The Persuasive Power of Policy Narratives
Evidence from a Survey Experiment

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This Project

- Identification of causal policy narratives in politics, defined as causal mapping to interpret facts

How much are causal narratives employed in the political discourse?

- Investigate the persuasive effect of causal policy narratives with respect to hard facts

Holding fixed the amount of information, are narratives more persuasive than facts?

Identifying Policy Narratives In Congressional Records

Goal: Isolate statements of the type "A causes B"

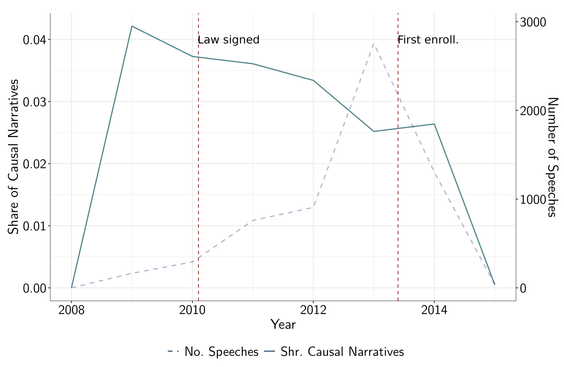
- Extract Agent-Verb-Patient tuples building on Ash, Gauthier, Widmer (2023)
- Combine unsupervised and supervised learning to isolate tuples that imply causality
- **Case Study**: Apply pipeline to Congressional Records about Affordable Care Act (ACA)

Agent	Verb	Patient
employers	drop	coverage
ObamaCare	helps	low-income families
ACA	improves	health

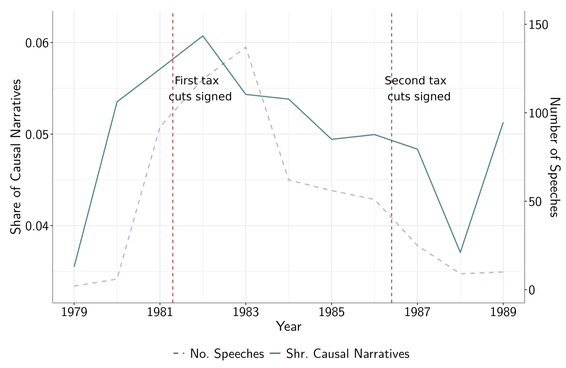
- Holding constant the amount of *time* devoted to ACA, plot the *time* taken up by causal narratives

Figure 1: Share of Causal Narratives over Time

(a) Affordable Care Act



(b) Reagan Tax Cuts



Notes: The figure plots the average number of causal narratives over the total number of tuples in Congressional speeches across years. Panel (a) shows the results for the Affordable Care Act, while Panel (b) for the Reagan Tax Cuts.

The Persuasive Effect of Narratives - Experimental Design

Sample: 500 individuals recruited on Prolific, representative of the U.S. population along gender, ethnicity, and age

Task: Respondents have to evaluate one of **two policies**: gender quotas in corporate boards (*salient* in the political debate) and a ban to sell alcohol from 10pm on (*non-salient* in the political debate)

Outcomes:

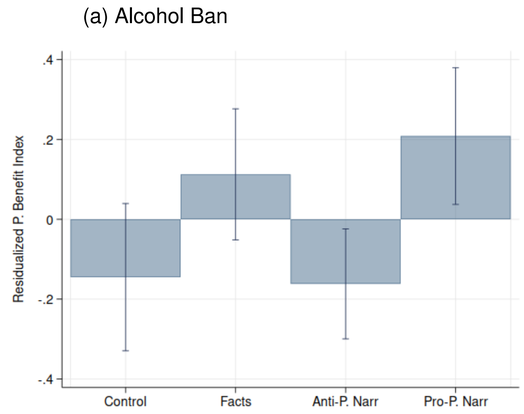
- Index computed as the average of answers about benefits from the policy, standardized to have mean 0 and std of 1
  Do you think that the policy mostly benefits or mostly harms society/specific groups? (1=Mostly Harms, 7=Mostly Benefits)
- Probability of voting for the policy

Treatments: Randomized information about the policy, keeping the content constant and changing the framing

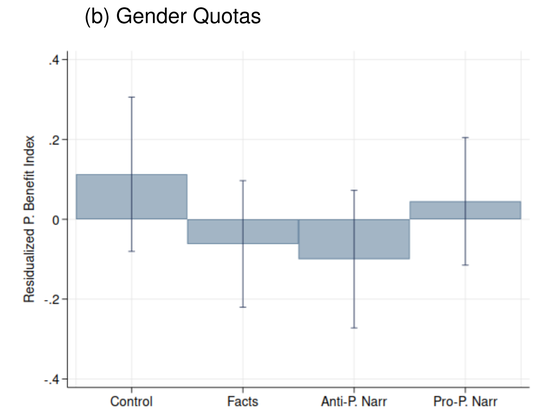
Results: Narrative Effect

Figure 2: Residualized Beliefs by Policy

(a) Alcohol Ban



(b) Gender Quotas



Notes: Residualized index of beliefs about benefits from the policy, measured on a 7-point Likert scale, by group. The index is residualized on demographic characteristics, priors, and ex-ante polarization. Panel (a) shows the results for the alcohol ban, while Panel (b) for gender quotas. 95% confidence intervals.

Narratives Provide a Mapping

- Respondents spend the same amount of time on all treatments → unlikely that they do not read the facts
- There is a small heterogeneity in beliefs update across confidence in the information
- After seeing the narrative, respondents refer more frequently to it in open-ended questions. This holds only for the alcohol ban

Figure 4: Most Frequent Bigrams - Alcohol Ban

(a) Causal Narrative Pro-Policy

(b) Causal Narrative Anti-Policy

Figure 5: Most Frequent Bigrams - Gender Quotas

(a) Causal Narrative Pro-Policy

(b) Causal Narrative Anti-Policy

Conclusion

- Causal narratives are mostly used in the initial discussions around a policy
- Evidence on the persuasiveness of causal narratives for non-salient policies
  - The effect is unlikely to be due to lower engagement with facts
  - Individuals seem to accept the narrative provided and interpret facts through its lenses
- The results suggest that framing of information is crucial in belief formation about a new policy, even in the presence of factual information about its effects