

Storytelling may make political ads powerful persuaders

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The persuasive potential of using stories in political ads may make them powerful tools for politicians and should become a focus for future research, according to a team of researchers.

In a study of 243 ads from the 2014 U.S. senatorial and gubernatorial

campaigns, researchers said candidates used three types of narrative ads: autobiographical, voter stories and testimonials. The researchers added that winners tended to use positive autobiographical narratives, while losers used negative attack ads narrated by an anonymous announcer.

"This is really the first of perhaps several studies on the use of narratives in political ads," said Fuyuan Shen, professor and head of the department of advertising and public relations, Penn State. "But it's important to point out that this study is based on a content analysis—it analyzes what types of advertisements have been used and who has used what, in terms of stories, but we can't draw a causal effect yet. If a loser used an attack ad it might be because he or she felt the race was too tight. It doesn't mean only losers use attack ads."

Shen said that using voters to tell their own stories in ads may be particularly persuasive, but also problematic because they could lend themselves to spreading disinformation.

"I think the voters' stories on issues are particularly powerful and that is really prominent in the research that we've seen," said Shen. "Instead of attacking opponents on their records, or using rhetorical statements, the voters are just telling stories about how a candidate's policy affected their lives."

Shen added that the difficulty of verifying information in a narrative ad may make it harder for voters to tell the difference between accurate information and deception.

"Maybe the people in the ads say the candidate's policy made them lose their jobs—how do you discount that?" said Shen. "Stories are hard to discount because the information is hard to verify."

Other industries—business and healthcare, for example—have long used

narratives because the technique is more compelling and persuasive, said Shen, who worked with Michail Vafeiadis, assistant professor of [public relations](#) at Auburn University, and Ruobing Li, a former doctoral student in mass communications at Penn State and currently assistant professor in the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University.

"Stories are powerful in changing people's opinions and involving people in the message—plus stories are hard to discount," said Shen. "If stories are used in [political ads](#) they can potentially be a powerful influence on individuals."

According to the researchers, who report their findings in the Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, currently online, narrative ads use a storytelling structure that differentiates them from other forms of political advertisements, such as informational attack ads.

"A narrative ad requires three things—characters, plots and causal relations," said Shen.

The researchers conducted a content analysis of narrative ads that candidates for U.S. Senate and governorship posted online during the 2014 political campaign. The initial search for campaign ads uncovered a total of 1,514 ads—585 from senatorial campaigns and 929 from gubernatorial campaigns. Of those, researchers identified 243 narrative ads—185 gubernatorial and 58 senatorial ads.

Each ad was analyzed according to its tone, emphasis, and verbal and nonverbal cues. The researchers also examined specific issues mentioned in the ads, including, for example, economic concerns, crime and gun control, abortion, health care, taxes and education. They also noted what types of appeals—logical or emotional, for example—were used and whether the dominate speaker was the candidate or someone else.

In the future, the researchers would like to set up experiments to determine if there actually are causal links between narrative ads and persuasiveness.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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