CURATING U.S. PUBLIC OPINION ON INEQUALITY:

HOW PROPAGANDA BITES WORK

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ABSTRACT

Policy and public management narrative hermeneutics have grown to encompass both post-positivist narrative analysis with a strong literary tradition as well as quantitative analysis of the effects of narratives and framing on public opinion. This article departs from prior researchers’ story-level or framing-level analyses to present the micro-narrative of word choice. Using U.S. debates about economic inequality as the linguistic setting of interest, this study analyzes the mechanics of sloganeering done at both ends of the political spectrum. Solutions to inequality are complex, yet public opinion can turn toward or away from a proposed policy reform when a few key words distill the message down to a convincing slogan: a propaganda bite. Critically examining the narrative web of policy reform is not enough – one must also examine the slogans used as persuasive weaponry in the selling of policy.
FOCUS ON THE MICRO-NARRATIVE CONTEXT

Robert Shiller’s 2017 presidential address at the annual meeting of the American Economics Association provided a reminder of the influence of compelling stories on economic behavior. His explanation of narrative context included examples illustrating how a catchy story may influence consumers to change their purchasing or savings behavior *en masse*, or to embrace political strategies that can run counter to personal economic incentives. In the post-2016 election torpor, Shiller’s call for recognition of policy narratives is a timely call for economists, who have lagged behind other fields in analysis of narrative and its effect on the economy.

Fortunately, the public policy and administration literature has recognized the importance of narrative in promoting and implementing public policy. Roe (1994, 2) notes, “Stories commonly used in describing and analyzing policy issues are a force in themselves, and must be considered explicitly in assessing policy options…Further, these stories…resist change or modification even in the presence of contradicting empirical data...” Ospina and Dodge (2005); van Hulst and Yanow (2016); Borins (2011); Lejano and Leong (2012); Crow and Lawlor (2016); Shanahan, Jones and McBeth (2011); and Miller (2012) provide a strong and sometimes contentious array of theoretical frameworks, yet all agree on the importance of narrative in the policy process. Orr and Bennet (2016), Borins (2011) and Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy (2005) also illustrate how public administrators employ narratives to motivate and convince the public and their staff.

This article carves out for particular attention the point at which information, arising from research, finds traction or dies in the public arena. In the research dissemination phase, others (media, advocates, politicians) may ignore, promote, or misappropriate research, translating the message in order to fit a particular political purpose.

A compelling supportive narrative helps sell a policy recommendation to the public (see Ertas 2015 and Shanahan, McBeth, and Hathaway 2011). Shiller’s (2017) example was the selling of supply-side economics to politicians and the public. The Laffer curve story, as many policymakers know, posited that we are on the inefficient portion of the tax-labor supply curve, meaning that a reduction in the highest federal income tax
rates could result in an increase in revenue, as high-income earners would be incentivized to work more. This new story thus linked two appealing thoughts; cut taxes + grow the economy. The opposing viewpoint articulated by most economists was, “But surely we are not on the inefficient portion of the tax-labor supply curve!” Here is why economists’ best policy recommendations may never see the light of adoption; the language of economics is foreign to the public, and does not ring with recognition.

Psychologists, cognitive linguists, and media communications scholars were, as would be expected, early thinkers on this topic, and they articulate the storytelling of political and commercial persuasion as framing. Entman (1993, p. 55) writes that the frame is the selection of “aspects of perceived reality (to)...promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.” Narrative policy and public administration researchers have embraced the importance of framing, but with the exception of Miller (2012), are mostly focusing at the story level – the complex story line, the protagonists, the resolution, and so forth. A significant body of research in linguistics and neuropsychology points toward an additional and fruitful level of analysis; the single words and phrases used to tell the story and persuade the public.

Persuasion needs not only an appealing narrative setting and concise, easily understood ideas, but also catchy words that are easily accessed from memory. Catchphrases or slogans, if chosen well, will ring in the ears and make the story stick in the public memory bank long after the tweet or news headline is gone. Chong and Druckman (2007, p. 104) express despair over the effectiveness of framing:

What is particularly vexing in public opinion research is a phenomenon known as “framing effects.” These occur when (often small) changes in the presentation of an issue or an event produce (sometimes large) changes of opinion. For example...about 20% of the American public believes that too little is being spent on “welfare,” but about 65% says that too little is being spent on “assistance to the poor” (Rasinski 1989).

