

# How Slogans Curate Public Opinion: Hard Lessons from Lakoff and the Linguists

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Renee Antoinette Irvin 

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*University of Oregon*

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Many a policy scholar has viewed election results with bewilderment: How can so many people persistently vote against their self-interest? In an attempt to at least partially address this conundrum, this article introduces persuasion techniques that can render good research and evidence largely irrelevant in the court of public opinion. By using U.S. debates about taxation and economic inequality as the linguistic setting of interest, the study illustrates the mechanics of curating public opinion at both ends of the political spectrum. Solutions to economic inequality are complex, yet public opinion can turn toward or away from a proposed policy reform when a few reductive key words distill complexity down to a convincing message: the micronarrative. Critically examining the broad narrative arc of the policy process is not enough; one must also examine the social construction occurring when word choice is used as persuasive weaponry in the selling of policy reform. The study finishes with a research agenda and a provocation for researchers regarding their role in policy reform. Should academicians remain behind the research curtain, or should they actively critique or even guide the narrative selling of their research?

Q4 **Keywords:** framing, micronarrative, narrative policy, persuasion, tax reform

Why are evidence-based policy recommendations often ignored or actively opposed by voters, even when the policy reforms could benefit them? To investigate this conundrum, this article provides an instructive look into the mechanisms used in cultivating public opinion. Facts matter, but are not sufficient to persuade. As cognitive linguist George Lakoff (2014, p. 16) wrote: “We may be presented with facts, but for us to make sense of them, they have to fit what is already in the synapses of the brain. Otherwise facts . . . are not heard, or they are not accepted as facts . . . .”

Storytelling—either in combination with facts or in place of facts—is a powerful persuasive tool. Reality is constructed by images and stories that are heard and retained as memories. Whether in sales and marketing or in political stump speeches, people tell stories to move and convince the public. Social scientists have long examined narrative in the policy and public administration contexts, but Shiller (2017) chastises economists, in particular, for being late to discover the influence of compelling stories on economic behavior. His explanation of narrative context included examples illustrating how a catchy story may

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Q3 Correspondence should be sent to Renee Antoinette Irvin, School of Planning, Public Policy & Management, University of Oregon, Hendricks Hall 1209, Eugene, OR 97403, USA. E-mail: [rirvin@uoregon.edu](mailto:rirvin@uoregon.edu)  
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45 influence consumers to change their purchasing or savings behavior *en masse*, or to embrace  
46 policy changes such as supply-side economics that can run counter to personal economic  
47 incentives.

48 Complementing the power of stories in public persuasion is the power of key phrases and  
49 single words. Whereas some phrases evoke images, emotions, and memories, others evoke  
50 nothing of the sort and are soon forgotten. Because a rich literature on persuasive word choice  
51 exists, yet has been largely overlooked by policy scholars, this article first locates the function  
52 of the micronarrative role within the theoretical framework of policy persuasion. Next, the  
53 empirical research on what makes an effective, persuasive slogan—primarily from cognitive  
54 linguistics and neuropsychology—is summarized for the benefit of policy researchers. The  
55 study illustrates the use of micronarratives used in taxation and economic inequality debates  
56 in the United States. The space in which tax reform is debated is a fiercely partisan battlefield,  
57 so the sloganeering is presented in its right- and left-leaning contexts. Finally, given the  
58 impact of micronarratives in political persuasion, the article ends by introducing a looming  
59 dilemma. The question transcends whether or not academicians should take a narrative turn by  
60 analyzing policy micronarratives. Here and now, given the ability of anyone to reach millions  
61 via social media, researchers must decide whether or not to step into the narrative themselves.  
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## 63 NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

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Ospina and Dodge (2005); Jones and McBeth (2010); van Hulst and Yanow (2016); and  
Crow and Lawlor (2016) exemplify the sometimes contentious array of narrative policy  
theoretical frameworks and methodology disputes, yet all agree on the importance of narra-  
tive in the policy and administration process. Shanahan, McBeth, and Hathaway (2011) and  
McBeth, Tokle, and Schaefer (2018) demonstrate how a supportive narrative sells policy to  
the public. Orr and Bennett (2017) and Ghore (2017) also illustrate how public administrators  
employ narratives to motivate their staff and court public approval.

