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The role of policy narrators during crisis: A micro-level analysis of the sourcing, synthesizing, and sharing of policy narratives in rural Texas

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Abstract

How do policymakers respond to crises? The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) answers this question by focusing on the contest over policy narratives. This paper focuses on the individuals constructing those policy narratives, conceptualizing them as policy narrators. Using a case study approach, we analyze seven counties located in a major oil and gas formation in Texas, which in early 2020 faced both an oil bust and the onset of COVID-19. We explore four sets of propositions about how policy narrators source, synthesize, and share their policy narratives. We find that while their narratives vary, the structure of those narratives is similar; their backgrounds shape how they source narratives, and they tailor their levels of narrative breach to the action (or inaction) they hope for. They avoid casting other local actors as villains, place their audience as the hero, and situate themselves as either supporting or a member of that audience, stressing their common ties. From these findings, we put forward a working definition of policy narrators, identify how they fit into the NPF, and discuss how they relate to other types of policy actors, including policy entrepreneurs.

KEYWORDS

crisis policymaking, narrative policy framework, policy entrepreneurship, policy narrator, policy process

INTRODUCTION

Policymakers make strategic use of narratives throughout the policy development and implementation process (Shanahan et al., 2017). Narratives are useful tools for setting policy agendas, emphasizing certain problems and target groups and sidelining others. Narratives can highlight the benefits of a policy response or highlight the costs of its alternatives. The Narrative Policy Framework, a lens for understanding the public policy process developed over the last 20 years, provides researchers a framework for systematically examining the role of narrative in the policy process, including in the definition and scope of policy problems, the solutions presented, and in the adoption of policy solutions (Jones et al., 2014; Jones & McBeth, 2010; Lawlor & Crow, 2018; Shanahan et al., 2017). The NPF posits that even across

diverse policy contexts, policy narratives have consistent content and structure: a setting or context; a plot, temporal in nature; characters, including villains, victims, and heroes; and a moral, expressed as a policy solution (Jones & McBeth, 2010; Shanahan et al., 2017). By systematizing structure and content within narratives, the NPF has proven a useful tool for analyzing narratives empirically across policy contexts.

The Narrative Policy Framework is one of a half dozen modern policy process theories (Weible & Sabatier, 2018). Cutting across these theories is a set of scholars who examine the policy actors that shape the policy process, including *policy entrepreneurs* (Kirkpatrick & Stoutenborough, 2018b); *stakeholders* (McBeth et al., 2016); *policy brokers* (Pholsim & Inaba, 2022); and *policy marketers* (McBeth & Shanahan, 2004). In this paper, we introduce another potential policy actor, the *policy narrator*.

Below, we provide an overview of the Narrative Policy Framework; the literature on policy actors, including policy entrepreneurs; and the role of policy actors in the NPF. The second section offers a working definition of the policy narrator, including laying out four sets of propositions about the characteristics and strategies of narrators built from prior NPF literature. Then, using case studies from seven rural Texas counties during two simultaneous crises, we test those propositions. The third section discusses our methodology and data, and the fourth section presents our results. We conclude by examining how the concept of a *policy narrator* fits within the Narrative Policy Framework, and how it relates to the types of policy actors conceptualized by other scholars.

Policy actors and producers of narratives

This paper builds on two closely related streams of literature. The first is micro-level work within Narrative Policy Framework scholarship that focuses on the strategic decisions made by policy actors that produce narratives. The second is a broader body of work that cuts across policy theories and that introduces different types of policy actors.

