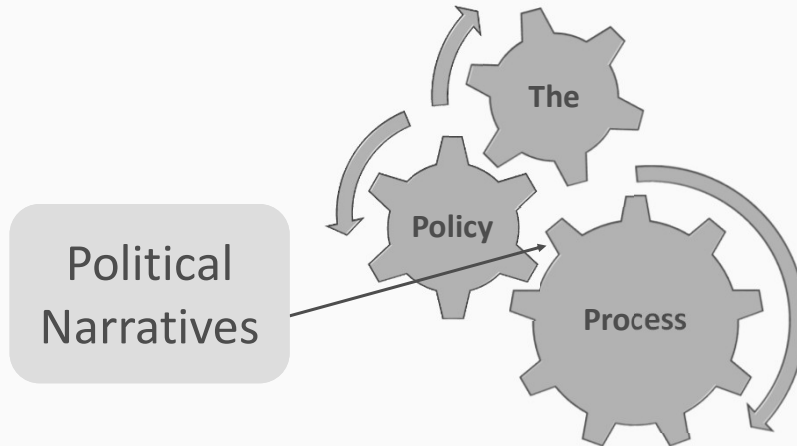
Narrative Policy Framework (NPF)

Summary of Study

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For my document analysis, I collected 40 documents—20 authored by stakeholders affiliated with Catholicism and 20 with Evangelicalism. I chose these two religious traditions because they are the most prominent in the US. The documents were a combination of legal briefs and press releases, which I chose because they represent official statements from the stakeholders. I focused on the contraceptive coverage requirement, and *Burwell v Hobby Lobby* and I analyzed the narratives using the narrative policy framework because the framework provides narrative elements and strategies that break down the narratives in a methodical way.

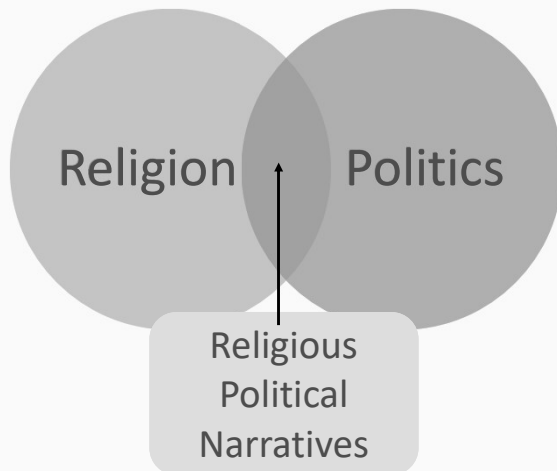
Why does this matter?



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Before I get into the analysis, I wanted to point out why it matters. As the authors of the narrative policy framework tell us, humans are storytellers, and we use narratives to process and make sense of the world. This is as true for the policy process as anything else, and so political narratives should be included in the analysis of policy development.

Why does this matter?