Persuasion is a topic of interest across a variety of disciplines. Political scientists and pub-  
lic relations scholars, for example, describe the importance of priming (Iyengar & Kinder,  
1987) and framing (Entman, 1993). Priming enhances persuasion by describing the context  
of an issue (e.g., the scene setting and selected history of the issue). Framing can be consid-  
ered the script, including phrasing and use of metaphors, and it is these elements that can be  
crafted to curate public opinion. Psychologists Petty and Cacioppo (1986) elaboration likeli-  
hood model articulates the effectiveness of a “peripheral” (nonanalytical) route to persuasion,  
whereby emotion and heuristic shortcuts lead people to believe a message. This peripheral  
route framing of an issue, as Petty and Cacioppo describe, can be more convincing than  
presentation of statistical data or logic.

Neuropsychologists, cognitive linguists, and communications scholars have also been, as  
would be expected, early thinkers on the topic of persuasion, as they explored framing  
constructs in political and commercial settings. The linguists in particular have researched  
persuasion of words and phrases, which is the focus of this article. Most narrative policy  
scholars are focusing at the story level—the complex story line, the protagonists and antago-  
nists, the resolution, and so forth, with analysis at the interest group level.

90 While the story arc analysis of group level narratives provides insight into the  
 91 development of public opinion, the linguistics and neuropsychology research demonstrates  
 92 the persuasive power of single words and phrases to individuals. Catchphrases or slogans, if  
 93 chosen well, will ring in the ears and make the story stick in the public memory bank  
 94 long after the tweet or news headline is gone. Chong and Druckman (2007, p. 104) call the  
 95 effectiveness of word choice in framing “vexing,” as wording changes in phrases or labels  
 96 can produce significant swings in public opinion.

97 Within the policy narrative literature, Miller (2012) uses the term “ideograph” as a connota-  
 98 tive and symbolic unit of material in the construction of an overall policy narrative. Similarly,  
 99 McBeth, Shanahan, Arnell, and Hathaway (2007) describe one of five described narrative strat-  
 100 egies to be the use of “condensation symbols,” or language that reduces a policy issue to a  
 101 simple and memorable form. However, much of the narrative public policy and administration  
 102 scholarship does not examine the micronarratives embedded in the complex structure of the  
 103 entire policy narrative—that is, existing policy analysis scholarship is focused on the story  
 104 content, ignoring the heuristic and poetic construction of a narrative. Even when narrative  
 105 researchers focus on discrete phrases of the overall story or frame, they gravitate toward the  
 106 topics, but not the linguistic features of words or phrases. Lejano and Leong (2012), for  
 107 example, analyze the complicated overarching story surrounding a case study in Los Angeles,  
 108 where the public opposed city efforts to introduce safe reuse of wastewater. The most arresting  
 109 feature of the case study, it could be argued, was the slogan sparking public opposition:  
 110 “toilet-to-tap.” The phrase is so image-rich that a counter-narrative could scarcely be imagined.

111 The micronarrative could be considered a snippet of an overall story arc, conveying  
 112 broader meaning in a condensed package. Stone (2012) emphasizes the importance of labels  
 113 as symbolic devices that enhance persuasion. Examples of the U.S. 2016 Presidential  
 114 election’s micronarratives are found within the unfolding story’s character development  
 115 (“crooked Hillary”); mood or setting (“Lock her up!”), and plot (“Make America Great  
 116 Again”). It is not accurate, however, to characterize a micronarrative as only a topic or  
 117 segment of a story arc. A micronarrative may be the entire story, obfuscating or misleading  
 118 by simplifying a complicated situation to a few memorable and convincing words.

119 Although this article stresses the power of a well-crafted micronarrative, Lakoff (2014)  
 120 argues that a mere slogan is not enough to persuade. An effective message to the public will  
 121 resonate only if that information fits within the correct framing of values. This article, by  
 122 focusing narrowly on the mechanics of persuasion at the word choice level, does not review  
 123 the overall framing of a message, which is covered extensively in the framing literature.

## 124 MICRONARRATIVES WITHIN THE NARRATIVE THEORY FRAMEWORK

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$$A = \sum v_i w_i,$$

where A is the attitude or summary judgment made by an individual on an issue;  $v_i$  is the individual’s knowledge about attribute  $i$  relating to the issue; and  $w_i$  is the weight that the

135 individual places on attribute  $i$  (and  $\sum w_i = 1$ ). Influencing the weight that an individual  
 136 places on attributes is different from presenting facts about the issue in front of the viewer.  
 137 Presenting new and factual information involves changing the attributes of the issue  $v_i$ ,  
 138 whereby framing influences the size of the judgmental weight  $w_i$  that each individual places  
 139 on those attributes.

