Abstract: Recent work in communications and psychology has shown that stories have different psychological effects than other forms of persuasive messages. Stories use plot, character, and narrative suspense to communicate an experience, in contrast to arguments, which use evidence of logical reasoning to support a claim. Despite growing scholarly interest in narrative and storytelling, political science has largely ignored the role of storytelling in political communication. In this paper, we address this gap, focusing on the experiences that are communicated by stories told in political advertisements. We first offer a descriptive analysis of campaign ads aired during the 2010 and 2012 US congressional elections. We show that stories appear in a substantial minority of advertisements, and that most of these stories communicate one of a few types of experiences associated with a small number of social groups. We then evaluate the impact of these stories using an experiment that tests the effects of different kinds of stories on voters’ attitudes towards the candidates implicated in the ads and their perceptions of the candidate’s association with social groups implicated in the advertisements.
Three weeks before the 2004 presidential election, the Progress for America Voter Fund, a Super PAC closely aligned with George W. Bush strategist Karl Rove, broadcast what would be hailed as “the TV ad that put Bush over the top” (Boehlert 2004). The ad, entitled “Ashley’s Story,” told the tale of Ashley Faulkner, a 16-year-old girl whose mother was killed in the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. Three years later, Ashley and her father attended a campaign event in Lebanon Ohio. Upon hearing that Ashley had lost her mother in the attack, Bush embraced and comforted Ashley. “He’s the most powerful man in the world and all he wants to do is make sure I’m safe,” recounted Ashley. The ad drew critical praise, was covered in over 700 newspaper articles, and was later hailed as “the definitive ad in the lead up to the election” (Keen and Memmott 2004, Tedesco 2008, Jamieson 2011 pg 181-184).

Why is “Ashley’s Story,” one of thousands of advertisements aired in the 2004 campaign, still remembered today? We argue that what sets ads like “Ashley’s Story” apart is its rhetorical form: Simply put, “Ashley’s Story” is a story. Stories are texts that uses characters, plot, and narrative suspense to communicate an experience. Scholars in communications and psychology increasingly recognize that stories are processed though fundamentally different psychological mechanisms than other kinds of messages (Green and Brock 2000, Slater and Rouner 2002, Moyer-Gusé 2008, Mar and Oatley 2008). Meanwhile, scholars in the humanistic social sciences argue that have long argued that storytelling is the central ways humans create meaning and form group identities (Ricour 1984, Polanyi 1985, Bruner 1986, McAdams 1993, Shenhav 2014). In both literatures, storytelling is recognized as qualitatively different than other forms of communication.

Examples like “Ashley’s Story” have given the effects of stories a mythical quality in some quarters. If one has a good enough story, the thinking goes, one can accomplish nearly any political goal. Before “Ashley’s Story,” political observers credited “Harry and Louise,” an ad that told the story of an average American couple struggling with the cost of health care, with almost single-handedly defeating
Bill Clinton’s Health Reform plan (Goldsteen et al. 2001). Graetz and Shapiro (2005), in their book-length exploration of how the 2001 estate tax repeal, devote an entire chapter to the proposition that “Stories Trump Science” in public debate. Scientists concerned about partisan polarization about basic scientific facts have argued that that telling stories about “the human narrative of science” can reverse this trend (Hartford 2017, Young 2017). Beyond their persuasiveness, some argue that the ability of stories to elicit empathy can make them a “weapon of the weak” (Rochefort 1998) that levels the rhetorical playing field (cf. Young 1996, 2000).

Despite legendary ads like “Ashley’s Story” and “Harry and Louise,” as well as this general sense that stories carry unusual rhetorical power, political science lacks a theory of the effect of stories in political communication, or even a description of how often stories are told and what form they take. In the present paper we draw on two literatures to fill this gap. The first is the growing literature in psychology and communications on narrative persuasion, which claims that stories persuade via different mechanisms that other kinds of messages. While more familiar forms of persuasive messages contain a claim supported by evidence, stories gain their power by communicating a series of events to the listener. If the story is successful, listeners process it by mentally simulating the story’s events from the perspective of its characters, and thereby sharing in the experiences of these characters as though they were the listener’s own experiences. This psychological process, notably different from standard models of how individual process persuasive messages (e.g. Chaiken 1980, Petty and Cacioppo 1986), allows stories to have different persuasive effects than communication structured as an argument; specifically, it allows them to short-circuit the normal tendency to counter-argue messages we find disagreeable. Indeed, a great deal of research, much of it in the field of health communication, has

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1 For simplicity, we use the term “listener” throughout to refer to the audience for a story, regardless of the medium through which the story is communicated.
shown that stories can persuade, and sometimes persuade in cases where arguments fail or backfire (See Graaf, de Sanders, and Hoeken 2016 for a review).

Yet, the most politically interesting impact of stories may not be in their persuasive effects, but rather their effect on social identity. Parallel to the literature of narrative persuasion, an expansive literature in the humanities and humanistic social sciences argues that storytelling is the central ways humans create meaning and form group identities (Ricour 1984, Polanyi 1985, Bruner 1986). Constructing stories allows us to make sense of the disparate events that happen in our personal lives, communities, and world (Patterson and Monroe 1998). Moreover, storytelling is a social process, and the sharing of stories allows groups to build a sense of identity on the basis of a set of shared experiences and shared interpretations of major events (Hammack and Pilecki 2012, Shenhev 2015), and to organize for collective action (Mayer 2014). Building on these theories, we suggest that stories might have an effect on identification between the story’s teller and audience.

This paper draws on these literatures to build a theory of the effect of stories in political communication through a study of the stories told in political advertisements in the United States. We first review the theoretical literature on storytelling and its psychological effects. The first empirical section of this paper draws on this theoretical framework to describe the stories that appear in political ads aired as part of sub-presidential campaigns in the 2010 and 2012 election cycle. Since the psychological effects of narrative depend on listeners sharing in the experience of the story’s characters, we describe these stories in terms of the experience they communicate. We find that most stories told by candidates share the experiences of a small number of well-regarded social groups; we argue that this functions primarily to associate the candidate with these groups, either as a member of the group or an ally of the group. The second empirical part of this paper uses an experiment to test the impact of one of the most common type of stories, what we term the “Politician Learns from Family Struggles” ad.
We show that this ad has direct effects on attitudes, but also that it shapes the group identities that subjects associate with the ad’s favored candidate.

**What Is a Story?**

The growing interest in narrative has produced a variety of sometimes contradictory definitions of what a story is, and what sets stories apart from other kinds of texts. Building on several existing definitions, we define a story as *a selective recounting of temporally sequenced events that communicate an experience*. By an “event,” we mean simply “something that happens,” (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, see Shenhev 2015, pg. 21 for a more expansive discussion). These events are temporally sequenced in that one is portrayed as happening before another, and altering this sequence changes the story’s meaning. A story recounts events selectively in that the story does not tell all events that happened, nor even all those in a particular time-period, or of a single type. Instead, the storyteller chooses those events that seem particularly salient, that he or she believes best communicate the story’s message, and, at least in the case of a “good” story, that draw the listener in using suspense or other narrative devices. These selected events are linked together by their sequencing, the listener’s expectations, and the conventions of the genre to create the story’s plot; these linkages are frequently perceived to be causal.

