

storytelling in politics

by francesca polletta

In the grim dawn after the 2004 election, Democratic party strategists concluded that the way to win back the hearts and minds of the American electorate from Republican rivals was to tell a good story.

Pollster Stanley Greenberg declared in an election postmortem that “a narrative is the key to everything.” James Carville, famous for engineering Bill Clinton’s presidential victory in 1992, agreed: “We could elect somebody from the Hollywood Hills if they had a narrative to tell people about what the country is and where they see it.”

In Carville’s remarks, conservative storytellers loomed large. “They produce a narrative, we produce a litany. They say, ‘I’m going to protect you from the terrorists in Tehran and the homos in Hollywood.’ We say, ‘We’re for clean air, better schools, more health care.’ And so there’s a Republican narrative, a story, and there’s a Democratic litany.”

Telling Democratic stories, according to Democratic party strategists like Robert Reich and Robert Kuttner, would do more than win elections. Strong, compelling narratives, they argued, would open the door to enacting a progressive agenda in the

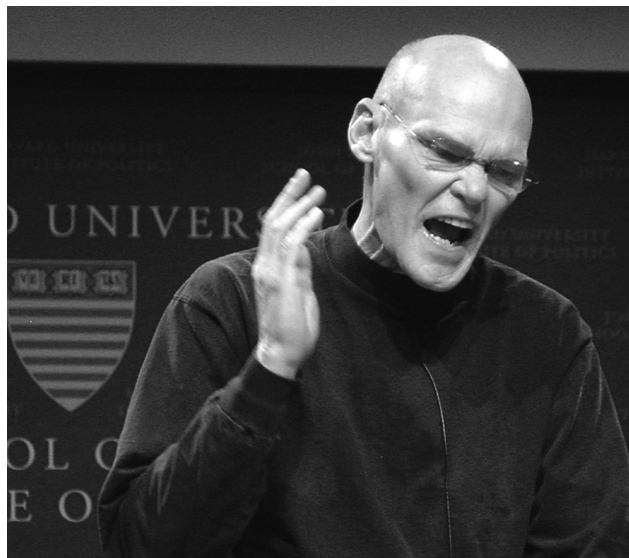


Photo by Carrie Andersen

“We could elect somebody from the Hollywood Hills if they had a narrative to tell people about what the country is and where they see it,” said political pundit James Carville.

United States, complete with universal health care, more equitable tax policy, commitments to workers' rights, civil liberties, genuine public assistance for the needy, environmental regulation, and the reestablishment of America's moral authority in world politics. The fact that Democrats won back both houses of Congress in 2006, and have a shot at winning back the White House this year, may suggest advocates of political storytelling were right.

Political storytelling is indeed powerful, for reasons sociologists well understand. There's no real evidence that telling good stories has been responsible for Democrats' electoral resurgence, nor is there evidence that, if the Democrats win in 2008, good stories alone will be enough to enact their progressive agenda.