140 Gamson and Lasch (1983) list five framing devices which could be interpreted as  
 141 influences on the weight  $w_i$ . These framing devices or rhetorical tactics are metaphors;  
 142 historical examples; catchphrases; depictions; and visual images. The micronarrative can be  
 143 any of these devices if it influences public opinion on an issue without need for supporting  
 144 discourse.

145 Hermeneutics (the process of understanding via interpretation or “rendering something  
 146 that was opaque accessible to thought” Keane & Lawn, 2016, p. 3) scholars might describe  
 147 these five framing devices as hermeneutic *mimesis*—ways of imitating life within text to elu-  
 148 cidate meaning. Davey’s (2016) discussion of *mimesis* points to why the tactics that look  
 149 like tricks, on the surface, are, in fact, deeply meaningful to the human experience: “The joy  
 150 of coming to recognition entails the knowing of something again that we already know as if  
 151 for the first time” (Gadamer 1986, p. 114). This ability of rhetorical technique to “lead the  
 152 soul,” which may include deceiving and manipulating the public, fostered Plato’s distrust—a  
 153 distrust that survives to this day in scholarly wariness regarding rhetoric (Crosswhite, 2013)  
 154 and the propagandistic potential of manipulative word choice (Lakoff, 2014). One could  
 155 characterize the narrative policy scholar’s reluctance to evaluate the micronarrative as  
 156 descending from this distrust—the academicians are more comfortable in the story interpret-  
 157 ation, rather than actively evaluating or even using the micronarrative. This reluctance of  
 158 scholars to engage will be discussed again in the summary of the article.  
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## 162 MEMORY AND RECALL IN THE NARRATIVE

164 Gadamer’s joy of recognition can apply to an entire narrative, including any micronarrative  
 165 and the recognizable or relatable plot. Memory and recall (see Ruin, 2016), therefore, should  
 166 be ever-present in narrative analysis of public persuasion. In particular, the difference  
 167 between recognition (passive reception of information as it triggers memory) and recall  
 168 (active and independent recall of memory) becomes important when analyzing effective  
 169 micronarratives. Recognition of information provided by another source can spark an emo-  
 170 tional response, yet an easily-recalled memory can also be independently repeated to others.

171 Note that Ajzen & Fishbein’s algebraic conditional expectancy value model above is  
 172 static. Regarding the intertemporal aspects of persuasion, Banas and Rains (2010) describe  
 173 an “inoculation” of early information on public opinion. That is, a model must be able to  
 174 express how a relevant piece of information has considerable influence upon the listener  
 175 when the issue is new to the listener. Having heard that particular piece of information  
 176 (or framing) first, the listener is more resistant to subsequent competing information. This  
 177 inoculation effect can fade from memory over time, allowing competing frames to emerge  
 178 and dominate (Chong & Druckman, 2007).  
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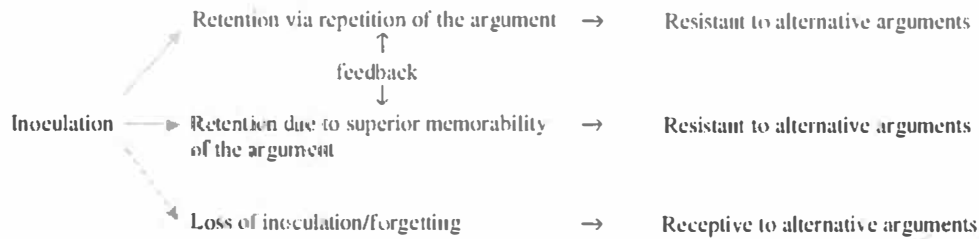


Figure 1. Micronarratives: Accessible memories with resistance to alternative frames.

To keep the attribute weighted heavily, it must be reinforced by repetition over time, or simply be more memorable. The “memorability” of the attribute (increasing the weight  $w_i$ ) is somewhat of a black box process in the framing theory literature. Chong and Druckman (2007), like Gamson and Lasch (1983), refer to “strong frames”—composed of symbols; endorsements; heuristics, linked to partisanship and ideology; exaggerations; prejudices; and fears.