Miller (2012, 3) introduced the concept of an “ideograph” – “symbolic material that brings into view a constellations of images, emotions, values, understanding, connotations, and facts. An ideograph is a simpler
“We can easily imagine, in the agenda formulation phase of the public policy process, an emerging policy debate that draws on symbolic associations – including values and emotions – that help make a policy proposal salient. A policy narrative bolstered by salient ideographs can help move a policy proposal through the enactment phase. The winning narrative then enters the implementation phase, where it forms new associations, with certain tactics and techniques perhaps, to enable social action.”

Yet much of the narrative public policy and administration scholarship does not examine the micro-narratives embedded in the complex structure of the entire policy narrative. Lejano and Leong (2012), for example, use hermeneutics to analyze the complicated overarching story surrounding a case study in Los Angeles, where the public opposed city efforts to introduce safe re-use of wastewater. Their article provides an excellent example of overall narrative scholarship, yet the most arresting feature of the case study was the slogan sparking public opposition; “toilet-to-tap.” The moniker is so image-rich that a counter-narrative could scarcely be imagined.

A rich literature on persuasive word choice exists, yet is relatively undiscovered for its potential to inform scholarship on policy and public administration. This article provides, therefore, an introduction to micro-narratives via an auditory analysis of policy spin in the US. To illustrate the use of slogans used in selling policy to the public, this article examines the micro-narratives surrounding policies creating or alleviating income and wealth inequality. The article focuses on the words and ignores the obvious corollary – the photographs that also sway public opinion and cement stories in the public memory bank. Even without photographs or other visuals, if the words themselves evoke clear images in people’s minds, the phrases will be memorable and more likely to circulate widely.

HISTORICAL AND CURRENT SETTING FOR PROPAGANDA BITES
Many will argue that social media is at fault for trimming down public discourse to a few short words. However, partisan bickering over issues has long been fertile ground for vicious sloganeering. Note that in prior decades and even centuries, the political poster and editorial cartoon also disseminated short, convincing slogans to garner public opinion. An evocative and well-turned phrase had surprising power in the past, and will always play a role in the political process. Greenberg (2016, p. 410) describes, for example, the emphasis on short phrases in the Reagan administration:

…the Reagan team’s morning began with a public relations meeting where aides, following Nixon, crafted a ‘line of the day’ – a story or angle to lead the coming day’s news stories. Officials faithfully mouthed the key arguments, pumping them through Washington’s proliferating arteries of communication. With television news quoting politicians in diminishingly small snippets – sound bites – aides learned to chisel out clever phrases and quips that would make the news.

Although the right turn of phrase has always had persuasive power with the public, there are ever more communication media to enhance the auditory power of slogans, and those media are increasingly polarized (Duca and Saving 2017). Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth (2011, 536) describe the changes in public discourse in various media: “No longer are policy actors restricted by traditional gatekeepers, such as news editors and press secretaries. New media outlets such as YouTube, blogs, and the Internet, offer free and fast venues for the dissemination of policy narratives with fewer editorial obstacles found in traditional media.” President Trump’s mastery of Twitter to court voters demonstrated with a new format the persuasive pull of short, repeated phrases.

According to Pew Research Center survey data (Mitchell et al. 2016), 18 to 29-year-olds in the U.S. named social media as the most helpful source for learning about the 2016 election, while those 30 and older named cable TV news as their most helpful news source. Only six percent of those aged 65 and older and five percent of those aged 50 to 64 listed the local newspaper as their most helpful news source. Druckman, Levendusky, & McLain (forthcoming) show how viewpoints disseminated by partisan media to the subset of the viewing population are then spread via interpersonal discussions.
Given the changing delivery mechanisms and greater polarization of news on policy reform (if there is any news on policy reform, that is), if policy reformers and key public administrators want to cultivate popular support, they must employ similar messaging tactics that presidential administrations have used for over a century (Greenberg, 2016). That is, they must distill the message into short, descriptive phrases in order to garner popular support. The next section illustrates the sloganizing – one could say propaganda – that surrounds the issue of economic inequality. Although readers will no doubt think of more slogans, the following is a sample of persuasive labels and phrases utilized in partisan policy skirmishes surrounding the topic of inequality and tax reform, starting with the conservative viewpoint.