The only structural component of this definition is the requirement for a story to have at least two temporally sequenced events. This is simple, but implies two other elements that are important for

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2 Our definition draws most directly on Shenhav (2014)’s minimalist description of a story as two, temporally sequenced events, Patterson (2012)’s experience-centered definition, and Mar and Oatley (2008)’s definition of narrative fiction as being about “autonomous intentional agents and their interactions,” that communicates “simulative experience.”

3 Obviously, recounting all the events in a period of time would be impossible – in this way stories are selective in the way that our perceptions are. As Polletta et al. (2011) point out, there are some genres that recount all events of a particular type (e.g. a ship’s log or the lengthy biblical chapters chronicling several centuries of begettings), but we do not generally regard these as stories, nor do we expect them to have the psychological effects that are described below.
stories’ unique psychological effects on their audience: a setting or “story world,” and characters. Events must happen somewhere, and thus the presence of a sequence of events implies a time and place when these events are occurring. Events generally happen to or are caused by identifiable actors, so this minimal definition also implies the presence of characters. The terms “setting” and “characters” can be thought of very broadly. The time and place that define the story world may be as precise as “in the coffee shop on Main St. last Tuesday at 3:00 PM,” or as vague as “a long time ago and far, far away.” Characters may be specific human characters, non-human creatures or inanimate objects (e.g. the teapot in “Beauty and the Beast”), or groups (the “we” in the US Declaration of Independence).

To these structural elements of the definition – events, temporal ordering, setting and characters – we add one component that is about content: stories communicate experiences. A variety of narrative theorists argue that stories are fundamentally about sharing the subjective experience of individuals or groups in a way that allows the listener to share in the experience. The idea that stories allow listeners to inhabit the lives of others has a long history in discussions of literary fiction (see Mar and Oatley 2008, Kaufman and Libby 2012 for discussions). The structure of a story makes it a particularly potent way to communicate experience. A story’s selective recounting allows it to present only those events that are particularly salient to character who is at the core of the story. Instead of

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4 Not every definition of a story includes this element, which goes beyond a text’s formal structure to place requirements on the text’s content for it to be classified as a story. Shenhav (2015, pg 15-16), for example, argues that this kind of content requirement risks “imposing aesthetic of cultural conventions on the definition of narrative,” that lead the analyst to miss some stories, particularly those produced in the wake of traumatic events or produced by marginalized groups. In contrast, Patterson (2012) defines a story exclusively as a text that communicates an experience, eschewing all structural requirements, though, interestingly, the logic underlying this choice is very similar to Shenhav (2015)’s.

We feel comfortable including the requirement that a text communicate an experience for it “count” as a story for two reasons. First, we are primarily interested in the psychological impacts of narratives on their audience, as opposed to analyzing social narratives to understand something about how the teller of the story views the world. Thus, a story that is not legible as a story to its audience is not, for our purposes, a story, even if it is a story to the person or group telling the story. Second, the stories we analyze are told by political candidates (or, rather, by the high-priced media consultants hired by political candidates) in the United States with access to sufficient resources to film and air political commercials, and are thus less likely to be the kinds of stories produced by marginalized groups that Shenhav (2015) worries about excluding.
recounting those events that are most important by some objective standard, stories can tell the events that feel the most important to the character or characters whose experience the story is communicating. Stories can present these events linked in the way that gives them the most meaning, instead of using some objective standard of causality or importance. Stories can also give access to characters’ thoughts and other mental states in a way that other texts cannot. Thus, stories that communicate experiences can be expected to have different psychological and social effects than texts that contain two sequential events but no clear experience.

The Psychology of Processing Stories

An extensive literature in psychology and communications argues that the structure of stories is not merely of aesthetic importance: stories are processed in a fundamentally different way than other texts. Psychologists describe the basic psychological effect of stories using the metaphor of transportation (Gerrig 1993). Just like a traveler leaving his home and temporarily going to a different place, the sequential events of the story transports the listener from the world that they physically inhabit to the story’s world. Once in the story’s world, the world of origin (i.e. the actual, physical world) becomes less accessible to the listener, and in its place the story’s world is experienced as though it is the real world. As Green and Brock (2000) describe, this happens on a physical level (“a transported reader may not notice others entering the room,”) as well as on a psychological level, as the beliefs, and attitudes that characterize the audience member’s relationship to the physical word become less accessible. The description of the process of narrative transportation seem strange, and yet is quite familiar to anyone who has ever been “lost” in a good book.

In addition to transportation to the world of the story, most theories of narrative processing emphasize the importance of identification with one or more of the story’s characters. While transportation refers to the process of being absorbed into the story’s world, identification involves
taking on the role and perspective of a particular character in the narrative (Cohen 2001, Slater and Rouner 2002, Moyer-Gusé 2008). Generally, (though not always) this is the story’s main character or protagonist. The narration of events happening to or caused by the character, sometimes accompanied by description of the character’s internal mental state, leads the audience develops an empathetic connection to the character. This connection produces a profound change in perception “in which the audience member is aware not of him- or herself as an audience member, but rather imagines being one of the characters in the text” (Cohen 2001, pg. 252). This may lead to what Kaufman and Libby (2012) refer to as “experience-taking,” a process in which “readers lose themselves and assume the identity of the character, adopting the character’s thoughts, emotions, goals, traits, and actions and experiencing the narrative as though they were that character.”

This process of transportation to a story-world and identification with the story’s characters is very different from how we process other kinds of messages. Consider, for example, how the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the canonical dual-channel model of processing persuasive messages, would predict the processing of an advertisement like “Ashley’s Story.” Viewers with little motivation to process the message would judge the advertisement heuristically, perhaps based on mentions of “9/11” or “Bush.” Viewers with sufficient motivation to process the message centrally would try to discern a claim, perhaps “George Bush is empathetic,” and then evaluate the evidence offered for the claim, in this case Ashley’s testimony about having witnessed Bush’s empathy, alongside other considerations that were generated by thinking about this claim, such as thoughts about how Bush’s conduct of the Iraq war indicates empathy or lack thereof. In contrast to this highly cognitive process, the transportation-identification model described above suggests that viewers will process “Ashley’s Story” by imaginatively transporting themselves to the political rally described in the ad. While in this story world, viewers witness Bush’s display of empathy towards Ashley, and possibly even inhabit the character of Ashley or of Ashley’s father, experiencing the loss of Ashley’s mother and Bush’s subsequent show of
empathy as though it was happening to them. These are very different mental processes; we suggest that only the transportation-identification theory can account for Ashley’s Story impressive impact.