Turning to the linguistics and cognitive psychology literature in the next section, one can find compelling evidence of what makes a strong, memorable, easily recalled frame. It is not only the topic and connotation of the phrase but *how* it is written that makes it enduring and accessible in a voter’s memory. A well-constructed micronarrative is a more accessible memory, and thus, will be weighted more in an individual’s consideration of the attributes of an issue, despite emerging counter-information over time (Banas & Rains, 2010). In addition, an easily recalled micronarrative is more likely to circulate in informal communication, even without extra repetition from external sources (see Druckman, Levendusky, & McLain, 2018). Figure 1 illustrates the intertemporal shift in the micronarrative, and the importance of inoculating the intended audience with an accessible, memorable phrase.

Consider, for example, a tax break directed toward low-income seniors. In trying to sway the public to support such a policy change, one could describe this as the “tax break to aid economically disadvantaged senior citizens” or the “save our seniors tax break.” Below, empirical research results will point unequivocally toward the latter label as the more compelling micronarrative that will be initially noticed; easily recalled; and more often repeated to others.

### SLOGANEERING IN THE UNITED STATES

Many might argue that social media is at fault for trimming down public discourse to a few short words. However, partisan bickering over issues has long been fertile ground for vicious sloganeering. In prior decades and even centuries, the political poster and editorial cartoon also disseminated short, convincing slogans to garner public opinion. An evocative phrase had surprising power in the past, and will always play a role in the political process. Greenberg (2016) describes, for example, the emphasis on sound bite packaging in the Reagan Administration, when aides were instructed to use a specific phrase or “line of the day,” in order to guide the news stories for the day (where “sound bite” refers primarily to very short subsets of speeches and other media content).

225 Although the right turn of phrase has always had persuasive power with the public, there  
 226 are ever more communication media to enhance the auditory power of slogans, and those  
 227 media are increasingly polarized (Duca & Saving, 2017). Media coverage of substantive pol-  
 228 icy issues and candidates has fallen from an average of 42 seconds per sound bite to fewer  
 229 than 10 seconds, and Web users spend only moments before they click; delete; share; and so  
 230 on (Harsin, 2016). Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth (2011, p. 536) describe the changes in  
 231 public policy discourse: “No longer are policy actors restricted by traditional gatekeepers,  
 232 such as news editors and press secretaries. New media outlets; YouTube; blogs; and the  
 233 Internet offer free and fast venues for the dissemination of policy narratives with fewer edi-  
 234 torial obstacles found in traditional media.” Druckman et al. (2018) show how viewpoints  
 235 disseminated by partisan media to the subset of the viewing population are easily spread via  
 236 interpersonal discussions.

237 A brief example of how micronarratives are developed in political discourse is illustrated by  
 238 the recent debate prior to the passage of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 (<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-115hr1197/pdf/BILLS-115hr1197.pdf>; <https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ97/PLAW-115publ97.pdf>). Conservative political interest groups Crossroads GPS and One  
 240 Nation reported survey and focus group results in October 2017 suggesting that the following  
 241 phrases resonated with the highest percentage of voters (Blizzard, 2017; Bolger, 2017): “rigged  
 242 system hurts small business” (the addition of “small” was found to be critical in swaying  
 243 opinion); “simpler/fairer” (later described with “so simple you can fill out your taxes on a post-  
 244 card”); “more than thirty years” (since there was major tax reform); “small business owners  
 245 will invest”; and “bring offshore profits home.” Subsequent messaging via Twitter and other  
 246 media outlets by GOP politicians, such as Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, stressed those very  
 247 points until the tax reform passed on December 22, 2017. This process shows that the crafting  
 248 of frames and micronarratives is not solely a top-down process formulated by policy elites, but  
 249 an iterative one in which alternative messages and phrasing are sometimes first tested to see  
 250 which will appeal most to the public (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

## 253 FEATURES OF PERSUASIVE SLOGANS

254 A well-developed body of academic scholarship and commercial effort has gone into  
 255 researching the impacts of certain types of words and phrases on comprehension, belief, and  
 256 persuasion. Following are key findings from the cognitive linguistics and neuropsychology  
 257 literature on word choice and persuasion. The features described here enhance ease or  
 258 fluency in comprehension, and whether the phrase will be readily accessible in memory. As  
 259 Alter and Oppenheimer (2009) show, these fluency effects result in subjects believing more  
 260 confidently that a statement is true; trusting a statement more; liking a person or statement  
 261 more; and viewing a statement as more accurate, compared to statements presented with  
 262 neutral framing. In other words, the ease with which the phrase can be understood and  
 263 recalled strongly influences the rational consideration of its contents.

