Ripping Yarn: How Elites Use Stories about Citizens to Shape Political Attitudes

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Abstract

When justifying their issue positions, elites will often tell stories about citizens that are affected by an issue as a way of personalizing their message. But little is known about how these types of emotional stories influence voters. In this paper, I explore the role of stories in elite rhetoric. With a content analysis of party convention speeches from 1964 to 2012, I show that personalized stories are told more often by incumbent party candidates than challengers. Using a randomized experimental design and a representative Internet sample of 3,984 likely voters, I show that stories told by elites (Barack Obama, Mitt Romney, and Joe Biden) generate more support for issues than abstract arguments. Stories told by elites even generate support for issues from out-party voters, but arguments fail to persuade out-party members. And this effect works for both parties in the same way. Lastly, favorability of each elite increases after telling the story, but this increase does not occur after an argument. My results demonstrate that stories about individuals affected by issues, and not abstract arguments, can influence the overall evaluations of elites. My results also suggest that stories are used by elites, mainly incumbents, to reach across the aisle and generate support from out-partisans.