CONSERVATIVE PROPAGANDA BITES

**Welfare queen**, a phrase first in use from the late 1960’s, originally referred to cases where welfare fraud was detected. Most reports of welfare fraud highlighted minority women; in particular, black, single women. What makes this phrase a powerful political tool is its implication that the recipient of assistance is not deserving at all, and is even living better than those who are paying for her assistance. It manages to divert attention and sympathy away from the concept of aid to the poor, so it may have played a role in the popularity of cuts to public assistance programs. President Reagan, in fact, used the phrase in his campaign speeches during his administration, which was when the Laffer curve was introduced as a justification for reducing taxes on the wealthy.

**Big Government.** Distrust of federal government has been a defining characteristic of the US, from pre-revolutionary times onward. The phrase evokes ideas of intrusiveness, inefficiency, over-regulation, and limits on personal freedom. Big is bad, as shown below with liberal-leaning condemnation of Big Pharma and other industries.

**Starve the beast** tells the public how to conquer Big Government, by cutting off its fiscal food supply. While reducing federal tax revenue does not appear to work to reduce federal government spending (Romer and Romer 2009), the idea persists.
Because taxation (specifically, a lack of progressivity in taxation) appears to be a critical driver of wealth inequality (Hubmer, Krusell and Smith, Jr. 2016), this article focuses more on partisan efforts to sell tax reform, compared to other policy remedies for inequality. Interestingly, the phrases associated with income taxes are rather benign, as it is easy to like a tax cut, for example, so no threatening phrasing is needed to frame a tax cut for a willing public. The Reagan administration brought the sharpest cuts in federal tax rates for high-income individuals, under the neutral-sounding moniker supply-side economics (also nicknamed Reaganomics). Although skeptical of supply-side economics’ ability to deliver significant economic growth, George H.W. Bush uttered read my lips; no new taxes to reassure voters that they would not face higher taxes. This quote, although a bit funny and exceedingly effective at the time, had a short shelf life and has not been used in any significant way since then.

Cognitive linguist George Lakoff points out that it was President George W. Bush’s promise of tax relief that “portrayed taxes as something that needed to be remedied” (Rossman 2017), and even Democrats unwisely picked up and used the phrase “tax relief.” Tax and spend is an old phrase, first in use in the late 1930’s but in constant pairing with liberals later in the 20th century (see Westen 2007).

By invoking fear of death, the renaming of estate taxes to death taxes subtly implies widespread incidence of the estate tax (Schaffner and Atkinson 2010). However, the US estate tax, with its $5.45 million threshold ($10.9 million for couples) affects just 0.2% of estates. As the Trump administration turns its attention toward eliminating the estate tax, the use of the death taxes nickname may increase in frequency. Research suggests that mentioning death might be an effective propaganda technique, as will be discussed in the next section.

The phrase job creators is in high use currently. It conveys the idea that tax reductions for businesses and high-income earners plus reducing regulations will allow the wealthy to free up resources to invest in new...
businesses and grow the economy. That is, the wealthy are the economy’s job creators, according to this narrative – which implies the effectiveness of supply-side economics.

**Regulations strangling businesses, job-killing regulations.** These phrases conjure more violent imagery to counter the opposing benevolent view of regulations protecting workers, investors, consumers, and the environment. The following tweet by U.S. Congressman and Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (Republican) is an example of the consistency of this message:

@SpeakerRyan, 2/24/17: We are using the Congressional Review Act to repeal Obama-era regulations that are choking the economy.

Coined by F.A. Hayek in 1944, **creeping socialism** is a truly memorable phrase, illustrating the dread of advancing Big Government, program by program.

Calling the suggestion of increased taxes on the wealthy **class warfare** is an instantly effective way to portray a progressive commentator as a left-wing crank.