264 To illustrate the linguistic rules suggested by the literature, this section provides a few  
 265 examples of micronarratives utilized in partisan policy skirmishes surrounding the topic of  
 266 inequality and taxation. The choice of slogans is for illustrative purposes only, and readers  
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270 will no doubt think of additional examples of persuasive labels and slogans in use in the  
271 United States over the past decades.

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

278 Examples:

279  
280 **Big Government:** Distrust of federal government has been a defining characteristic of the  
281 United States from pre-Revolutionary times onward. The phrase evokes intrusiveness:  
282 inefficiency; over-regulation; and limits on personal freedom.

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284 **Top 1%:** The Occupy movement of 2011 accompanied a measurable shift in the American  
285 public's awareness of the growth of the inequality gap (Morin, 2012). Occupy's use of the  
286 phrase "top 1%" and the slogan "We are the 99%" appeared to spark a rising awareness of  
287 wealth concentration.

288 **Job creators** is a phrase in high use currently, conveying the idea that tax reductions for  
289 businesses and high-income earners plus reducing regulations will allow the wealthy to free up  
290 resources to invest in new businesses and grow the economy. This narrative implies the  
291 effectiveness of supply-side economics.

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293 **Tangible imagery:** Petrova and Cialdini (2005) and Tannen (2007, p. 160) stress the  
294 value of imagery in aiding comprehension: "(I)mages work through the individual imagin-  
295 ation to create involvement. The invoking of details—specific, concrete, familiar—makes it  
296 possible for an individual to recall . . . ." More broadly, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) show  
297 that abstract concepts are understood best as metaphors, drawing from the body's experience.  
298 Similarly, Thibodeau, Hendricks, and Boroditsky (2017) summarize how vivid metaphors  
299 guide thought.

300 Examples:

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302 **Welfare queen,** a phrase first in use from the late 1960s, originally referred to cases where  
303 welfare fraud was detected. Most reports of welfare fraud at the time were racially charged,  
304 highlighting, in particular, single black mothers (Hancock, 2004). What made this phrase a  
305 powerful conservative political reframing of welfare was its implication that the recipient of  
306 assistance is undeserving, and is living better than those who are paying for her assistance.  
307 President Reagan used the phrase in his campaign speeches prior to his administration's  
308 emphasis on reducing welfare assistance.

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310 **Working families** is a phrase used by the left to describe low- and middle-income households  
311 in the United States. The phrasing avoids the word "poor" (as people may not want to self-  
312 identify with the poor) and evokes a profamily sympathy for those who are supporting children.  
313 In addition, it combats the welfare queen trope by implying that workers are neither lazy nor  
314 getting a free ride on welfare. A similar label is the **working poor** (Gamson & Lasch, 1983).

315 **Starve the beast** commands the public to conquer Big Government by cutting off its fiscal  
316 food supply (Bartlett, 2007).

317 Coined by F. A. Hayek in 1944, **creeping socialism** is a visual and truly memorable phrase,  
318 illustrating the dread of advancing Big Government. program by program.  
319

320 The phrase **trickle-down economics** was used in the 1920s and resurfaced decades later when  
321 Reagan's Director of the Office of Management and Budget, David Stockman, used it to  
322 describe the intended flow of benefits to the middle- and lower-income populations following  
323 tax breaks to the wealthy. The phrase was immediately adopted by opposing Democrats, for  
324 good reason; its unpleasant visual imagery implies inadequacy of the benefits to the  
325 middle class.  
326

327 At the turn of the prior century, the phrase **the idle rich** described the class of high-wealth  
328 families living on earnings from assets instead of labor. Nebraska Representative William  
329 Jennings Bryan, in his famous Cross of Gold speech (Bryan, 1896), railed against the "idle  
330 holders of capital." **Idle rich** largely disappeared in the more egalitarian mid-twentieth century,  
331 and has not returned, as extremely wealthy individuals are still working (see Saez, 2017), and  
332 the present public may not grasp the difference between living off labor income rather than  
333 asset earnings.