From its early days, NPF scholarship examined the micro-level dynamics between the producers and consumers of policy narratives. Scholars examined the impact of narrator trust in on an individual's acceptance of a narrative (Jones & McBeth, 2010; Shanahan et al., 2017) and explored how consumers of policy narratives vary in the degree to which they respond more positively to narratives more congruent with their existing belief sets (Lybecker et al., 2013; McBeth et al., 2010). This same group of authors then turned their attention to the producers of those narratives, observing how policy analysts make strategic choices about what narratives to present to policymakers (McBeth, Lybecker, & Husmann, 2014). In a series of studies on river restoration, those scholars demonstrate how stakeholders construct their own policy narratives (McBeth et al., 2017); how they sideline their preferred narratives in order to craft messages more likely to resonate with the public (McBeth et al., 2016); how they vary in the framing and content of their messages (Lybecker et al., 2016); and how they are affected by the Third Person Effect (Kirkpatrick & Stoutenborough, 2018b). Other NPF studies examine the rhetorical use of the angel-devil shift; policy containment; and strategic narrative switching (Ertas, 2015; Gottlieb et al., 2018; Jones & McBeth, 2010; Kirkpatrick & Stoutenborough, 2018b; McBeth et al., 2016). More recent work has built on this literature in two ways: First, by demonstrating the role of cultural cognition in shaping the narratives groups form (Smith-Walter et al., 2020); and second, by demonstrating how narratives can bubble up from the public, typically considered the consumers of narratives (Colville & Merry, 2022).

What is curious about this work is that while this scholarship discusses the strategies of those stakeholders that produce narratives, NPF scholars have not yet given these actors a consistent label. In the papers described above, *stakeholder* is the most common label of policy actors producing policy narratives. A paper by NPF scholars that preceded the formalization of NPF theory describes *policy marketers* as "those individuals who spend much of their time constructing public problems, defining relevant policy beliefs, and ultimately reducing complex and interrelated societal problems into simple policy marketing packages," whose primary role is to "market public opinion" (McBeth & Shanahan, 2004). And at least one of the papers listed above describes the main policy actors within the NPF as *policy entrepreneurs* (Kirkpatrick & Stoutenborough, 2018b). Where authors do refer explicitly to *narrators*, they focus either

on how belief congruence between narrators and their audience can lead and audience to find a narrator more trustworthy (Ertas, 2015) or how the public attaches existing narratives to individuals in the absence of a clear narrator (Kirkpatrick & Stoutenborough, 2018a).

The Narrative Policy Framework is one of multiple modern theories of the policy process. Each of those theories has its own set of dedicated scholars; spanning them are other scholars interested in a particular phenomenon, such as policy learning or policy actors. The most robust area of work on policy actors conceptualizes these individuals as *policy entrepreneurs*, first introduced by John Kingdon and later defined by scholars of the multiple streams framework of the policy process as "advocates who are willing to invest their resources – time, energy, reputation, money – to promote a position in return for anticipated future gain in the form of material, purposive, or solidarity benefits" (Herweg et al., 2018; Kingdon, 1968). Policy entrepreneurs are a key part of the multiple streams framework, as well, which envisions them as engaging in whatever actions necessary to promote their "pet projects" (Zahariadis, 2003).

Most recently, scholars attempting to find connection points among different frameworks for understanding the policy process have identified *policy entrepreneurship* as a concept that might be incorporated into each major theory of the policy process (Petridou & Mintrom, 2021). But as these same authors point out, the phrase means "different things to different scholars even within the same discipline" (Petridou & Mintrom, 2021). For example, within an incrementalist theory of the policy process, Petridou and Mintrom identify as policy entrepreneurs what may be two distinct types of idea-generating actors: the "proximate policymaker" (perhaps also describable as a policy *intrapreneur*) and another set of actors that sit "on the margins of policy-making circles." Similarly, in the institutionalist framework one set of actors identifies opportunities within existing institutions, while other actors conceptualize and build new institutions. In the context of the NPF, Petridou and Mintrom identify overlap between their conception of the policy entrepreneurs and *policy marketers*, an early conceptualization of a policy actor within the NPF (McBeth & Shanahan, 2004). Other scholars have worked similarly to connect multiple policy process theories by way of the concept of the *policy broker*, an intermediary figure tasked with gathering resources for a coalition (Pholsim & Inaba, 2022).

As a step toward clarifying some of this ambiguity, in this paper we conceptualize another policy actor, the *policy narrator*. We conceptualize the policy narrator as having a specific, bounded role within the Narrative Policy Framework as a policy actor that creates and disseminates policy narratives. In the remainder of this paper, we identify and examine four sets of propositions as an initial examination of the *policy narrator* concept. In the discussion, we return to the question of how policy narrators relate to these other actors, including addressing whether they are most helpfully viewed as a type of policy entrepreneur or an identifiably distinct set of policy actors.