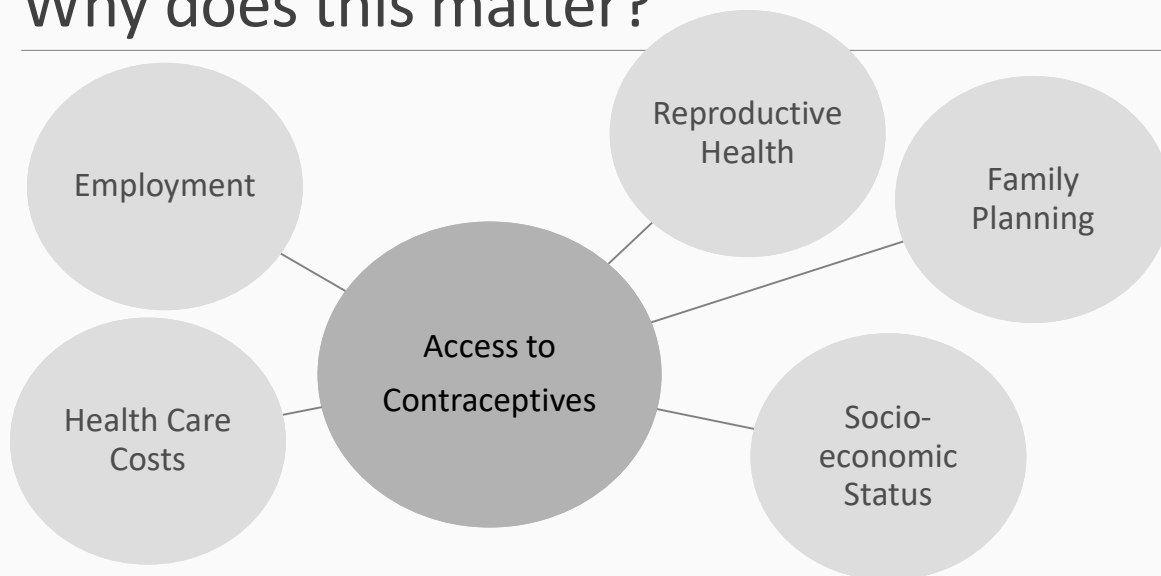


The policy problems that developed around the CCR and *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* are examples of the on-going intersection between religion and politics.

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Additionally, religion and religious narratives have been impacting US politics since its beginning. Alexis de Tocqueville even talked about this in the 1800s when he wrote *Democracy in America*, where he said we “hold [religion] to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions.” This dynamic has shifted over time, but it has not gone away. Religious-political narratives are especially compelling because they are rooted in shared beliefs about salvation, and I will highlight some of the ways that played out in the narratives in this study. I chose to analyze religious narratives about the contraceptive coverage requirement and *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* because this is an excellent example of the wicked policy problems that develop at this intersection.

Why does this matter?



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Furthermore, policies that impact access to contraceptives are an important public health and policy issues because they impact people's lives in a variety of ways. It impacts the outcomes of reproductive health for people across the gender spectrum, and more access to contraceptives means better outcomes for family planning, which in turn decreases poverty and increases education and employment opportunities for both parents and their children. I could go on and on about this, but it would take too much time. I wanted to highlight the importance of the policy I chose to study.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What narrative elements did/do Catholic and Evangelical communities use to discuss the ACA's (2010) Contraceptive Coverage Requirement, contraceptives, and the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause?

Research Question 2:
What narrative strategies are employed?

- Sub-research question: How are belief systems used in the narratives?

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My research questions for this study centered on the narrative elements provided by the narrative policy framework. I asked what narrative elements are present, what narrative strategies are used, and the role belief systems played in the narratives.

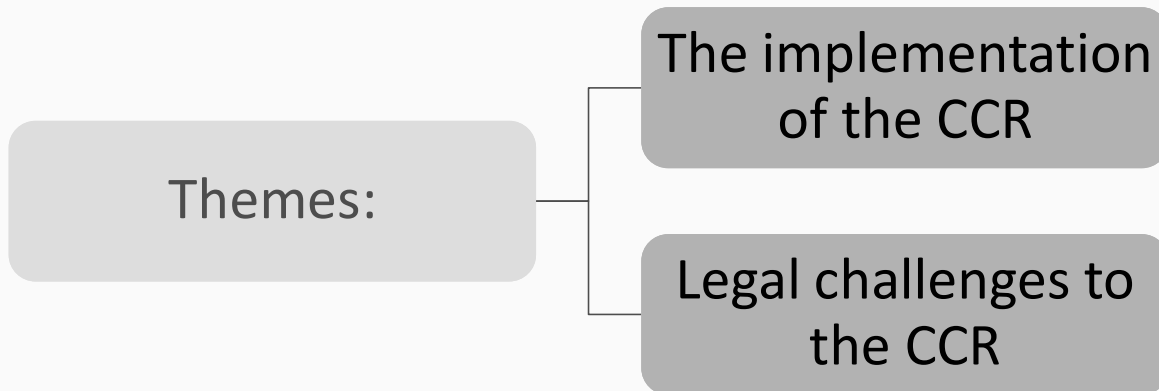
Narratives Elements



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The plot, setting, moral of the story, and policy solutions all lay the groundwork for the narratives and provide the framework in which the characters interact with each other. Those interactions and the arguments made in the narratives are also rooted in the policy beliefs. And I'll also go over the narrative strategies I found.