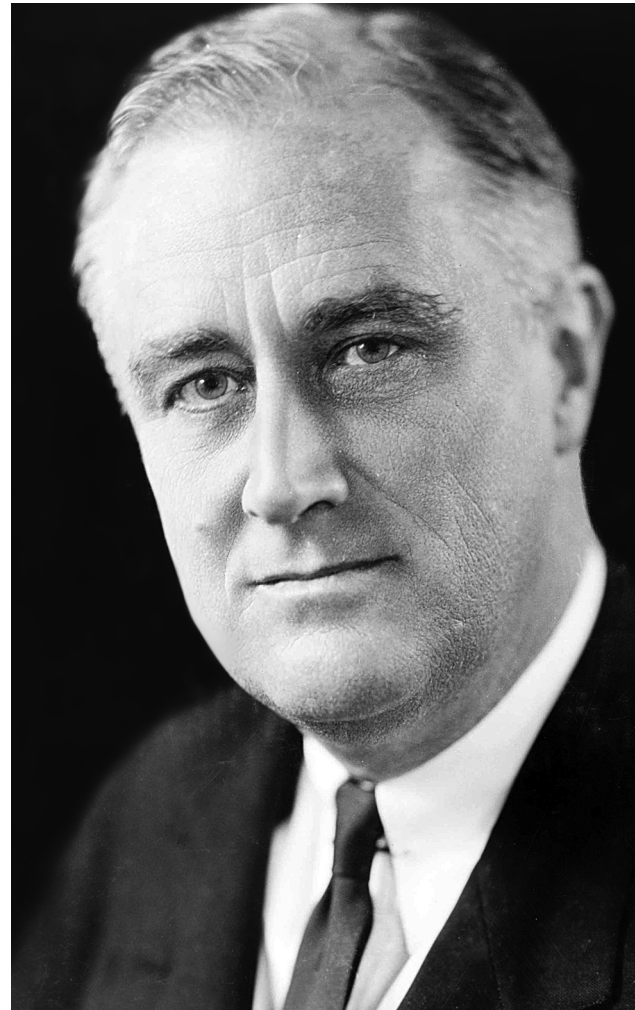
Exploring how stories work and the challenges facing progressive storytelling today can help us better understand why some political narratives persuade while others don't. None of this means progressives should throw in the towel on realizing a progressive agenda or on the possibility of using stories to get them there, but it does suggest they must pay attention to the cultural norms that make some people's stories more believable than others.

how stories work

The key to the power of narrative, researchers have shown, is that we hear stories differently than other kinds of messages. For a long time scholars of persuasion thought we processed messages in one of two ways: "centrally," where we really scrutinize a message and evaluate its claims critically, or "peripherally," where we absorb a message casually, judging it less by its content than by the appeal of the speaker or our mood.

Peripheral processing, scholars showed, may change attitudes in the short-term, but they don't last. To really get people to change their opinions they must process information centrally. The hitch is they're likely to do that only when they already have a personal stake in an issue. You can see the problem. If you want me to support your proposal for welfare reform, your efforts to convince me won't matter much if I'm not on welfare or not palpably incensed about the portion of my paycheck supporting people on welfare. Together, those two groups don't account for much of the electorate.

This is where narrative comes in. Recent research suggests we process stories by a third route. We immerse ourselves in the story, striving to experience vicariously the events and emotions the protagonists experience. This is probably no surprise to anyone who has teared up along with Wilbur the pig when a certain grey spider died. Researchers have shown this experience of immersion or "transportation" can lead to lasting changes of opinions. This is true even when the subject doesn't care much



Public domain image, originally by Elias Goldensky

A famous Democratic storyteller, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

about the issue in question.

In a series of fascinating experiments conducted by psychologists Melanie Green and Timothy Brock, subjects read a story about a child murdered in a mall by a psychiatric patient. Afterward, they answered questions designed to measure their absorption in the story, such as whether "activity going on in the room around me was on my mind" while reading the story,

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and whether "I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the narrative." Participants were also asked their views on issues relevant to the story, for example, about freedoms for psychiatric patients and their beliefs in a just world.

The results were clear: readers who scored highly on the absorption scale were likely to report beliefs consistent with those implied in the story. Absorbed readers were more likely to believe psychiatric patients should always be supervised and they were more likely to believe "good people often lead lives

of suffering.” This was true whether the events in the story were described as true or fictional.

Another experiment probed the dynamic involved. Subjects were asked to circle every “false note” or statement that didn’t ring true in the story. The more absorbed they were, the less likely they were to see such false notes. This suggests that when we hear stories, we suspend our proclivity to counterargue, to raise doubts about the veracity or relevance of the information we’re hearing. We truly suspend disbelief. And we do so in a way that has lasting effects. Other studies have shown the attitudinal change brought about by stories tends to persist or even increase over time.

So far, so good. However, narrative research has identified an important condition for stories’ persuasive power. Stories have no effect if their message is too explicit. Readers resist being beaten over the head with the moral. They want the events to yield their own meaning. But events in a story *never* yield their own meaning. We evaluate, even understand, what’s happening by reference to stories we’ve heard before. As we listen or read, we gradually recognize events as part of a David-and-Goliath story about the little guy triumphing over the big guy or a pride-before-a-fall story about the little guy biting off more than he can chew. The plotlines available are multiple and diverse. And stories never hew exactly to the formula; what would be the point? Still, stories that stray too far from the familiar risk seeming unbelievable, unintelligible, or simply strange. Which brings us to one of the key problems for progressive political storytelling.

hearing with stories

Progressives have to tell unfamiliar stories. That’s because when it comes to some of the issues they care most about, the problem lies not in the stories they tell but in the stories through which people hear them.