The renaming of the Affordable Care Act to **Obamacare** by the GOP was so successful that recent poll results suggested that 17% of Americans thought they were different policies and 18% weren’t sure if they were the same or different (Dropp and Nyhan 2017). Although health care is tangential to income and wealth inequality, the slogans on this topic have been particularly scathing, e.g. causing widespread concern about bureaucrats making live or die decisions, as introduced by this Facebook post by Sarah Palin in 2009; “The America I know and love is not one in which my parents or my baby with Down Syndrome will have to stand in front of Obama’s **death panel** so his bureaucrats can decide, based on a subjective judgement of their ‘level of productivity in society,’ whether they are worthy of care” (Gonyea 2017). Once Palin posted the evocative phrase on Facebook, “death panels” received widespread airplay despite being quickly labeled as false, winning Politifact’s “Lie of the Year” for 2009 (Holan 2009).

Since the Affordable Care Act’s passage in 2009, it has been frequently characterized by anti-Affordable Care Act sources as having been **shoved down our throats.** The alarming image here is effective. Finally, the
recent efforts to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act have centered on first defining the problem with various slogans (Obamacare is in a death spiral), and once the public is convinced of the problem, presenting a solution.

LIBERAL PROPAGANDA BITES

At the turn of the prior century, the phrase the idle rich described the class of high-wealth families that lived on earnings from assets instead of labor. An illustration of this terminology is William Jennings Bryan’s famous Cross of Gold speech (1896), emphasis added:

…(T)his (is) a struggle between the idle holders of idle capital and the struggling masses who produce the wealth and pay the taxes of the country; and my friends, it is simply a question that we shall decide upon which side shall the Democratic party fight. Upon the side of the idle holders of capital, or upon the side of the struggling masses?

Idle rich largely disappeared in the more egalitarian mid-20th century, and has not returned, as extremely wealthy individuals are still working (i.e. corporate executives, equity fund managers; see Saez 2017) and the current public may not grasp the difference between living off of labor income rather than assets earnings. At the same time the public was scornful of the idle rich, industrialists like Cornelius Vanderbilt and Andrew Carnegie were vilified by the press and called robber barons. Such colorful language, along with profiteer (also from the same era) seems to suggest that anti-industrialist, pro-regulation proponents were better at creating more colorful slogans and derogatory names than current reform-minded progressives.

The left has employed several slogans over the years to describe antipathy toward Big Business. Big Pharma (and in the past, complaints about Big Tobacco, Big Sugar, and Big Oil) are examples of phrases that imply rent-seeking, powerful lobbying ability, and perhaps collusion among firms in these sectors. The military-industrial complex, a phrase first used by President Dwight Eisenhower, warned of the power of
the arms industry to influence public policy. In the 1960’s this phrase evoked distrust of an overly powerful and wasteful military and arms sector.

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson launched the **War on Poverty** to combat persistent poverty in the US (Haveman et al. 2015), together with broader education and justice initiatives forming the mid-century **Great Society** agenda. The War on Poverty label rallied support to care about poverty and take steps to solve it, while the Great Society descriptor flattered the public and appealed to its aspirations. The War on Poverty phrase was later recycled for use with the War on Drugs and the War on Terror.

During the 1970’s, the phrase **living on a fixed income** was effectively connected with senior citizens. At the time, fixed income payments were not indexed to inflation, so retirees with pensions steadily lost real income when inflation was high.

Used in the 1920’s, the phrase **trickle-down economics** resurfaced decades later when President Reagan’s budget director David Stockton used it to describe the intended flow of benefits to the middle and lower-income populations following tax breaks to the wealthy. The phrase was immediately adopted by opposing Democrats, for good reason – its visual imagery is unpleasant, and “trickle” also implies inadequacy of the returns to the rest of the population. However, it does imply that some returns will be enjoyed by the non-wealthy, so its value as a propaganda bite is dubious. This phrase has endured, and appears in a 2011 meme shown below (source: [http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/and-then-i-said](http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/and-then-i-said)).
Another favorite liberal phrase was generated by a Republican when Presidential candidate George H.W. Bush expressed doubt about supply-side economics, calling it \textit{voodoo economic policy}. The Democrats ran with the phrase \textit{voodoo economics}, which survives today (Krugman 2014).

A phrase that helped Bill Clinton win the presidential election in 1992 was \textit{“it's the economy, stupid.”} Originally used internally by Clinton’s campaign advisor to keep campaign workers on message, the put-down was memorable by being funny, as well as perfectly targeted to leverage middle class anger over the recession at the time. As with the “read my lips, no new taxes” quote by George H.W. Bush, this quote had a short shelf life.