The Effects of Storytelling

Narrative and Persuasion

The different mental processes involved in processing stories vs. persuasive arguments has produced an extensive literature on the effects of narrative that focuses on the ability of stories to persuade, or to change the listener’s attitudes and beliefs. Theorists of narrative transportation have long posited that listening to a story can have persuasive effects; in the words of Gerrig (1993), after narrative transportation “the traveler returns to the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey.” Studies of narrative persuasion expected transported listener to be “changed” primarily in terms of “story-consistent changes in beliefs [and] attitudes” (Braddock and Dillard 2016, pg. 449). These may include beliefs about the state of the world, beliefs about causal relationships in the world, and beliefs about social norms (Moyer-Gusé 2008, cf. Mar and Oatley 2008 regarding social norms). For example, consider a story about a Democratic politician successfully helping a small business owner win a government contract. Vicariously experiencing these events from the point of view of the small business owners might change beliefs about Democrats’ favorability towards small business (state-of-the-world beliefs), beliefs about the effects of reaching out to a politician for help (causal beliefs), and beliefs about the appropriateness of politicians intervening in government contracting decisions (beliefs about norms).

5 Moyer-Gusé (2008), writing in the health communications literature, discusses these elements at “Perceived vulnerability,” “Perceived Norms,” and “Outcome Expectancies.” For example, a story about couple in a long-term relationship having a condom break but not getting pregnant can change beliefs about the probability of condoms breaking, perceptions of the norm of condom use in long-term couples, and beliefs about the effects of having a condom break. We suggest that these elements generalize to beliefs about the state of the world, beliefs about social norms, and beliefs about causal relationships.
The primary mechanism for this change is through the vicarious experience of the story’s events. The act of witnessing the events that take place in the story world and experiencing these events from the point of view of a character in the story-world can change the listener’s beliefs about the real world. For example, the experimental treatment in Green and Brock’s 2000 study is a short story entitled “Murder at the Mall,” in which a little girl is brutally stabbed to death by a psychiatric patient. Green and Brock find that the story caused changes in opinions about whether psychiatric institutions should be able to grant day-passes to their patients, as well as beliefs about the frequency of violent attacks in the US. Notably, this change happens even though neither belief is explicitly flagged as a target for persuasion. In this way, persuasion by stories can be much more like learning from personal experience than persuasion by more traditionally constituted persuasive messages.

Psychologists and communications scholars argue that stories can have unique persuasive effects because this indirect route to persuasion makes them is less likely to cause resistance than other persuasive messages. In standard dual-process models of persuasive arguments (e.g. Chaiken 1980, Petty and Cacioppo 1986), overtly persuasive messages can also spark psychological resistance to change via psychological reactance or counter-arguing (Moyer-Gusé 2008). Reactance refers to a psychological response to perceived loss of independence that produces motivation to reassert one’s individual freedom (Moyer-Gusé and Dale 2017, pg 7). In the context of persuasive messages, individuals may assert their independence in the context of attempts to persuade by reaffirming their original attitude. Counter-arguing, on the other hand, refers to the cognitive process of generation of considerations that either allow the listener to discount the persuasive message, or that provide reasons to maintain the existing attitude or belief despite the persuasive message.6

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6 For example, a liberal confronted with a message that “George W. Bush was actually a pretty good president because he pushed for more funding to fight AIDS in Africa” (see Matthews 2015) would counter-argue by finding reasons to counter the evidence offered (e.g. “George W. Bush didn’t care about AIDS in Africa, career foreign service officers were probably behind the push for more funding”) or finding reasons to maintain their current, negative, evaluation of Bush (e.g. “Bush did incalculable damage by invading Iraq.”). On the other hand, a story
Theories of narrative persuasion claim that stories’ indirect method of persuasion can overcome these barriers (Green and Brock 2000, Slater and Rouner 2002, Moyer-Gusé 2008). Persuasive arguments present clear claims and evidence. This clarity makes them more comprehensible, but also makes their persuasive intent clear, potentially triggering reactance. The persuasive intent of stories is also generally less evident; for the transported reader, a story asks one to share in an experience, not change one’s mind (Moyer-Gusé 2008, Moyer-Gusé and Nabi 2010). Further, explicitly stated claims and evidence make easy targets for counter-arguing (Green and Brock 2000, Slater and Rouner 2002, Moyer-Gusé 2008). Presented with a claim that they do not wish to believe, the clarity of these claims and evidence make it easier for the motivated audience member to produce reasons to doubt the evidence or disbelieve the claim. By using the listener’s mental simulation of narrative experiences to change attitudes, stories provide no clear target for counter-arguing.

**Storytelling, Identity, and Mobilization**

Much of the existing literature on the effects of storytelling ask some variation of the question: do stories change attitudes, and do they do so more effectively than other rhetorical forms (e.g. arguments)?

However, the broader literature on the function of narrative suggest that stories may effect a more fundamental element of political psychology: group identification. As previously noted, narrative theorists argue that narratives allow humans to create meaning in their lives; our identity is created by the stories that we tell about ourselves (Bruner 1986, Singer 2004). But stories are also social objects. We tell stories to each other, hear stories from politicians and other leaders, and sometimes observe stories told within other social groups. The social nature of storytelling allows it to shape not

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7 Several reviews of these literatures include Braddock and Dillard (2016), Graaf, de Sanders, and Hoeken (2016), van Laer et al. (2014), Bilandzic and Busselle (2012).
just individual identity but also social identities (See Monroe and Patterson 1998, Hammack and Pilecki 2012, Shenhav 2015). The stories shared by groups and repeated within these groups come to shape the content of the group’s identities, and the lack of a shared story can indicate a weak or incoherent group identity (Carr 1986). Further, telling a shared story can be a way of indicating group membership; telling a different story can be a clear indication of out-group membership.

If stories help shape and signal collective identity, then the primary effect of storytelling in political advertisements may not be persuasion, but its effects on politically relevant identities. We focus on three possible kinds of effects. First, telling a story in a political context may have a signaling effect by indicating that the teller is a member of a particular group. Second, telling a story may have a priming effect, by raising the salience of a particular identity. Third, telling a story may have a shaping effect, by telling a slightly different version of a group story than is expected. For example, consider a political ad in which a candidate tells her story about building a small business from the ground up, working long hours but ultimately being successful, and working closely with her unionized workforce. The story can signal the candidate’s membership in a group that may voters hold in high regard, small business owners, a priming effect by increasing the salience of identification with small business owners in voters’ minds, but also a reshaping effect by casting two characters who are usually at odds in this group’s collective stories, business owners and unions, as partners instead of enemies.