Conservative ideas about what constitutes genuine need, who is a real victim, and what counts as inequality rather than just difference have force because they seem to be supported by so *many* familiar stories, stories whose multiplicity and diversity give them the feel of the real.

If you tell a new story, a truly new story, you risk being made sense of via those old familiar stories, or you risk not making sense at all.

For example, when women went to court in the 1980s to prove employers were discriminating by sex, they armed themselves with statistical evidence of longstanding disparities in men’s and women’s rates of hiring and promotions. That evidence should have countered employers’ claims that women didn’t want jobs that had traditionally been held by men.

But in case after case, legal scholar Vicki Schulz found, judges weren’t satisfied with that evidence. They wanted vic-

tims—individual women who could tell a story of having aspired to the higher-paying job and been denied it. As the judge in the famous *EEOC v. Sears* case put it, plaintiffs might have won had they produced “even a handful of witnesses to testify that Sears had frustrated their childhood dreams of becoming commission sellers.” To which the answer should have been: Who dreams of becoming a commission seller? The stories judges wanted to hear mistakenly assumed people’s work preferences are forged only *before* they enter the work world, rather than also evolving in line with the possibilities they perceive once in the work world. Such stories left the real problem intact: the practices of sex-segregated advertising and word of mouth recruiting that effectively defined high-status jobs as male.

Moreover, when plaintiffs did tell the stories judges want-

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ed to hear, they often met with skepticism. Employers’ argued most women didn’t want jobs that were stressful, “heavy,” “dirty,” and took time away from their families. That argument was convincing against the backdrop of the countless stories we’ve heard of girls being different from boys, and girls liking “clean” things, and women sacrificing for their families, and families being a haven in a heartless world and so on. By contrast, plaintiffs seemed to be saying women were identical to men, a claim that flew in the face of common sense, as more than one judge put it.

Again, plaintiffs in these cases were encouraged to tell their stories. But the assumptions about women and work that those stories had to challenge were already a part of more familiar stories, stories that came in so many versions and forms they seemed to capture a complex reality. A story palpably at odds with those stories was easily discounted as idiosyncratic. Plaintiffs should have been able to say, “This is a story not about dreams, but about the obstacles to dreaming.” But that story—not really a story at all—would have been much harder to tell.

Certain stories about women and work are deeply embedded in American culture. Other stories that have shaped policy are of a more recent vintage. Consider the case of welfare reform. Set aside the sensational stories about welfare queens riding high on the system. The real problem for progressives fighting cuts to public assistance in the 1990s was the more compassionate argument made by Democrats and Republicans alike that poor people’s dependence on governmental assistance had stunted their potential for autonomy.

That argument made sense against the backdrop of the



AP Photo/Charles Dharapak

President George W. Bush sits down with U.S. Border Patrol and other law enforcement officers during a stop at the Cotulla Style Pit Barbeque in 2006.

stories we've heard about the virtues of autonomy and the ills of dependency. But the familiarity of those stories obscured a profound historical shift. Before the second half of the 20th century, as researchers Linda Gordon and Nancy Fraser have shown, dependency was widely seen as the result of a market-based employment system rather than a character flaw, as economic more than psychological. After all, the reality is that everyone is, at some point in their lives, dependent on others, just as everyone is, in some way, subsidized by the state. But in the last few decades, stories of economic dependency as a personal failing gained traction. Economic dependency was described as a psychological problem not unlike chemical dependency or emotional dependency, and as a problem to which women, and particularly women of color, were especially prone. The claim that governmental assistance was *responsible* for people's poverty—surprising on its face—made sense in terms of those background stories.