\textbf{Global capitalism}, while a vaguely-targeted bogeyman, describes the shift in local or regional enterprise to stateless, perhaps malevolent international entities.

\textbf{Corporate greed} is a widely used phrase, recently repeated by Senator Bernie Sanders during his presidential campaign. It does not suggest a particular policy solution, however. \textbf{Corporate welfare} is a more effective
phrase for ideological purposes, because nobody respects anyone on welfare, and the idea of a corporation receiving undeserved breaks (like the welfare queen described above) is offensive to many.

**Working families** is a descriptor of low- and middle-income households in the US. The phrasing avoids the word “poor” (as people do not want to self-identify with the poor) and evokes a pro-family sympathy for those who are supporting children. In addition, it combats the welfare queen trope by implying that people are working hard to support families and are neither lazy nor getting a free ride on welfare. A similar name is **the working poor**, again stressing that they are not lazy or at fault. Stressing “working” draws some indirect attention to wage stagnation and the growing difficulty of supporting oneself with one job.

The challenge in convincing the broad public to assist the poor is that well-meaning people may use bland, stultifying euphemisms to describe the poor, such as **economically disadvantaged**. These terms do not evoke any empathy among others. Plus, the derogatory terms **poor white trash** and **trailer trash** continue to circulate, linking snobbery with racism, and implying it is their own fault the poor are poor. Middle-class and high-income progressives may not find much common ground with poor and rural populations (Vance 2016). Finally, phrases such as Bryan’s (1896) **struggling masses** in his Cross of Gold speech evoke Marxist rhetoric, which the American public soundly rejects.

Another challenge for progressives is that descriptions of high net worth individuals may not strike members of the broader public as negative. Most people wish or at least wouldn’t mind if they were wealthy, so Bernie Sanders’ label, **the billionaire class**, may not evoke the negative feelings it is intended to. That is, it may be difficult to vilify the wealthy because it is a natural urge to aspire to better circumstances.

**Wall Street** is used as a proxy for people who are working in and benefitting from the huge returns to those in the financial sector. It is becoming a bit pejorative, suggesting illicit gains from a **rigged system** (Sanders 2016, Baker 2016) designed to provide enormous incomes for insiders.

**Top 1%**: Although plenty of research on economic inequality has described a huge and growing gulf between the middle class and high-wealth households (e.g. Wolff 2002 is one of the first attempts to broaden the U.S. public’s awareness of wealth inequality), the Occupy movement of 2011 accompanied a measurable
shift in the American public’s awareness of the growth of the inequality gap (Morin 2012, Fischer 2014). The phrase “top 1%” appeared to reach enough people that the concept of inequality included rising awareness of massive wealth gains at the top. This no doubt assisted in the populist appeal of 2016 presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, who kept his public speaking constantly centered on inequality policy reform. The “top 0.1%” would be a better descriptor of inequality (see Saez 2017), but the simplicity of “top 1%” now resonates with the public.

FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE PROPAGANDA BITES

A well-developed body of academic scholarship and commercial effort has gone into researching the impacts of certain types of words and phrases on comprehension, belief, and persuasion. Following are key findings related to slogan selection. The features described here enhance the ease or fluency in comprehension, and whether the phrase will be readily accessible in memory. As Alter and Oppenheimer (2009) show, these fluency effects result in subjects believing more confidently that a statement is true, trust a statement more, like a person or statement more, and view a statement as more accurate, compared to statements presented with neutral framing. In other words, the ease with which the phrase can be understood and recalled is more important than the rational consideration of its contents.

Ease of pronunciation: Oppenheimer (2006) report that phonologically simple (ease of linguistic fluency) phrases are judged in a more favorable light or viewed as more true than phrases or names that are more difficult to grasp and pronounce. The ease with which syllables roll off the tongue is important (Shah and Oppenheimer 2007, Whittlesea and Williams 1998). See also Tversky and Kahneman (1973) regarding processing fluency and metacognitive ease and Laham, Koval and Alter (2012) for their study on ease of pronunciation and positive impressions.