Mayer (2014) takes this argument about stories and identity a step further to argue that stories are an important way that groups overcome collective action problems and mobilize their members to act. Echoing scholars in the social movements literature (e.g. Polletta 2005, Polletta 2011, Beckwith 2015) Mayer argues that storytelling can act as a coordination and assurance device that helps large groups coordinate on collective action. By sharing a common story, group members can commit to a common understanding of the political world. This includes a common understanding of their values and goals as well as a shared understanding of when and how others will and will not act in support of these
values or goals. Because they embody these shared understandings, telling shared stories can mobilize individuals to participate in collective action by reminding them that they hold these understandings in common, and can thus count on others in their group to take action alongside them.

**Study 1: What Stories do Candidates Tell?**

Stories, then, may have unique effects on attitudes and beliefs, but also effects on identities. The primary mechanism for these effects is the communication of the experiences of a person or a group. Thus, a first step to understanding the impact of stories in campaign advertisements is examining what experiences are communicated by candidates seeking office. We do this through a two-step content analysis of political advertisements aired in congressional and gubernatorial races during the 2010 and 2012 election cycles, first identifying the advertisements that contain stories and then separately coding the types of experiences that appear in these ads. We then describe the common types of experiences, and analyze the relationship between candidate characteristics and the tendency to tell stories.

**Method**

We began by drawing a stratified random sample of 2,000 advertisements aired by congressional and gubernatorial campaigns in the United States during the 2010 and 2012 election cycles. We rely on data from the Wesleyan Media Project, which collects videos of all political advertisements aired in US elections as well as data on where and when the ads aired (Fowler 2014, Fowler 2015). Wesleyan Media Project coders code a wide variety of characteristics of the ads and the entity that aired them. The Wesleyan Media Project collected 10,790 unique advertisements from congressional and gubernatorial campaigns during these two election cycles; from these we draw a random sample of 1,000 advertisements from each cycle stratified by the variables listed in Table 1, all
of which we expected might be related to the tendency to engage in storytelling or the kind of stories
told. After removing ads whose video file could not be found and those aired in Spanish we were left
with 1,901 ads.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ad Characteristic</th>
<th>Levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal vs. Policy</td>
<td>1: Ad’s primary focus is personal characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2: Ad’s primary focus is policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3: Ad focuses on both or neither personal characteristics and policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsor</td>
<td>1: Ad is aired by a candidate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2: Ad is aired by a party or coordinated between party and candidate</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3: Ad is aired by an interest group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>1: Governor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2: Senate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3: House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favored Candidate’s Party</td>
<td>1: Republican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2: Democrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ad Tone</td>
<td>1: Contrast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2: Promote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3: Attack</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Characteristics Used to Draw Stratified Random Sample

Once this sample was drawn, two undergraduate research assistants watched each ad and
coded whether the advertisement contained a story. Drawing on the definition of a story discussed
about, coders used the following definition for determining whether an ad contained a story: “A text,
one of whose major purposes is to re-presents the past, present, future, or imaginary experience of a
person or group using a sequential structure.” Intercoder reliability (Krippendorf’s Alpha) was .684,
within the generally acceptable range. For ads where there was disagreement, coders conferred to
render a definitive decision. In the end, 156 of the 1,901 ads were judged to contain stories. Henceforth,
we refer to these as “story ads.”

After identifying the advertisements containing stories, a second team of undergraduate
research assistants developed a second coding scheme that categorized each story according to the type
of experience that it communicated. This categorization focused on two elements. The first was the character whose experience was being communicated. The second was the nature of the experience itself; the series of events undergone by the character during the course of the story. These two elements correspond to the key elements of transportation theory: who is the audience being asked to identify with, and what events does the audience experience once absorbed into the story world?

The set of story categories was developed through an inductive process. First, coders independently watched 100 of the story ads and generated a preliminary set of categories of experiences communicated by these ads. We then met and discussed these preliminary lists of categories, working collaboratively to generate a master list of categories from these two lists. As table 2 shows, the coding team settled on a set of five categories. Coders then returned to the original ads; both coders assigned categories to ads while also refining the list of categories, adding categories or suggesting revisions as needed. As an additional check on our categorization and coding, we included 53 additional advertisements in this round of coding that had been held back from the original category generation. 50 of the advertisements were double-coded – these produced an inter-rater reliability of .615 (Krippendorff’s Alpha). After this, we met for a final time to reconcile coding disagreements, finalize category definitions, and finalize the list of categories. Since our goal was to identify the most common types of experiences communicated in story ads, we did not attempt to develop a list of experiences that included every story-ad; as described below, 13.6 percent of story ads communicated idiosyncratic experiences that did not fit into one of these five categories.

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8 Some ads communicated multiple experiences. In this case, coders identified the primary experience communicated by the ads, as well as up to three additional secondary experiences.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>% of Story Ads (% of all ads)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Politician’s family struggle | The favored candidate tells the story of learning values from his family’s struggles. The family is portrayed as dealing with adversity, but succeeding due to hard work.  
These may be the struggles of the candidate’s nuclear family while the candidate was growing up, or the struggles of the candidate’s earlier relatives (e.g. immigrating to America). | 30.9 (2.5)                    |
| Politician makes own success | The favored candidate succeeding in their chosen area of endeavor through hard work, loyalty, and self-sacrifice.  
Almost always, the story tells either the candidate’s success as a small business person or as a member of the military. | 14.8 (1.2)                     |
| Constituent loss           | A constituent experiences some kind of serious loss; the favored politician comforts the citizen or shows solidarity with the citizen.  
The loss is generally either related to being or being related to a member of the military, a severely ill person, a victim of crime or a victim or terrorism. | 4.9 (0.4)                      |
| Constituent helped         | A constituent faces a challenge and is helped by the favored politician, who solves the problem.                                                                                                             | 19.8 (1.6)                     |
| Constituent harmed         | A constituent is harmed by the actions of the disfavored politician.                                                                                                                                               | 16 (1.3)                       |
|                            | Generally, the constituent is a veteran, a senior, someone who suffers from illness, or a member of the middle class.                                                                                             |                                |
| Uncategorized                |                                                                                                                                                                                                            | 13.6 (1.1)                     |

Table 2: Story Categories

After coding these advertisements, we modeled the correlation between campaign characteristics and the tendency to air story ads in a subset of all ads: those aired by candidate for the House of Representatives. Our unit of analysis is the individual advertisement; this might be thought of as the decision by a campaign when filming an advertisement to structure that ad as a story or to use a more conventional rhetorical structure. The dependent variable is coded 1 if the ad is a story (or is the
kind of story being modeled) and 0 if not. We include several characteristics of the ad that are contained in the Weslyn Media Project dataset, including whether the ad is a positive, negative, or contrast ad and whether it focuses on personal characteristics, policy matters, or both. Drawing on data gathered by Gary Jacobson, we also as well as the sponsoring candidate’s partisanship, whether the favored candidate was the incumbent in the race, and their total campaign expenditures. We model this relationship with a probit specification.

Results

Who Tells Stories?