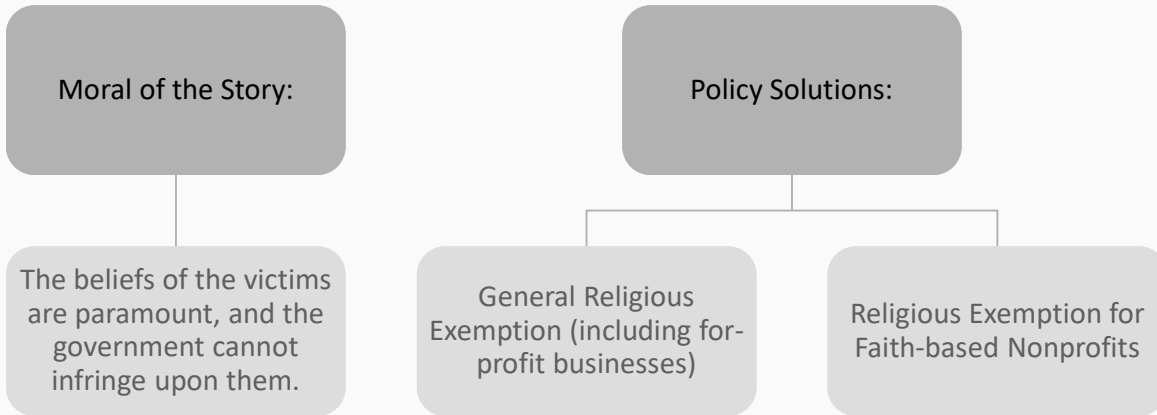
Narrative Elements: Plot and Setting



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The plot and setting were universal in themes across the narratives. It begins with the passage of the ACA, which includes provisions for preventative care. In 2011, the HHS announced that contraceptive coverage would be required in insurance plans provided by employers. From there, the religious objections arose, leading to a plethora of legal cases, *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* being the pinnacle case. Another notable case was *Little Sisters of the Poor v. Burwell*, which centered around the objections to the accommodation offered to faith-based nonprofits that did not receive the same exemption as churches.

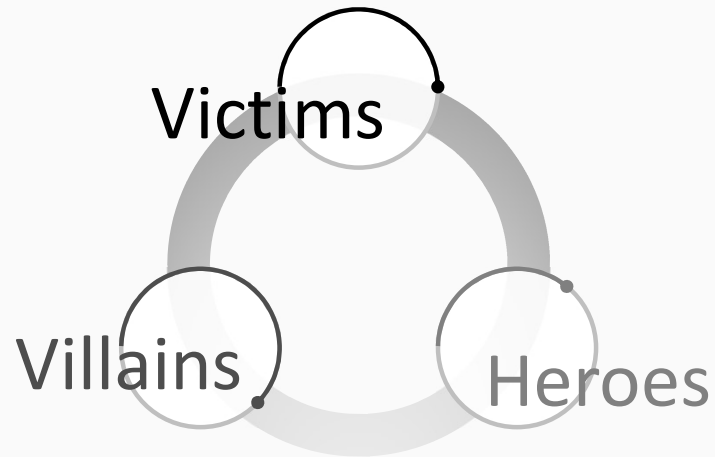
Narrative Elements: Moral of the Story/Policy Solutions



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The moral of the story is that the religious beliefs of the victims are paramount, and the government cannot infringe upon them. The policy solutions offered had two main focuses: either an exemption for any employer who claims a religious objection or that faith-based nonprofits receive the same exemptions that churches do.

Narrative Elements: Characters



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The victims and villains were featured prominently across the documents, with the victims and their beliefs centered in the narratives. There are a variety of victims, and especially a myriad of ways the victims were harmed. The villains were concentrated, with most of the documents pointing the finger of blame in the same area. Heroes had less of a presence, and there was not a solid consensus about who the heroes were across the documents.

Narrative Elements: Heroes



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I am going to start with the heroes because they were the least prominent, and there are fewer connections to make with them. I have listed seven here, though there were quite a bit more in my analysis. I chose to include only those that appeared in at least 20% of the 40 documents. As I said, there was not a solid consensus in the narratives about who the heroes were.

Narrative Elements: Villains



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With the villains, on the other hand, there was a consensus about who was to blame. The villains were primarily focused on the government and the offending policy, which was most commonly referred to as The Mandate. The narratives focused on the health and human services department and the accommodation that was developed for faith-based nonprofits often enough that I included them in the coding as well. You may have noticed that Court and Decisions showed up as both a villain and hero. This framing was, of course, dependent on whether the decision of the court helped or hurt the preferred policy agenda.

Narrative Elements: Victims



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As I mentioned previously, the victims were the primary characters in the narratives. Of those, religious freedom was the most common victim by far. Religious freedom showed up as both a hero and a victim, though much more commonly a victim. When it was a hero, it was because the right to religious freedom was perceived as a shield to the harms that the villains were causing. When it was a victim, it was because that right was being infringed upon. That is where it landed in most of the narratives.