Again, those bidding to cut welfare were successful not because they told the same version of the same story over and over again, but rather because their arguments, assertions, and assumptions were heard in terms of a cluster of diverse stories about the differences between women and men, housework and paid labor, addiction and autonomy, subsidy and independence. Some of those stories were newer than others, but together they constituted a kind of narrative reality against which claims about the effects of

government assistance seemed plausible.

The same thing is true of the much-maligned genre of "victim" stories. Progressives have to show that people whose livelihoods, health, or security is already fragile are hurt by current policies, and they have to make us care. Sure, we're all in this together—Americans all suffer when the economy goes south—and progressives can point that out. But the fact is, some people are better equipped to withstand the vicissitudes of an unregulated market and a privatized health system than others. The problem is that when progressives tell Americans about those people, Americans tend to assimilate them to the countless stories of victimization they've heard. In those stories, protagonists are either truly victims—innocent, pure, powerless, and pitiful—or aren't really victims at all. No one wants to be the first kind of victim. Advocates for battered women who have struck back at their abusers and are being prosecuted for homicide or assault have found that, even when their freedom

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depends on it, women are unwilling to present themselves as pitiful, powerless victims.

The problem goes still further. When battered women defendants do present themselves as victims, they find it difficult to plead self-defense. Because we think of victims as

powerless, it's hard to think of them also as people able to determine their own fate. Victimization means being *without agency*. So judges, juries, even women's own defense counsel have been unwilling to see battered women as acting to save their own lives. Because of the many stories we've all heard about victims and those posing as victims—one pitiable and powerless, the other competent and criminal—the legal plea of self-defense, which was ostensibly available to women, has been denied them.

Again, as conservatives' experiences with victim stories demonstrate, what matters is not so much the stories you tell as the extent to which the stories you tell resonate with the stories your audience already knows. For even as they have been scathing in their denunciation of victim storytelling, conservatives in recent years have relied on the same form themselves. As Thomas Frank and others have argued, contemporary conservatives pretty much came to power on a victim story—one in which ordinary, plain-thinking, god-fearing Americans were betrayed by sanctimonious, liberal intellectuals pushing a radical agenda on people they dismissed as stupid. But conservatives are rarely attacked as crybabies. Why is that? In part, because new stories are heard in terms of old stories. Against the backdrop of countless stories that portray conservatives as up-by-your-bootstraps, self-sufficient, stiff-lipped, and uncomplaining, their victim stories tend to be absorbed into those stories rather than heard as challenges to them.

ambivalence

There's yet another reason why progressives' victim stories have been heard more skeptically than conservatives' in recent years. It has to do with how Americans evaluate not stories, but storytelling. Americans are ambivalent not only about victim stories but about storytelling generally. We love stories and we distrust them. We see them as at once authentic and deceptive, universal and idiosyncratic, morally powerful and politically unserious. It's rare, however, that we hold these mixed views of stories at once. Rather, as I've tried to show in my own work, negative views of the form are more likely to be triggered on some occasions and by some storytellers.

Republicans won the battle over narrative in the 1990s when they successfully cast progressives as elite intellectuals (think John Kerry). In so doing, conservative Republicans made it difficult for progressives and Democrats more generally to be seen as credible storytellers.

Stories are seen as the province of the ordinary, the down-to-earth, the unpretentious and morally straightforward—the opposite of the abstract argument, theoretical posturing, and complex facts and figures of intellectuals.

Democrats haven't always been seen as bad storytellers (think, for example, of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his fire-

side chats). But once Democrats were widely identified with East Coast eggheads, as development linguist and National Public Radio correspondent Geoffrey Nunberg has described, it became difficult to see them as folksy raconteurs. When Al Gore, the policy wonk, told poignant stories during the 2000 election of people suffering from inadequate health care and school budget cuts, he was widely attacked for his calculated

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effort at authenticity. George Bush, by contrast, who was promising twice as much in spending as his own program allowed and misrepresenting his tax cuts as benefiting the poor, was widely appreciated as the kind of guy with whom you'd want to trade a few stories over a beer.