We found that 8.1 percent of advertisements contained stories. Story ads made up a much higher percentage of ads aired by candidates themselves than of ads aired by outside groups (10.4 percent of candidate ads vs. 3.7 percent of outside group ads), and a somewhat higher percentage of ads aired in support of Democratic Candidates than Republican candidates (10 percent vs. 6.8 percent). Stories appeared much more often in ads that discussed the personal characteristics vs. those focused on policy matters (19.3 percent vs. 4.3 percent), and more likely to appear in positive ads than in contrast or negative ads (14.2 percent for positive, 3 percent for negative, 3.3 percent for contrast. In ads aired by US House candidates, for which we have more detailed data on candidate characteristics, incumbents and challengers air roughly the same percentage of story ads (8.5 percent vs. 7.2 percent). We also found little relationship with overall campaign spending: candidates whose total expenditures were above the median told stories in 7.7 percent of their ads, those below the median in 8.3 percent of ads.

Table 3 Here
We modeled these relationships using a logit specification using only ads aired by House candidates (Table 3). This model finds no relationship between partisanship and telling stories. However, largely confirms the other bivariate relationships reported above. Stories appear more frequently in positive ads (as compared to contrast ads). Stories appear more frequently in ads that focus on personal characteristics and less often in ads focused on policy matter, as compared to ads that were coded as discussing both. There is no relationship between candidate incumbency or spending and the tendency to tell stories.

These results are interesting both for what they find and for what they do not find. Contrary to some suggestions by academic and popular commentators (e.g. Ricci 2016, Hartford 2017) storytelling does not seem to be to province of the political right; Democratic losses in this era cannot be chalked up to a reluctance to tell stories. Nor does it appear that candidates with more resources or political experience are more likely to tell stories. Finally, candidates do not appear to tell stories to convince skeptical voters about the wisdom of their policy stances, as we might expect from the narrative persuasion literature. Instead, these results suggest that that candidates primarily tell stories in order to communicate personal characteristics about themselves.

**Types of Stories and their Frequency**

When political ads told stories, what stories did they tell? We classified the experiences communicated in these ads into six categories described in Table 2. In this section, we briefly describe each category, with a focus on the common social groups implicated in the ads’ plots. These categories fell into two broad classes of experiences. In the first, the story shared the experience of the candidate airing the ad. In the second, the story shared the experience of an average citizen whose life was impacted by either the candidate airing the ad or of the candidate’s opponent. In either case, most

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9 Or the candidate supported by the ad in the case of ads aired by parties or outside groups.
advertisements told stories that are foundational to the identity of one of a small number of highly-regarded social group: veterans, small business owners, families, or Americans as a whole. The candidate played either the role of protagonist, and thus a member of the group, or of an ally of the group. In the relatively small number of negative story ads, the story communicated the experience of a member of one of these groups who was harmed by the other candidate in the race, thereby casting the disfavored candidate as an opponent of one of these highly-regarded groups.

In the case of the most common kind of advertisement, Politician’s Family Struggle, this takes the form of the politician learning from his family’s perseverance in the face of common middle or working-class American struggles. In some of these ads these stories are of the politician’s ancestors, in others they are the struggles of the politician’s parents, directly observed by the politician as a child. The struggles the families are common American tropes - middle-class economic struggles, unexpected illness or other tragedy, or stress from military service. The family overcomes these struggles through the application of values that are central to American identity: hard work, family solidarity, and patriotism. The result teaches the politician the important of these values and their effectiveness as guides to life. In some cases, the politician goes on to success through the application of these values.

A similar class of ads, Politician Makes Own Success, is also biographical in nature, but instead of telling a quintessential American story of learning from one’s hardworking parents or ancestors, these ads tell the story of the candidate succeeding according to the narrative underlying a more specific group identity. In nearly all cases, these ads portrayed the candidate as a successful small business owner or a military hero. In ads portraying the candidate as a small business owner, the candidate faces long odds building a small business, but succeeds through a combination of hard work, shrewd business sense, and self-sacrifice, resulting is a thriving small business. In ads portraying the candidate as a military hero, the politician, as a member of the military, acts with courage and a sense of duty to serve his or her country and help his or her military comrades. In both cases, the candidate shows their
membership in the group not through an assertion of formal affiliation, but by telling one of the stories that forms the basis of that group’s identity.

In the remaining three categories, the politician cedes the protagonist role to an average person. In the Constituent Helped category this is an average person who faces some kind of a surmountable challenge. The constituent is helped to solve this challenge through the actions of the politician. While the help may be delivered through government agencies, it is portrayed as being the result of the politician’s individual action, not larger governmental programs. The constituent is almost always a small business owner, a severely ill person, or a veteran or active duty military personnel. In a related category of ads, Constituent Loss, the problem faced by the constituent is portrayed not as a surmountable challenge, but rather as a loss that cannot be “fixed,” such as the loss of a child. Instead of solving the problem, the politician comforts or shows solidarity with the constituent, often using his or her official position or status. The loss is generally either related to being or being related to a member of the military, a severely ill person, or a victim of crime or terrorism.

The final category of ads, Constituent Harmed, communicates the experience of a person is harmed as a result of the actions of a politician, in this case the opponent of the favored candidate, or in some cases as a result of a faceless government bureaucracy. The harm is generally portrayed as a result of the opposing politician’s greed, incompetence, or disloyalty. As in the other categories, the citizen harmed is almost always part of one of a small number of highly-regarded social groups: military veterans, small business owners, or families suffering from disease.

Discussion

The pattern of which campaigns decide to tell stories, as well as the specific experiences communicated in story ads suggest a clear strategy underlying storytelling in campaigns. Candidates tell stories to characterize themselves and, to a lesser degree, their opponents in the eyes of voters. They do
this by appealing to narratives that define the identities of a small number of social groups. The experiences of small business owners, families dealing with illness, and members of the military, active duty as well as retired, are the center of most stories told in political advertisements. The experiences of other groups are largely absent. Notably, these identity groups and not the largest groups in society – most voters are not small business owners, or veterans, or suffering from a serious illness. Instead, these group identities may be valuable to politicians because they are highly regarded; many Americans identify with these groups, even if they do not identify as a member of these groups.

Study 2: What Are the Effects of Storytelling?

This paper has so far focused on two primary purposes for which politicians might use storytelling: to persuade, and to identify. Are political stories successful at achieving these aims? To explore this question, we conducted an experiment that randomly assigned subjects to read a message from a fictional congressional candidate. The message was modeled on the Politician’s Family Struggle category of ads. This kind of ad poses a hard test for claims about narrative persuasion, since this genre makes it particularly difficult to construct a “non-narrative” treatment. Subjects were randomly assigned to read a message that was structured as a story or a message containing the same information that was structured as an argument. The candidate was randomly assigned to be a Democrat or a Republican. We then evaluate the effect of the message type and whether the subject and candidate were co-partisans on counter-arguing, support for the candidate, and identification of the candidate with various social groups implicated in the message.