Narrative Elements: Types of Harm

Religious Conviction/Exercise

Forced Complicity

Subject to Fines/Penalties

Accommodation Form

Religious Employer
Distinction

Religious Belief

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Just as important as the victims were the types of harms they experienced. Often, the types of harms were even more of a focus than who the victims were. In connection with religious freedom, the right to exercise one's beliefs was a common focus. You will note this is coded differently from religious belief, itself, which is located here at the bottom. While some of the narratives did claim that their beliefs were being attacked or banned, otherwise the focus was more on the right to exercise those beliefs. The idea of forced complicity—that the victims were being forced to be complicit in something they viewed as a sin—came in a relatively close second to religious exercise. Third was the fines/penalties, which is mostly self-explanatory, but it is worth noting that, according to these narratives, those fines were always portrayed as ruinous. Whether the business was for-profit or nonprofit, it would mean it had to shut down.

Another harm was attributed to the accommodation offered to faith-based nonprofits. They believed that filing the accommodation form was as much as a violation of their religious exercise as the contraceptive requirement itself. Along with this came the idea that creating a distinction between types of employers who could claim religious objection was a form of religious discrimination.

Narrative Elements: Policy Beliefs

Religious Freedom and Protection

Complicity as a Sin

Abortifacients/Abortion

Religion and Public Life

Sincerely-held Beliefs

Life Begins at
Conception

Contraceptives

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At this point, you may have forgotten that we are supposed to be talking about contraceptives. Again, I want to highlight that the primary focus of these narratives was religious freedom. The issue at hand was nearly tertiary to the discussion. However, you can see here that some of the policy beliefs do reference ideas related to the policy. Beliefs about abortifacients (or contraceptives believed to cause abortions), contraceptives in general, and the belief that life begins at conception were all embedded in the narratives. As was the belief that if you believe something is a sin, it is also a sin to be complicit in that thing. All of these beliefs were employed to give credence to the argument that this was a religious freedom issue. However, the most frequently invoked belief was, of course, religious freedom and protection. Related to this idea were the beliefs about religion and public life (which was the doctrinal belief that a person of faith is required to practice that faith in all areas of their life, including business) and sincerely-held beliefs (which argued that a sincerely-held belief cannot be infringed upon—and neither the courts nor the government is allowed to question the veracity of the belief). As I mentioned before, these religious-political narratives are especially compelling because they are connected to shared beliefs about salvation, and they often invoke a deity-authority that is the arbiter of salvation. This was true in the way these policy beliefs were framed. Especially when invoking beliefs about complicity, religion and public life, and life beginning at conception. The idea was that defaulting on any of these principles would be immoral, and the victims would be putting their eternal souls at risk (this was something that was said explicitly over and over).

Narrative Strategies

Scope of Conflict, Focus on Costs

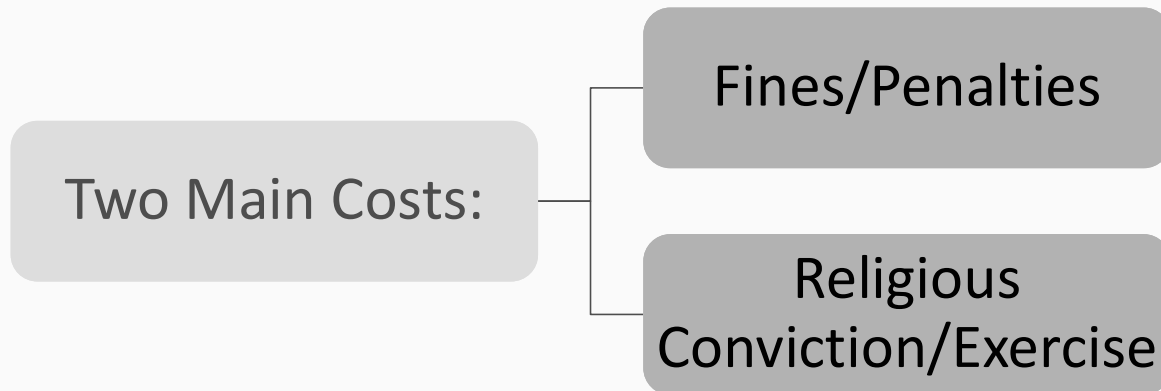
Devil Shift

Intentional Causal
Mechanism

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Within the narrative policy framework, the potential strategies are the scope of the conflict, the devil/angel shift, and causal mechanism. The angel shift was employed in the narratives to some extent, but not remarkably so. Again that association would have been with heroes, and they just were not the focus of the narratives, so I have only focused here on the devil shift. Additionally, I will explain a bit more about each of these in the next slides.