Indeed, I wonder if Democratic pundits after 2004 began calling for a coherent "story" rather than a philosophy or vision or platform because they thought that by speaking *in* ordinary American, they'd come up with a way of speaking *to* ordinary Americans.

Things may be changing, though. The Democrats didn't win in 2006 by telling stories. By all accounts, Democratic congressional candidates won because voters held Republicans responsible for having misled them into an unpopular war. However, it's possible Republicans' loss of credibility on the war will spread to a more general distrust of conservative storytelling. Our ambivalence about narrative comes in again here. Even the best storytellers are vulnerable to having their accounts dismissed as "just stories"—as lies.

advice for storytellers

None of the foregoing should be taken to imply that politicians in general and progressive politicians in particular can't gain traction by exploiting stories deeply embedded in American culture. But they do have to break with familiar stories. To do that they should take a cue from great literary writers. Great writers don't write simple stories. They write stories that tap into our expectations and defy them. They tweak familiar plotlines, characters, and situations. They use tropes like irony, ellipsis, and shifting point of view to make what was familiar strange. They let us think we're hearing one kind of story and then tell us another.

Political storytellers should reconsider the idea that irony is depoliticizing. Left-leaning storytellers might instead tell victim stories not in the tragic form we're used to but in a way that combines heroism and irony. For example, they could tell a story of a hardworking and resourceful woman on welfare.

Show what she has to do to keep her family clothed and fed, but do so with wry humor. Emphasize the woman's creativity in a way that sheds light on the irrationalities of the bureaucratic structures she has to negotiate. The goal is to elicit in the audience a response not of "poor her" but "this is nuts!"

Michael Moore movies are effective in part because they join the heroic with the picaresque. They're about a crusading journalist who sets out to challenge scions of industry, health care, and politics. But the hero is chubby, mumbling, and not very quick on the draw. It's the scions of the establishment who blithely reveal the injustices and hypocrisies of the system. Moore is just there. Politicians should use the familiar to draw ordinary Americans in; when they're absorbed, tell them something different than what they expect to hear.

Political storytellers should also aim to capitalize on Americans' ambivalence about stories. I said that views of stories as idiosyncratic, deceptive, and trivial tend to get pinned on progressives more than conservatives. But it doesn't have to be that way. Progressives can question the authenticity, generalizability, or relevance of the stories told by conservatives. They can say to an audience, "I'm not going to tell you stories; I'm going to give you facts and here's why." When they really think about it, most people don't believe stories are more straightforward than statistics. They should be reminded.

The fact that telling successful progressive stories is harder than some politicians recognize doesn't mean realizing a progressive agenda is impossible. Instead, it means progressives should concentrate on telling truly literary stories—and, sometimes, should refuse to tell stories at all.

recommended resources

Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon. "A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a keyword of the U.S. welfare state," *Signs* (1994) 19. A feminist analysis of how contemporary stories of "dependency" as a psychological condition, rather than a structural condition, reshaped poverty policy.

Melanie C. Green and Timothy Brock. "The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2000) 79: 701–721. Two psychologists show that readers who find a narrative account absorbing are more likely to embrace opinions consistent with those in the story—whether or not they believe the story is true.

Geoffrey Nunberg. *Talking Right: How Conservatives Turned Liberalism into a Tax-Raising, Latte-Drinking, Sushi-Eating, Volvo-Driving, New York Times-Reading, Body-Piercing, Hollywood-Loving, Left-Wing Freak Show* (Public Affairs, 2006). Democrats can't simply redefine terms like "liberal," "elite," and "values" that conservatives now control; they have to change the stories behind those terms, according to this linguist and National Public Radio commentator.

Elizabeth Schneider. *Battered Women and Feminist Lawmaking* (Yale University Press, 2000). A key figure in the effort to secure justice for battered women writes ruefully about how battered women's stories have been consistently misheard in court.

Vicki Schultz. "Telling Stories About Women and Work: Judicial interpretations of sex segregation in the workplace in Title VII cases raising the lack of interest argument," *Harvard Law Review* (1990) 103. Schultz's analysis of 54 Title VII cases shows plaintiffs were much more likely to win their cases if they told stories—but in doing so they left real problems intact.

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