Hypotheses

Hypotheses about Persuasion

The existing literature suggests that stories persuade through a different psychological mechanism than arguments. This mechanism allows stories to bypass normal kinds of resistance to
persuasion, particularly counter-arguing, the generation of thoughts that run counter to the persuasive goal of the message. Thus, stories can be more persuasive than arguments, but only among those predisposed to resist the persuasive message; among people who are unlikely to engage in counter-arguing, stories and arguments should be equally persuasive. To test this, our first set of hypotheses predict how the story vs. argument condition will affect these forms of resistance to persuasion, and how this is conditional on whether the partisanship of the subject predispose them to resist persuasion by the candidate.

**H1a (Counter-Arguing Hypothesis):** Subjects receiving a persuasive message will counter-argue less if the message is structured as a story.

**H1a (Other-Party Counter-Arguing Hypothesis):** Subjects receiving a persuasive message about an out-party candidate will counter-argue less if the message is structured as a story.

**H1b (Same-Party Counter-Arguing Hypothesis):** Subjects receiving a persuasive message about an in-party candidate will show the same amount of counter-arguing regardless of whether the message is structured as a story.

We further expect that these different psychological reactions will lead subjects in the other-party condition to adopt different levels of story-consistent attitudes depending on whether they receive a story message or an argument message. On their other hand, subjects in the own-party condition should be persuaded to the same degree by the two kinds of messages.

**H2a (Other Party Persuasion Hypothesis):** Subjects receiving a persuasive message about an out-party candidate will support this candidate more if the message is structured as a story.

**H2b (Own Party Persuasion Hypothesis):** Subjects receiving a persuasive message about an own-party candidate will support this candidate to the same degree regardless of whether the message is structured as a story.
Hypotheses about Identity

In addition to persuasive effects, we expect storytelling to affect the groups with which listeners associate the politicians featured in the advertisement, as well as the group identities of the listeners. To this end, H3 suggests that when listeners will associate a candidate more with the implicated social group when the message is structured as a story. H4 suggests that listeners’ own social identification with the implicated group will increase more when hearing a message structured as a story than one that is not structured as a story.

**H3 (Candidate Identification Hypothesis):** *Subjects receiving a persuasive message about a candidate will identify that candidate with the social groups featured in the message to a greater degree when the message is structured as a story.*

**H4 (Listener Identification Hypothesis):** *Subjects who identify with the social group featured in a message will strengthen their identification with that social group if the message is structured as a story.*

Method

To evaluate the three hypotheses described earlier about the effect of storytelling, we conducted an experiment comparing the effects of a campaign message containing a story to a campaign message containing an argument. Subjects were randomly assigned to read a message that was structured as a story or a message that was structured as an argument; to better evaluate the effect of message type on overcoming resistance to persuasion, we also randomly assigned the partisanship of the candidate. After reading the message, subjects answered a series of questions that measured their cognitive response to the message, attitudes towards the candidate, and social identities implicated in the message’s story.

Figure 1 Here
**Experimental Design**

This experiment utilized a 2x2 experimental design with a control condition, manipulating the message type (story vs. argument) and the party of the candidate being described in the message (Republican vs. Democrat). The first factor is of primary interest. We include the second factor in order to evaluate the effect of the message type on voters with a different a priori propensity to engage in counter-arguing against the message. Subjects were randomly assigned evenly to the five conditions. In our analyses, we treat the second factor as random assignment to receive a same-party message or an out-party message, based on subjects’ responses to a party identification question.

**Treatments**

The treatments in this experiment were based on the *Politician’s Family Struggle* story type. These stories communicate the politician’s experience of growing up, learning important life lessons from their community as well as their family’s struggles with the challenges of American life. These ads fit into a larger class of ads generally referred to as biographical advertisements, which introduce a candidate to voters, generally early in an election cycle. Both treatments, which are presented in Figure 1, contained the same basic biographical information about the candidate. The candidate, Robert Foster, is described as having grown up in a middle-class family in the respondent’s state. His family faces challenges, but they use these challenges to teach him important values. These messages focus on one aspect of the candidate’s biography: His middle-class upbringing and the values that this upbringing inculcated in him. We do this for two reasons. First, portraying a candidate and his or her values as a product of middle-class America is a common trope in the advertisements we coded. Second, cueing middle-class American values implicates a particular social identity and set of related attitudes and beliefs. We will use the degree to which subjects adopt this social identity and associates Robert Foster with this social group as key outcome variables.
Importantly, both treatments contain the same biographical details about the candidate, expressed whenever possible using the same words and phrases. However, the way that these are presented is altered in several ways that we expect to affect narrative processing. First, the argument treatment begins with the message’s central claim, whereas the story treatment begins with an event that serves to introduce the reader to the story-world. The argument continues by offering a series of biographical details as evidence for elements of the opening claim. In contrast, the story presents these biographical details as a series of temporally ordered events that Robert experiences while growing up. The story closes by stating the same claim that opens this argument, but presents it as a final temporally ordered event (“Now, Robert wants to...”) instead of a claim that requires substantiation. In this way, the treatments offer subjects the same set of information about Robert, but differ only in the form used to present this information.

The candidate’s partisanship was cued in two places. First, prior to the message subjects were told that they would be asked to read a statement by a “fictive <Republican/Democratic> candidate for Congress.” Second, both messages ended with the sentence “Robert Foster, <Republican/Democrat> for US Congress.” We selected the name Robert Foster as a generic, ethnically non-distinct male name.

Measures

H1 suggests that subjects will be less likely to counter-argue messages structured as stories than messages structured as arguments. We evaluate this using a thought listing exercise administered immediately after subjects read the experimental treatment. This exercise asked subject to list any positive or negative thoughts they had about Robert Foster while reading the message. Subjects were given space to list up to eight thoughts of each type. To remove any expectation that they fill in all the spaces, subjects were told that we had intentionally provided more spaces than we expected anyone to use. To evaluate H2 we include a question that asked subjects how likely they would be to vote for Foster.
H3 posits that message type will affect identity with and affect towards social groups. We measure identity with and affect towards seven different groups who may be implicated by the message: Republicans, Democrats, Independents, the lower class, the middle class, the upper class, and Americans. Middle-class identification is directly implicated in the ad’s message. However, identification with related social groups may change as well. Seeing Foster or themselves as more middle-class may increase identification with super-ordinate groups of which the middle-class is a large component (e.g. “Americans”) and may decrease identification with groups seen as competitors to the middle-class (e.g. the upper class). To measure identification with these groups, we adapt the single-item measure of social identity proposed by Postmes et al. (2013), who demonstrate that a single item asking how much respondents agree or disagree with the statement “I identify with <group>” is a valid measure of social identification (see also Reysen et al. 2013). To enhance this measure’s reliability we include one additional item taken from Leach et al. (2010): “I feel a bond with <group>.” We repeat these questions for all seven groups. To measure affect, we include a standard feeling thermometer for each group. We measure subjects’ partisanship using a standard branching 7-point party identification question. We include partisan leaners in the definition of “partisan.”