PROPOSITIONS

In this section, we lay out four sets of propositions about how policy narrators source, synthesize, and share their policy narratives. Two of these four proposition sets build explicitly from prior NPF work on narrative breach and the characters of policy narratives (heroes, villains, and victims). The other two proposition sets borrow theory from narratology, entrepreneurship scholarship, and diffusion theory.

Narrative sourcing

Prior NPF research has explored the extent to which narrators strategically select narratives. However, we know little about how they identify narrative elements to select from or how they write their own narratives (Kirkpatrick & Stoutenborough, 2018b; McBeth et al., 2016). We propose that policy narrators act as what management scholars call *cultural entrepreneurs*, picking and choosing new ideas and information to build narratives from both external and internal sources (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019). By pulling

information and ideas from outside their community, policy narrators can serve as agents of policy diffusion, bringing policies tested in other communities into their own (Berry, 1994; Mintrom, 1997). They can also signal their connectedness to other actors and political systems beyond the local level, which might build legitimacy and trust with their target audience. But, this connectedness to other communities may cut both ways: Policy narrators that tell stories with too many elements sourced from outside their community run the risk the risk of weaving a narrative that no longer resonates with their audience.

Evidence of this type of strategic narrative sourcing would include narrators that are engaging a variety of ideas and cultural artifacts, such as shared history or shared values, that come from within and from outside of the community. These narrators will likely reference relationships and collaborations with policy actors within the community as well as from outside the community, including from other counties or at the state level. Narrators engaging in strategic narrative sourcing will demonstrate their understanding of their community's place within the larger policy ecosystem and economy. A lack of strategic sourcing would entail a limited source of ideas and content and limited reference to other communities or relationships outside of the community. Thus, we propose that:

> **P1a.** Policy narrators will strategically source ideas by incorporating novel ideas from outside networks and resources that they have built up over time while simultaneously incorporating local cultural stock.

We suspect that there is variation in the depth of narrative sourcing based on narrator characteristics and experience. Likely, narrators who have wider connections outside of the community from professional, educational, or other experiences, will have access to a wider pool of ideas and narrative elements to select from. Meanwhile, policy narrators with deep roots in the community will be more adept at building community-specific narratives and will be more likely to make comparisons of current crises to past experiences of the community. But if they have not built networks outside of their community, they may have difficulty accessing new ideas for policy solutions.

> **P1b.** Policy narrators with extensive work and educational experience outside of the community will tend to use wider narrative sourcing; correspondingly, policy narrators with limited outside experience will tend to source narrative stock more from internal resources.

Narrative breach

In policy narrative contexts, there are any number of policy problems and solutions that a narrator can weave together into a narrative. Which crises merit narration? Which battles are the narrators picking and how are they positioning themselves? According to prior NPF literature, stories that "do violence to the norm, breach banality, and rend expectations" change the way we view the world (Jones & McBeth, 2010). One original and untested NPF hypothesis is that individuals are more likely to be persuaded by a narrative as its level of "breach" from the status quo increases (Jones & McBeth, 2010). If higher-breach narratives are in fact more persuasive, then narrators who seek to change their audience's views of the world to encourage acceptance of their preferred policy solutions should also prioritize the high-breach policy narratives. For example, a policy narrative in the context of the oil and gas bust and COVID-19 pandemic that utilizes high breach might repeatedly mention the unprecedented nature of the events, or frame the events as rare or far-afield from business-as-usual in their community.

> **P2a.** Narrators will compose narratives with maximum breach from the status quo.

What if policymakers prefer to maintain the status quo through their narrative, rather than advocate for change? Prior research suggests that policymaking is in part a contest over agendas—including keeping certain items *off* the agenda (Marschall & Shah, 2005). For policy narrators hoping to prevent an audience

from acting, they may well do the opposite of what the Narrative Policy Framework predicts. We expect to see this tactic more frequently applied by policy narrators that prefer limited government intervention. Conversely, in communities where limited policy intervention is the norm, policy narrators seeking action may employ higher levels of breach, as they face higher barriers to action.

> **P2b.** Narrators that compose narratives with low breach do so strategically, to compel acceptance rather than action.