334 **Humor:** Schmidt (1994) shows that humorous sentences were easier for subjects to  
335 remember than nonhumorous sentences. However, humor has a transitory effect, and once it  
336 loses its element of surprise (from an incongruous statement, for example), it may no longer  
337 be useful to repeat because it is an old joke. Thus, humorous phrases associated with policy  
338 debates may quickly fall out of use.  
339

340 Example:

341 A phrase that helped Bill Clinton win the Presidential election in 1992 was "**it's the economy,**  
342 **stupid.**" Originally used by Clinton's campaign advisor, James Carville, to keep campaign  
343 workers on message, the put-down leveraged middle-class anger over the recession.  
344

345 **Rhyming and other poetic devices:** McGlone and Tofighbakhsh (2000) show that rhym-  
346 ing phrases are easier to process linguistically and thus easier to memorize. Alliteration  
347 (repeating consonants) and assonance (repeating vowel sounds) may also help the listener to  
348 memorize a phrase, but these poetic framing devices are relatively unexplored vis-à-vis their  
349 link to memory and persuasion in the literature. Finally, long vowel sounds like "ee" (/i:/),  
350 "aa" (/eɪ/), and "ii" (/aɪ/) may ring out better to the listener (**Deep State**; see Michaels,  
351 2017), compared to "uh" (/ʌ/) or "eh" (/ɛ/) sounds.

352 Examples:

353 **Robber barons** vilified oligarchs of the turn of the prior century (Sauers, 2006).  
354

355 **#GOPTaxScam** and **#TaxScam** are Twitter hashtags in current use by the left to describe the  
356 Tax Cut and Jobs Act of 2017.  
357

358 **Make America Great Again** is notable for its ease of pronunciation, alliteration,  
359 and assonance.



360 **Negative messages:** Negative phrases are more likely to attract attention than positive mes-  
 361 sages (Rozin & Royzmann, 2001). Pratto and John (1991) showed that negative information  
 362 is weighted more heavily in people's judgment than positive information. Because of this, it is  
 363 unsurprising that willingness to accept estimates (for loss of something) outweigh willingness  
 364 to pay estimates to obtain the same attributes (Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1990). The  
 365 takeaway point for political suasion is to select negative slogans, and if possible, frame issues  
 366 of concern as removals of current benefits or possessions (see McBeth et al., 2007).  
 367

368 **Examples:**

369 Calling the suggestion of increased taxes on the wealthy **class warfare** is an instantly effective  
 370 way to portray a progressive commentator as a left-wing crank.  
 371

372 **Wage theft** describes skimming of labor compensation, particularly for low-wage hourly  
 373 workers (Tippett, Alexander, & Eigen, 2017).  
 374

375 **Reminders of death:** Greenberg et al. (1990) showed that reminding test subjects of their  
 376 mortality immediately prior to presenting unrelated information provoked them to agree  
 377 more with similar viewpoints and disagree more strongly with opposing viewpoints, com-  
 378 pared to a control group where subjects were not reminded of their mortality. Mentioning  
 379 death prompted more in-group favoritism and prejudice.

380 **Examples:**

381 By labeling estate taxes "**death taxes**," widespread incidence of the estate tax is implied  
 382 (Schaffner & Atkinson, 2009). However, the U.S. estate tax, with its recently increased \$11.2  
 383 million threshold (\$22.4 million for couples) affects fewer than 0.1% of estates (Tax Policy  
 384 Center, 2017).  
 385

386 Although health care is tangential to income and wealth inequality, the slogans on this topic  
 387 have been particularly scathing; for example, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin's vivid claim in  
 388 2009 that the Affordable Care Act would create **death panels** (Gonyea, 2017) (<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ148/pdf/PLAW-111publ148.pdf>; <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ152/pdf/PLAW-111publ152.pdf>). Since the Affordable Care Act's passage  
 390 in 2010, it has been frequently characterized by anti-Affordable Care Act sources as having  
 391 been **shoved down our throats**. Recent efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act have  
 392 described the program as being in a **death spiral**.  
 393  
 394

395 **Violence and fear:** Rozin and Royzmann (2001) explain how overvaluing threatening  
 396 events is an adaptive mechanism to avoid risk of death. Even misery experienced by others  
 397 provokes an empathetic response greater than the empathic response to happiness experience  
 398 by others. Thus, persuasive political phrases sometimes invoke fear via violent imagery.  
 399

400 **Example:**

401 **Regulations strangling businesses, job-killing regulations.** These phrases conjure more  
 402 violent imagery to counter the opposing benevolent view of regulations protecting workers;  
 403 investors; consumers; and the environment. The following tweet by Wisconsin Representative  
 404 and Speaker of the House Paul Ryan is an example:

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

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

412  
413 Examples:

414 In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson launched the **War on Poverty** to combat persistent  
415 poverty in the United States (Gillette, 1996), together with broader education and justice  
416 initiatives forming the mid-century **Great Society** agenda. The War on Poverty label rallied  
417 support to care about poverty and take steps to solve it, while the Great Society descriptor  
418 flattered the public and appealed to its aspirations (Burch Jr., 2017). The War on Poverty  
419 phrase was later recycled for use with the War on Drugs and the War on Terror.