Subjects

Subjects were 502 US residents over the age of 18 who were recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk platform using the Turk Prime study management tool (Litman et al. 2017). While there are well known downsides to relying on online labor marketplaces for experimental subjects, recent research suggests that subjects recruited through Mechanical Turk are similar in important psychological respects to subjects recruited through more traditional means (Krupnikov and Levine 2014, Huff and Tingley 2015, Clifford et al. 2016). Potential subjects responded to an advertisement for a “study about media messages shape attitudes and behaviors;” those who successfully completed the study were paid $0.75 for their participation. 18 subjects failed attention screeners, producing a final sample size of 486.
Results

Manipulation Check

As a manipulation check, we asked subjects to complete the Transportation Scale-Short Form (TS-SF) battery (Appel et al. 2015). This battery is a shorter version of Green and Brock (2000)’s original Transportation scale, which measures the cognitive and emotional components of transportation, as well as items measuring how well subjects could picture the major characters in the story. The results suggest that the manipulation was successful. Subjects assigned to a story condition scored an average of 5.2 on the seven-point scale, while those in an argument condition scored a 4.7, a difference that is statistically significant (\( p = .012 \), two-tailed t-test). Notably, this result suggests that the manipulation was fairly weak, with the difference on the transportation scale of .5 being about \( \frac{1}{4} \) of a standard deviation. This confirms our expectation that this kind of biographical ad would present a hard test for the claim that stories have different psychological effects than arguments.

Cognitive Responses

We first evaluate \( H1 \) regarding subjects’ cognitive responses to the message by comparing the mean number of positive thoughts minus the number of negative thoughts about the candidate in each condition. This is a measure of counter-arguing that takes into account the overall volume of thoughts reported in each condition. Table 3 shows these numbers, divided by experimental condition. As expected, the story condition generates less counter-arguing than the argument condition, with the average subject generating 2.4 more positive thoughts than negative thoughts in the Story conditions as compared to 1.8 in the Argument conditions (\( p = .010 \)). However, contrary to sub-hypotheses \( H1a \) and \( H1b \), the effect is seen in both co-partisans and non-co-partisans of the candidate. Indeed, the effect of the story manipulation is substantively larger in the same-party condition and is only statistically significant in the same-party condition (\( p = .036 \) Same-Party Story vs. Same-Party Argument; \( p = .141 \) Opposite-Party Story vs. Opposite-Party argument).
We next test whether this change in cognitive responses caused a change in support for Foster’s candidacy. Subjects in the story conditions reported a small increase in likelihood of voting for Foster, but this difference is not statistically significant ($p = .198$). However, this masks significant heterogeneity depending on whether subjects were assigned to a condition where Foster shared their party identification. In Same-Party conditions, those reading a story were more likely to vote for Foster ($p = .026$), while there was essentially no effect of the story-argument manipulation among those reading about an opposite-party candidate ($p = .833$). Again, this result runs counter to our expectations. $H2a$ and $H2b$ expect stories to be more persuasive to out-party members than arguments and for the two forms to be equally persuasive to in-party members. Instead, we find that stories are particularly effective when talking to those who identify with one’s own party, while no more effective than arguments when talking to partisans of the other party.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Argument</th>
<th>Same-Party Story</th>
<th>Same-Party Argument</th>
<th>Opposite-Party Story</th>
<th>Opposite-Party Argument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number Positive Thoughts Minus Neg Thoughts (SD)</td>
<td>2.4 (2.4)</td>
<td>1.8 (2.0)</td>
<td>2.8 (2.3)</td>
<td>2.1 (2.1)</td>
<td>2.0 (2.4)</td>
<td>1.5 (1.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n = 191</td>
<td>n = 175</td>
<td>n = 101</td>
<td>n = 87</td>
<td>n = 87</td>
<td>n = 88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Balance of Thoughts Listed by Condition

Mean number of positive thoughts minus negative thoughts in each condition. Two-tailed $T$-tests used to compare adjacent conditions. Bolded cells indicate a statistically significant difference between conditions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Argument</th>
<th>Same-Party Story</th>
<th>Same-Party Argument</th>
<th>Opposite-Party Story</th>
<th>Opposite-Party Argument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of Voting for Candidate (SD)</td>
<td>4.7 (1.9)</td>
<td>4.4 (1.7)</td>
<td>5.5 (1.3)</td>
<td>5.1 (1.4)</td>
<td>3.8 (1.9)</td>
<td>3.7 (1.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n = 191</td>
<td>n = 175</td>
<td>n = 101</td>
<td>n = 87</td>
<td>n = 87</td>
<td>n = 88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Attitudes towards Robert Foster

Likelihood of voting measured using seven-point scale from Extremely Likely (7) to Extremely Unlikely (1). Two-tailed $T$-tests used to compare adjacent conditions. Bolded cells indicate a statistically significant difference between conditions ($p < .1$)
Finally, we look at the effect on group identities. Table 5 shows the effects of the experimental manipulation on how subjects perceived Robert Foster’s group identification. Here, because of a programming error about 40 percent of subjects were not asked about Foster’s identification, resulting in less statistically reliable findings. We find no main effect of the story manipulation on perceptions that Foster identifies with the Middle Class. This does obscure some variation depending on whether the respondent was assigned to the same-party or opposite-party condition. Subjects in the same party condition perceived Foster as slightly less middle class, while those in the opposite party perceived him as slightly more middle-class when presented with a story, though neither of these differences is statistically significant ($p = .31$, same-party story vs. same-party argument; $p = .30$, other-party story vs. other-party argument).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Story (SD)</th>
<th>Argument (SD)</th>
<th>Same-Party Story (SD)</th>
<th>Same-Party Argument (SD)</th>
<th>Opposite-Party Story (SD)</th>
<th>Opposite-Party Argument (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foster Identifies with Middle Class (SD)</td>
<td>5.5 (1.3) n = 113</td>
<td>5.5 (1.3) n = 106</td>
<td>5.4 (1.3) n = 57</td>
<td>5.7 (1.3) n = 56</td>
<td>5.5 (1.2) n = 54</td>
<td>5.2 (1.4) n = 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Identifies with Lower Class (SD)</td>
<td>3.3 (1.4) n = 113</td>
<td>2.9 (1.1) n = 106</td>
<td>3.5 (1.4) n = 57</td>
<td>3.1 (1.4) n = 56</td>
<td>2.9 (1.3) n = 54</td>
<td>2.7 (1.1) n = 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Identifies with Upper Class (SD)</td>
<td>3.3 (1.7) n = 113</td>
<td>3.8 (1.5) n = 106</td>
<td>3.1 (1.6) n = 57</td>
<td>3.7 (1.5) n = 56</td>
<td>3.4 (1.7) n = 54</td>
<td>3.9 (1.4) n = 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Identifies with Americans (SD)</td>
<td>6.2 (0.9) n = 113</td>
<td>6.0 (1.0) n = 106</td>
<td>6.2 (1.0) n = 57</td>
<td>6.2 (1.0) n = 56</td>
<td>6.3 (0.7) n = 54</td>
<td>5.8 (1.0) n = 50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5: Perceptions of Foster’s Identification with Social Groups**

> Identification measured with a two-question index consisting of the items “I identify Robert Foster with <group>,” and “I think that Robert Foster feels a bond with <group>,” each measured on seven-point scale from “Strongly Agree” (7) to “Strongly Disagree” (1). Bolded cells indicate a statistically significant difference between conditions ($p < .1$).