Narratives Strategies: Scope of Conflict, Focus on Costs



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There are two ways that narratives can manage the scope of conflict: a focus on the benefits of a policy or a focus on the costs of a policy. None of the 40 documents employed a focus on the benefits of their preferred policy agenda. Nearly all of them focused on the costs of the policy they were opposed to.

The costs mainly fell into two categories: there was a focus on the literal costs of the fines and penalties that enforced compliance (which, as a reminder, would be ruinous) and then a focus on the more figurative cost to religious freedom rights. Often the costs were presented together in an either/or scenario—the victims had to abandon their religious convictions or shut their business down because of the fines.

Narrative Strategies: Devil Shift

“...Defendants are **blatantly discriminating** and disrespecting those holding such religious belief.”

“For the sake of the church, and for every person of faith, we must **stop this soul-crushing power-grab now...** We call on everyone... to join us in stopping the administration from pillaging the soul with **this God-defying, unconstitutional assault on religious freedom.**”

“**If the government can force** even private religious organizations to help their own private workforce obtain drugs and procedures that violate the organizations’ religious convictions, **there is little government cannot do.**”

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The devil shift strategy describes when the villains' impacts and intentions are exaggerated, as well as an exaggeration of the harms they cause. In the narratives, when blame was being assigned, the devil shift was often employed for emphasis. I thought these would be best demonstrated in a few quotes, where you can see examples like “soul-crushing power-grab.” The devil-shift in these narratives was primarily associated with the government villain, who was the most prominent villain in the narratives.

Narratives Strategies: Intentional Causal Mechanism

Villains intentionally
inflicted:

Fines/Penalties

Religious
Conviction/Exercise

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The causal mechanism strategy has to do with the way blame is assigned in the narratives. The narrative policy framework gives us four options: accidental, inadvertent, mechanical, and intentional.

The star here was the intentional causal mechanism. Most of the documents directly assigned blame to the villains as intentionally causing harm to the victims via the fine and penalties or infringing upon religious freedom rights, and often both.

The Impact of *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*

For people of faith, matters of morality and conscience are not insubstantial—they are serious concerns that directly and materially affect a person’s soul and thus eternal salvation, **which is far more important than a person’s physical health and thus exponentially more important than increasing the use of contraceptive services**—services the government promotes under the guise of healthcare.



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To connect all of this back to *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, I wanted to note that this posed important questions about whether the burden of religious belief should be shifted to third parties. Moreover, this a notable impact of *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* because previously conscientious claims (the type that would allow a doctor to opt-out of performing abortions) have not been complicity claims. This is a new legal take on religious freedom. The narratives sometimes side-stepped this issue by arguing that whether something is or is not included in employer-based health insurance does not constitute a burden for employees. Nevertheless, what you see in this quote was the prevalent sentiment. This hearkens back to the power of religious-political narratives because what affects a person’s soul and eternal salvation is, to them, always going to be the most crucial issue. And that brings me to the final point.

The Bottom Line: Religious Freedom

No one should misunderstand what this issue is really about.

While the offense to us is abortion, and to others it is contraception, **the real issue is governmental trampling of faith.**



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A few of the narratives were very clear about this, and I have included this quote as an example. Religious freedom is the bottom line. Though the policy was about contraceptives, the beliefs about religious freedom and the right to exercise religion were the reigning rhetoric.

The takeaway here is one that can be applied to the wicked policy problems that develop around the intersection of religion and politics. Mandated coverage of contraception was a non-starter for religiously motivated employers because, to them, it is a slippery slope and the beginning of an assault on their way of life. Additionally, the veracity of that claim is not relevant when they are also claiming that sincerely-held beliefs cannot be challenged. As policymakers and policy analysts, we have to find ways of advocating for sound policy that side-steps these issues. For example, the government does indeed have other methods of increasing access to contraceptives that would not involve employers, which would make all of this a non-issue. This is demonstrably not a concern for the current administration. However, if we ever again get back to understanding the importance of contraceptives as a public health issue, we have to look for alternative ways to address this problem and others like it. Thank you.