Anglo-Saxon, not Latinate word choices: English words with Germanic (Anglo-Saxon) roots sound more concrete, are shorter, and evoke more emotion. “Starve the beast” is a good example of a phrase with
Germanic roots. Words derived from Latin, on the other hand, tend to be more elevated in tone, more polysyllabic, and abstract; as in “reduce the deficit.”

**Tangible imagery:** Petrova and Cialdini (2005) and Tannen (2007, p. 160) stress the value of imagery in aiding comprehension: “(I)mages work through the individual imagination to create involvement. The invoking of details – specific, concrete, familiar – makes it possible for an individual to recall…”

**Humor:** Schmidt (1994) shows that humorous sentences were easier for subjects to remember than nonhumorous sentences. However, humor has a transitory effect, and once it loses its element of surprise (from an incongruous statement, for example), it may no longer be useful to repeat because it is an old joke. Thus, humorous phrases associated with policy debates will get initial attention, yet may quickly fall out of use.

**Rhyming and possibly other poetic devices:** McGlone and Tofighbakhsh (2000) show that rhyming phrases are easier to process linguistically and thus easier to memorize. Alliteration (repeating consonants) and assonance (repeating vowel sounds) may also help the listener to memorize a phrase, but these poetic framing devices are relatively unexplored vis-à-vis their link to memory and persuasion in the literature. Finally, long vowel sounds like “ee” and “ii” may ring out better and be obvious to the listener than “uh” or “eh” sounds. This has not been studied, which is probably just as well – if long vowel sounds were found to attract more attention than other vowel sounds, a bizarre auditory imbalance in favor of long vowel sounds might occur in any media attempting to persuade consumers and voters.

**Negative messages:** Propaganda bites that are negative are more likely to attract attention than positive messages (Rozin and Royzman 2001). Pratto and John (1991) and Hamilton and Zana (1972) showed that negative information is weighted more heavily in people’s judgment than positive information. Because of this, it is unsurprising that willingness to accept estimates (for loss of something) outweigh willingness to pay estimates to obtain the same attributes (Kahnemann, Knetsch, and Thaler, 1990). The takeaway point for political suasion is to select negative slogans, and if possible, frame issues of concern as removals of current benefits or possessions.
Reminders of death: Greenberg et al. (1990) showed that reminding test subjects of their mortality immediately prior to presenting unrelated information provoked them to agree more with similar viewpoints and disagree more strongly with opposing viewpoints, compared to a control group where subjects were not reminded of their mortality. They found that mentioning death prompted more in-group favoritism and prejudice. This provides an explanation for the frequency of the word “death” in the slogans summarized above.

Violence and fear: Rozin and Royzman (2001) explain how overvaluing negative (threatening) events is an adaptive mechanism to avoid risk of death. Even misery experienced by others provokes an empathetic response greater than the empathic response to happiness experience by others. Thus, persuasive political phrases sometimes invoke fear via violent imagery.

Emotion: Tannen (2007, p. 46) summarizes prior research by others: “Emotion and cognition… are inseparable. Understanding is facilitated, even enabled, by an emotional experience of interpersonal involvement.” She notes the connection between imagery and emotion, and describes how verbal or textual descriptions of visual scenes evoke both emotional identification and understanding.

Repetition: The more that the phrase meets the above criteria, the less it needs to be repeated to initially capture a listener’s attention, and the more that the phrase will be repeated to others. Regardless of the musicality or emotional pull of a phrase, simple repetition of a phrase will be persuasive, even if it is being repeated in order to point out that it is false (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). For example, always pairing “tax and spend” with “liberals” helps to cement in voters’ minds the accessible memory that liberal politicians spend more than conservative politicians. For a discussion of repetition’s role in cognitive ease, see Kahnemann (2011, p. 59-66) and Tannen (2007). Table 1 below summarizes examples of the features described above.

<table>
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<th>Features of propaganda bites</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<td>Rhyming (and maybe other poetic devices such as trailer trash, supply-side economics)</td>
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WHICH SIDE HAS THE BEST PROPAGANDA BITES?

Viewed from the perspective of a curator, the liberal/populist propaganda bites seemed stronger in the prior century; robber baron, the idle rich, profiteer. Progressive propaganda bites in use today (corporate welfare, working families, top 1%) pack less punch than conservative propaganda bites (choking regulations, job creators, class warfare).