421 **Repetition:** The more that the phrase meets the above criteria, the more easily it will  
422 remain an accessible memory, and the more that the phrase will be repeated to others. Aside  
423 from the musicality or emotional pull of a phrase, consistent repetition of a phrase will be  
424 persuasive, even if it is being repeated in order to point out that it is false (Lewandowsky,  
425 Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook, 2012). For a summary of repetition’s role in cognitive  
426 ease, see Kahneman (2011, pp. 59–66) and Tannen (2007).

427  
428 Examples:

429 Lakoff (2014) points out that it was President George W. Bush’s consistent promises of tax  
430 relief that framed taxes as an affliction, and even Democrats unwisely repeated the phrase.

431 Always pairing **tax and spend** with **liberals** helped to cement in voters’ minds the view that  
432 liberal politicians spend more than conservative politicians (see Westen, 2007).

433  
434 Table 1 summarizes examples of the features described above.

Q6

TABLE 1

<i>Successful micronarrative techniques</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Rhyming (and other devices, such as alliteration; assonance; and consonance) fosters memorization	<b>Robber baron. supply-side economics</b>
Easily pronounceable words	<b>Job creators, top 1%</b>
Negative emotions (anger, outrage)	<b>Corporate greed, rigged system</b>
Humor	<b>It’s the economy, stupid</b>
Evoking fear and violent imagery	<b>Shoved down our throats. death tax</b>
Tangible imagery	<b>Creeping socialism, working families</b>
Consistent repetition	<b>Tax-and-spend liberal, fake news</b>
Long vowel sounds like “ee”, “aa”, and “ii” (effectiveness unknown)	<b>Welfare queen, Make America Great Again</b>
Avoid: multisyllabic and nonvisual words	<b>Oligarch, economically disadvantaged</b>

## A MULTILEVEL CALL TO RESEARCHERS

450  
451  
452 Excellent existing bases of narrative and framing scholarship are firmly embedded in the  
453 literatures of communications; public relations; marketing; and policy narrative analysis.  
454 Without naming micronarrative elements as such, these literature bases incorporate in persua-  
455 sive phrasing analyses of metaphors; visual imagery; emotion; and other heuristics. The miss-  
456 ing piece from this scholarship is examination of the linguistics research results in the policy  
457 context. How much does rhyming or ease of pronunciation, for example, really matter?  
458 Studying micronarratives can aid researchers in untangling and revealing the poetic narrative  
459 mechanisms that shape public opinion. Micronarrative scholarship should also be dynamic,  
460 considering the important influence of time and memory on understanding and persuasion,  
461 and at the level of the individual (rather than the predominant stakeholder-group focus).

462 Researchers could devise content analysis (either human-coded or via machine-learning  
463 Big Data analysis); surveys; social media sharing; and other types of empirical studies to  
464 measure individuals' reactions to variations in phrasing. The variations in phrasing, however,  
465 could use the guiding hand of a postpositivist scholar, as the micronarrative research agenda  
466 ideally combines the skills of humanities and social science researchers.  
467

468 Story-level narrative analysis, whether in the form of an empirical study or a hermeneutic  
469 and interpretivist analysis, is largely historical. The policy reform proposal, opposition, and  
470 resolution/conclusion phases are usually chronicled in perspective by the researcher. In  
471 contrast, examination of micronarrative effects on public opinion can occur during or even  
472 before policy reform takes place. Thus, the researcher can step into the normative space and  
473 participate in shaping public opinion—in essence, transforming from the philosopher to the  
474 rhetorician. Participant observation is a well-discussed topic in fields such as social anthro-  
475 pology and ethnography, but is relatively unexplored in the policy and public administration  
476 arena. If future micronarrative research involves active participation by researchers, an  
477 additional imperative for further research would be the ethical framework and boundaries of  
478 narrative research and the participant-observer divide.  
479