Interestingly, we find more significant effects of the story treatment when looking at the effect of storytelling on identification Foster with other groups that are related to the group that is explicitly
mentioned in the message. Storytelling increases perceptions that Foster identifies with Americans ($p = .084$), that he identifies with the lower class ($p = .028$), while it decreases perceptions that Foster identifies with the upper class ($p = .007$). Since “Americans” might be thought of a super-ordinate group that includes the middle-class, the finding that stories increase identification with Americans is perhaps not surprising. The effects on lower- and upper-class identification might be a result of perceptions of class conflict. Subjects might view the middle-class and lower-class as groups with shared interests, such that identification with one might imply solidarity with the other. In contrast, subjects likely view the middle-class and the upper-class as competitors, such that identification with the middle class implies a lack of identification with the upper class. In three of the four cases, subjects in the opposite-party condition show stronger effects of the story manipulation than subjects in the same-party manipulation.

Finally, we tested the effects of the story manipulation on subjects’ own identification with each of these groups and found no statistically significant effects. While this evidence fails to confirm $H4$, we do not conclude based on this null finding that storytelling plays no role in the formation of one’s own identity. Instead, it seems likely that the treatment was too weak to produce any such effects.

**Discussion**

We find mixed results for the claims advanced above about the unique psychological effects of stories. In line with the literature on the persuasiveness of storytelling, we found that subjects counter-argued stories less frequently and were more likely to vote for a candidate whose biographical statement took the form of a story. However, these effects were only found among subjects in the same-party candidate conditions. This is unexpected, since these subjects should have already been predisposed not to counter-argue the message. Contrary to our expectations, storytelling may be more effective at rallying those predisposed to support a candidate than at reaching out to others.

The results of the storytelling manipulation were in the expected direction, though again fairly weak. Structuring Robert Foster’s biographical ad as a story had a minimal effect on perceptions that
Foster identified with the middle class. However, it had stronger effects on identification of Foster with social groups related to the middle class, decreasing identification of Foster with the upper class while increasing identification of Foster with the lower class and Americans as a whole. Possibly, even the “argument” treatment in this study was sufficiently clear about Foster’s connection with the middle class that telling this as a story had little added effect; instead, the effect of telling a story shows up through effects on collateral identities that are implicated in the experience of growing up in a middle-class, sometime struggling household, but are not directly stated.

Conclusion

The literature on political advertising has investigated the impact of a range of ad characteristics: positive vs. negative ads (Lau et al. 2007), framing effects (Shen 2004), and emotion (Brader 2006), to name just a few. Yet, despite growing interest in storytelling across a range of social sciences, this research has largely ignored the effect of storytelling in political communication. The present paper begins to address this gap. We do this by building on two distinct theoretical literatures. The first, rooted in psychology and communications, suggests that stories allow storytellers to persuading those who might otherwise resist persuasive messages. The second, rooted in the humanistic social sciences suggests that the storytelling primarily serves to construct and reinforce social identities. In both cases, stories achieve these ends by communicating experiences, allowing listeners to share in these experiences through the simulation of sequences of events, the world these events take place in, and the characters who are affected by them.

The data described here about the stories told in political advertisements suggests that stories are primarily told for their effects on identity. Candidates do not appear to tell stories to persuade their constituents about policy issues. Instead, they tell stories to characterize their own identity by associating themselves with a small number of highly-regarded social groups. Our analysis of the
experiences communicated in these ads suggests that they do this telling stories that are foundational to these identities of these groups, either as their own stories or as the stories of people who have been helped or supported by them in the past. This group identity explanation of the role of stories in political communication is in line with the recent focus in political behavior scholarship on the role of groups in democracy (e.g. Huddy et al. 2015, Achen and Bartels 2016).

Our experimental results are more equivocal about the effects of stories. Consistent with the narrative persuasion literature, we find that a biographical ad structured as a story reduces counter-arguing and increases support for the candidate. Contrary to expectations, these effects are primarily found among co-partisans of the candidate; that is, those we would expect to be least likely to counter-argue non-narrative messages. We find that storytelling can have an effect on political identities, but only on those groups that the audience associates the candidate with, and primarily on identities collateral to the primary message of the advertisement. As a preliminary test of the effect of storytelling on identity, and a hard test of the theory, we hope that future work will more thoroughly explore this connection.
References


Young, Iris Marion. 2000. *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford University Press.

Story Treatment:

Hi, I’m Robert Foster. Let me tell you the story of where I come from.

I was born into a middle-class family here in <subject’s state>.

Growing up, my mother worked nights as a nurse, my father the days as a teacher. Like a lot of people, they struggled sometimes to make ends meet. They struggled, too, when my sister Jane was born with serious disabilities.

But my parents worked hard to provide for us kids, and used these struggles to teach us important values.

From an early age, they taught me to take care of my sister Jane.

They made sure I got my first job at age 14, bussing tables at a local restaurant, and I’ve been working hard ever since.

From our middle-class home, I went on to be an Eagle Scout, starting a food bank for those less fortunate.

Now, I’m running for Congress to bring these middle-class values – family, service to the community, and hard work – to Washington.

I hope I can count on your support.

Robert Foster, <Republican/Democrat> for US Congress.

Argument Treatment

Hi, I’m Robert Foster, and I’m running for Congress to bring middle-class values – family, service to the community, and hard work – to Washington.

I know these important values because I was born into a middle-class family here in <subject’s state>. My mother, a nurse, and father, a teacher, used the struggles of a middle-class life to teach us.

I know the value of family, because from an early age my parents taught me to take care of my sister, Jane, who was born with serious disabilities.

I know the value of hard work, because even though my parents struggled sometimes to make ends meet, they worked hard to provide for us kids. I show this by working hard every day of my life, starting with my first job at age 14 bussing tables at a local restaurant.

I know the value of serving my community, because I was an Eagle Scout, starting a food bank for those less fortunate.

I hope I can count on your support.

Robert Foster, <Republican/Democrat> for US Congress.