This contention -- that conservative phrases appear to be more effective – has surfaced before, notably by Lakoff (2002) and Westen’s (2007) research on analyzing the importance of emotions and values in political decision-making. Greenberg (2016, p. 437) tells of Republican George W. Bush’s reelection in 2004 leaving Democrats convinced they were “losing not on the issues but on spin.” Robinson (2017) asks, “Why are Republicans so much better at coming up with pithy phrases that pack a punch?” Westen’s 2007 book on neuroscience and political persuasion suggested that there are emotional differences behind divergent political preferences, and while Republican messaging is expertly designed to tug at emotion, Democrats’ communication is tepid and lacking emotional appeal. Westen (2007, p. 85) laments:

A central aspect of the art of political persuasion is creating, solidifying, and activating networks that create primarily positive feelings toward your candidate or party and negative feelings toward the opposition. The Republicans are tremendously adept at doing so, having spent billions of dollars over
forty years on think tanks designed in part to hone the conservative message…and to associate
Democrats and liberals with taxing, spending, military weakness, special treatment of minority groups,
low moral standards, and a host of other unsavory characteristics. And they have done so remarkably
successfully, using procedures straight out of a textbook on associative networks.

Of course, neither political party admits to playing the spin game, and both accuse the other of relentless
propaganda. Conservatives also lament that liberals have the upper hand with spin: Barrons’ editor Epstein
complains about New York Times columnist Paul Krugman’s “econospinning” (2006), and Groseclose (2011)
documents the liberal dominance of print journalism in the US.

Many phrases that go viral and are incorporated into policy spin, however, do not originate with leading
political parties, think tanks, or public relations firms, but instead burble up from the broad discourse on
social media. Therefore, this is not a game that is left only to paid professionals in Washington DC. To win
the propaganda bite game, one must get out in front with a ringing new phrase first. If one side wants to kill a
phrase coined by the opposition, they must invent and repeat a completely different and catchy counter-
phrase that does not repeat the original offending phrase (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Lakoff (2002, p. 419-
420) exhorts liberals to “evoke the right frames”, and notes, “Rebuttal is not reframing. You have to impose
your own framing before you can successfully rebut.”

A CALL TO RESEARCHERS

Studying propaganda bites is not just a way to improve scholarship as researchers untangle and reveal the
narrative mechanisms that shape policy and administrative reform. It is also, arguably, a vehicle for stepping
into the normative arena and participating in shaping the debate. Policy and public management researchers
have some credibility, and as credible sources, can respond in a way that mitigates some of the biases fostered
by clever framing (Druckman, 2001). This article therefore closes with a call to respond to inaccurate framing
and even participate, if necessary, in proactive framing of policy issues. Policy and public administration
researchers can take an active role in responding to the narratives associated with their research. In order to
do so, one must be willing to tell a story or two. And, as the word-level analysis of the cognitive linguists and neuropsychologists suggests, one must be a better poet as well, choosing phrasing carefully to ring through the chaotic discourse.

Researchers have two options. One can formulate and use original propaganda bites; a tactic recommended by Lakoff (2002). Join the spin game and introduce a propaganda bite that illustrates the policy recommendation. One needn’t go that far, however, when disseminating policy recommendation. Journalist Steven Poole (2006) recommends people draw attention to the “unspeak” in use and counter it intellectually. At the very least, practice explaining research without the multisyllabic soup that academics use. Respond if the topic is being sloganized by others, especially if their slogans frame policy recommendations incorrectly. When discussing points with someone who uses a propaganda bite, label it immediately as a propaganda bite!” A negative phrase like this has more ability to draw attention to it, compared to the neutral academic words “framing” or “ideograph.” Naming what people are doing may engage the critical thinking portion of the brain (see Kahnemann 2011) and may encourage the listener to be more skeptical.

Draw attention to the slogans that are utilized daily by the media, politicians, and pundits. By labeling these slogans “propaganda bites”, there is a greater chance that the public will pay attention to the messaging itself, which will foster skepticism and – one can only hope – more reflection on the substantive policy discussion.
REFERENCES