## MICRONARRATIVE RESEARCHERS AS PARTICIPANTS

480  
481  
482 Policy and public management researchers have some credibility, and as credible sources,  
483 can respond in a way that mitigates some of the biases fostered by clever framing  
484 (Druckman, 2001). Therefore, this article closes with a call to engage: respond to inaccurate  
485 framing of research and even construct proactive framing of policy relevant research results.  
486 In order to participate in the discourse, one must be willing to tell a story or two. Moreover,  
487 as the word-level analysis of the cognitive linguists and neuropsychologists suggests, one  
488 must be a better rhetorician as well, choosing words and phrasing carefully to ring through  
489 the chaotic discourse.  
490

491 Academicians have two options. One can formulate and use original slogans; a tactic  
492 recommended by Lakoff (2002, pp. 419–420). He recommends liberals in particular to  
493 “evoke the right frames,” and notes, “Rebuttal is not reframing. You have to impose your  
494 own framing before you can successfully rebut.” To immobilize a phrase coined by others,

495 **Proposal:** An annual progressive tax on individual total net assets, starting at a threshold of \$5 million (1%) and  
 496 increasing at higher asset levels. The purpose for the tax would be to reduce wealth inequality and the revenue  
 497 could be used to pay down the federal debt. The anticipated political reaction is opposition from the right and  
 498 support from the left.  
 499

500  
 501 **Micronarrative from the Right:** Although the tax would apply to a very small proportion of the population,  
 502 the micronarrative crafter would have a relatively easy task in characterizing the tax's undesirability by implying  
 503 overreach by the government in confiscating assets. Labels such as the **Nest Egg Tax** or even the **Marxist Tax**  
 504 would engender considerable opposition.  
 505

506  
 507 **Micronarrative from the Left:** Selling a new tax is an inherently more difficult proposition. The left could call  
 508 it the **Fat Cat Tax**, which is easy to pronounce and remember, plus underlines the tax target population of  
 509 high-wealth individuals. However, the aspirational public may have sympathy for high-wealth individuals (and many  
 510 people own fat cats, literally). An image-rich label that singles  
 511 out high-wealth individuals for scorn would be the **Offshore Club Tax**. To emphasize the outcome of the tax,  
 512 they could also call it the **Debt-Killer Tax**.  
 513

514  
 515 **Q11** **Figure 2.** Hypothetical micronarrative for a tax on capital.

516  
 517 one must invent and repeat a completely different and catchy counter-phrase that does not  
 518 repeat the original offending phrase (Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

519 The following shows a hypothetical curation of public response to a proposed policy  
 520 change. In keeping with the theme of taxation and inequality sloganeering, the hypothetical  
 521 **Q5** policy change would be a progressive tax on capital, as shown in Figure 2.  
 522

## 523 RESEARCHERS AS CRITICS OF MICRONARRATIVES

524  
 525  
 526 It is difficult to imagine that academicians would be comfortable taking control of the "spin"  
 527 surrounding their policy recommendations, however, social scientists are trained to present  
 528 the body of evidence in their academic subfields to an audience of peers, without concern for  
 529 lay reader comprehension. This self-imposed ban on participation in the rhetoric of policy is  
 530 millennia old; Plato voiced concern for the threat of skillful rhetoricians gaining power  
 531 through deception or inciting violence (see Chambers, 2009; Crosswhite, 2013). A more  
 532 comfortable role for the academician is merely critical. Journalist Steven Poole (2006) rec-  
 533ommends that people draw attention to the "unspeak" in use, and counter it intellectually.  
 534 Researchers can respond when others are sloganeering the topic, especially if those slogans  
 535 frame policy recommendations incorrectly. When discussing points with someone who uses a  
 536 misleading and persuasive slogan, the researcher should label it immediately. A negative  
 537 phrase like "propaganda bite," for example, has more ability to draw attention to it, compared  
 538 to the neutral and nonmemorable academic labels "frame"; "condensation symbol";  
 539 "ideograph"; or "micronarrative."

540 Labeling what people are doing may engage the critical thinking processes of the brain  
 541 (Kahneman, 2011; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Lakoff (2016, p. 9) argues, "(M)ost real polit-  
 542 ical discourse makes use of unconscious thought . . . via unconscious framing and common-  
 543 place conceptual metaphors. It is crucial, for the history of the country and the world . . . that  
 544 all of this be made public." By putting one's hermeneutic skills to work and calling attention  
 545 to the practice and craft of sloganeering, there is a greater chance that the public will pay  
 546 attention to the messaging itself, which may foster skepticism, and—one can only hope—  
 547 more reflection on the substantive policy discussion.  
 548

### 549 ORCID

550 Renee Antoinette Irvin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5038-1591>  
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