Character selection

Characters are a key piece of narratives, and narrators strategically select and frame these actors to increase narrative persuasiveness. The NPF posits three main characters, at least one of which must be present for a narrative to exist: heroes, villains, and victims. Previous NPF research has suggested that the use of characters is important to the persuasiveness of a policy narrative (Jones, 2014; Jones et al., 2014). Research on narrative characters has focused on one of the NPF's core hypotheses, the *devil-angel shift*. According to this hypothesis, actors on the losing side of a political battle will tend to tell stories with strong negative language about their opponents (the devil shift), and those on the winning side will use strong positive language about themselves and/or their allies (the angel shift) (Shanahan et al., 2013). Evidence on this hypothesis, one of the most tested within the NPF literature, has been mixed (Crow & Berggren, 2014; Gottlieb et al., 2018; Heikkila et al., 2014). Merry (2019) adds a second dimension to this framework, resulting in two other "shifts": the "angel in distress" and the "devil diminished." In the same article, she calls for a greater investigation for the relationship between character selection and communication venue (Merry, 2019).

To examine this relationship, and in hopes of building theory about character selection within NPF scholarship, we turn to the field of narratology. In narratology theory, the narrator's level of participation (as the main character, a lesser participant, or not a participant at all) is a strategic choice designed to accomplish a persuasive goal (Fludernik, 2009; Herman, 2009; Rimmon-Kenan, 2003). Nonparticipation in a narrative might establish trust by way of disinterest, for example, while participation in the narrative might do so by providing a reliable first-hand account. More likely, policy narrators will place themselves within the story world that they create to generate trust among their audience, and to enable their alignment with the victims or heroes.

> **P3a.** Policy narrators will situate themselves as significant characters within the policy narrative to increase reliability and trust.

Once policymakers establish themselves as existing within the narrative (as opposed to external narrators), they have a choice about where to place themselves in a policy narrative as defined by the Narrative Policy Framework: will they be the hero, villain, or victim in their policy narrative? In a policy setting, in which the persuasive goal of a narrative is toward action (or in some cases, inaction), we expect to see policy narrators making a very specific choice to place themselves as a character adjacent to and supportive of the audience, whom we expect the policy narrator to cast as the hero.

> **P3b.** Policy narrators position the audience they are persuading to act as the hero of the narrative they construct.

> **P3c.** Policy narrators will position themselves as on the side of the audience-hero in a position of support and guidance.

If the goal of policy narrators is to persuade an audience to action, and if the most effective persuasion places the audience at the center of the story as a hero, which characters will narrators choose as a villain?

Policy narrators often narrate in public places. Where they tell public stories, we expect to see policy narrators casting as villains those actors that they cannot, or will not, attempt to persuade—be that a faceless federal government too large to control, or a previously established and unpersuadable rival, a marginalized group without voice among those with power, or an unstoppable macroeconomic force. To do so otherwise involves risking the strength of the narrative. Choosing the wrong villain might alienate a potential ally, rally support around an opponent, or box a narrator out of the possibility of negotiating a policy compromise with someone they had previously cast as a villain.

> **P3d.** Policy narrators will avoid casting members of their own community, or anyone with whom they expect potentially fruitful interact with, as villains in their policy narratives; instead, their villains will be characters they need not or cannot directly engage with.

Narrator-audience congruence

Narratives may be effective tools of persuasion, but they are likely far more effective when the values and beliefs align with priors of the audience. Previous work from narratology and NPF would suggest that a policy narrator whose worldview is congruent with the predominant values and political views of a community will be a more persuasive narrator (Jones & McBeth, 2010; Rimmon-Kenan, 2003) and that narrators will often set aside their preferred narratives in favor of narratives more congruent with the values of their audience (McBeth et al., 2016). A successful policy narrator should be able to connect with their narratees by sharing, adopting, or at the very least expressing openness to their community's dominant ideological beliefs. Thus, we would expect that narrators align politically with most of their community. To interrogate this proposition, we first ask whether there is widespread evidence among policy narrators and their audiences of ideological alignment:

> **P4a.** Policy narrators will express political worldviews that are congruent with those of their audience.

An alternative proposition on ideologies suggests that narrators with moderate views will be most successful, as they can construe narratives acceptable to audience members on both sides of the political divide, as suggested for example by the Median Voter Theorem (Congleton, 2004). Narrators that are less politically congruent with their audience will be less explicit with their personal ideologies, instead emphasizing moderate and uncontroversial values of the community that could be embraced by both sides of the political spectrum. Where narrators are not politically aligned with their audience, we expect them to emphasize other characteristics that are more congruent with their audience, such as their educational or work background, their birthplace and residential history, and their wider connections within the community. Moderate worldview narrators may also be more common in communities that are experiencing big changes such as an influx of new residents with values that are different from long-time residents.

> **P4b.** Where policy narrators are not politically congruent with their audience, they will be more likely to emphasize other areas of congruence.

CONTEXT, DATA, AND METHODS

In the spring of 2020, oil-producing regions in Texas were hit with not one crisis, but two. Two weeks prior to shutdowns across the United States in response to the spread of COVID-19, oil prices fell to their lowest levels in 30 years and 70% of working rigs were idled (Stevens, 2020). Given the rapid pace of change during the pandemic and high levels of uncertainty in the energy market, local policymakers served a central role in interpreting, managing, and mitigating these twin crises. To explore the

propositions developed above, we construct comparative case studies of seven oil-producing counties in one region of rural Texas. Comparative case study approaches are most appropriate when (1) examining recent phenomena as opposed to historical events; (2) the questions to be answered involve complex process questions that are more effectively examined in depth in small numbers of cases, rather than quantified across large cases; and (3) when developing theory (Yin, 2014). Each of those conditions apply here.

Understanding who these local policy narrators are and their role in the policy creation process in times of crisis, we argue, serves as an acute expression of how policy narrators act more broadly outside of moments of crisis. Examining policy narrators in the middle of crisis allows us to observe the policy narrating process in near-real time. In the discussion, we return to the question of how policy narrators' behaviors might vary during moments of crisis, noncrisis, and multiple crises (as studied here). We also consider the extent to which the findings of study—in rural, relatively wealthy counties in a large state in the US—are generalizable to other contexts.

Analytical approach and case selection

To explore the role of the policy narrator, we utilized qualitative methods for this study, as they best suited the exploratory and inductive nature of this analysis. In line with previous NPF literature that demonstrated the utility of qualitative methods in NPF (Gray & Jones, 2016), we think this is an appropriate method for developing policy narrator characteristics and propositions that can later be refined and tested. Following Mill's method of differences, we identify counties that are similar in as many respects as possible but vary in our variables of interest: their policy narratives and responses to the current crises (Van Evera, 1997). This allows us to observe where differences in context and narrator might be associated with differences in policy narratives and outputs. We employed thematic analysis using a primarily deductive approach to develop and conduct our analysis (Clarke et al., 2015). We note that our analysis is not intended to lay causal or statistical claims, rather to begin to carefully delineate and define the role of policy narrators in the policy process with the NPF and to use case data to offer an initial exploration of certain propositions about the behavior and choices of policy narrators. In doing so, our hope is to contribute toward the development of a micro-level theory of behavior within the NPF.

Before beginning data collection, we developed research questions and propositions to inform the building of a semi-structured interview guide. These early research questions explored behaviors that narrators engaged in, specifically sourcing of narrative elements and character selection, as well as the factors that constrained and enabled narrators, including their personal backgrounds, their worldviews, and the county environment. After data collection but before analysis, we returned to the analytical strategy and consulted NPF, narratology, and organizational management literature to finalize the four propositions that we present in this study. Once all propositions were clearly delineated, we utilized a familiarization process to become familiar with the data while transcribing interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2012) and then developed a codebook with themes (including community values, the interviewees' background, breach,[1] sourcing of narrative elements, characters, etc.), and codes (within the theme of community values, e.g., codes included patriotism, cooperation, and friendliness). During the data analysis process, some codes were added or adjusted, but the propositions remained consistent. After annotating the interview transcripts, we analyzed the data to code each participant's narrative elements and strategies. For example, we coded whether an interviewee sourced narrative stock from the community and/or from afar when speaking about the crisis and policy response, whether the emphasized or de-emphasized the crises as a breach from status quo, and coded whether and how they spoke about heroes and villains.

To select counties that could serve as case studies, we began with the list of counties identified by the Texas Railroad Commission as part of a specific oil and gas play, which we call the Atchafalaya Shale here to protect interviewees' confidentiality.[2] We then narrowed down to counties tagged as *rural* by the US Office of Management and Budget. From that list, we identified medium-to-high-producing counties with populations over 2500 and where oil and gas made up a significant portion of that county's industrial mix. That produced a list of fewer than a dozen appropriate counties for this study.

TABLE 1 County descriptions and data.

County	Interviewees' roles[a]	Partisanship	Oil and gas production	Distance from metro	Population	Percent insured
De Soto	(4) City leadership; economic development; county leadership; other	High	High	Low	Medium	High
Sabine	(6) County leadership; economic development; Other	Low	Medium	High	Medium	Medium
Natchitoches	(2) City leadership; county leadership	Medium	High	High	Low	High
Red River	(2) County leadership; city leadership	Medium	High	Low	High	Medium
Vernon	(2) Economic development; county leadership	Medium	High	High	Medium	High
Bossier	(3) City leadership; county leadership; other	High	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium
Caddo	(2) County leadership; city leadership	High	Medium	Low	Medium	High

[a]"Other" here includes interviewees in healthcare, education, business, and journalism, lumped together for anonymization.

We then began outreach to elected, appointed, and unofficial leaders in each county, starting with mayors and county judges. The latter merit special attention: In Texas, elected judges are the primary authority in rural counties; they serve primarily as the executive of the county, rather than in a judicial role. In each county, we also reached out to economic development heads, city managers, and chamber of commerce heads where they existed. When identified explicitly by interviewees as local leaders, we also spoke with owners of major businesses, philanthropists, social activists, religious leaders, journalists, city council members, and county commissioners. In total, we reached out to 49 individuals across 14 counties. In the seven counties below, we reached out to 34 individuals, 21 of which we interviewed. See Table 1 for an anonymized list of interviewees, along with other key variables used in the analysis of each case.

To measure political worldview for P4a, we asked interviewees a set of questions about which of a pair of traits were most important in children. Per Hetherington and Weiler (2018), one set of answers (independence, self-reliance, curiosity, and being considerate) is associated with more liberal (what they call "flexible") worldviews, and the other (respect for elders, obedience, good manners, and being well-behaved) is associated with a more conservative (or "fixed") worldview (2018). We scored respondents on a scale of 0 (most liberal) to 4 (most conservative). At the end of each interview, respondents were asked to share whether those scores lined up with their own view of themselves.

Data collection

At the heart of each case study is a set of semi-structured interviews with policy actors in each county. Those interviews, which were conducted 5 to 7 months after the onset of COVID-19 and the oil price downturn (February/March 2020), covered the background of the participant; their conception of the community in which they operated and the current crisis; their observations of the policy responses floated as potential responses to the crisis and the players involved; one question designed to identify their own worldview; and an interpretive question designed to elicit interviewees' explicit feedback on our propositions, methods, and interpretation of their answers. A full list of interview questions is provided in the Supplementary Information.

The open-endedness of these semi-structured interviews mirrors that of Colville and Merry's recent textual analysis of Medicaid recipients (Colville & Merry, 2022). Prior work analyzing narrative producers' choices used experimental methods to identify what narratives experts would choose to communicate with the public (McBeth et al., 2016; McBeth, Lybecker, & Husmann, 2014). These studies helped demonstrate that when producing narratives, experts analyze their audiences and fashion narratives to fit them.

Our approach builds on this work, trading off a larger sample size for a more detailed examination of how our interviewees' craft and communicate policy narratives.

The anonymity of these interviews also empowered participants to speak more freely, and even negatively, about other policy actors in their county. This, in turn, allowed us to triangulate the claims made by each actor against the reports of other actors, developing a clearer picture of both sides of disagreements about arguments in a county and how those arguments were perceived by others (see Hochschild, 2009). In each interview, we also asked who participants would point to as leaders in their county, building our confidence that we interviewed the key participants in each of the counties included.

We also compared our interview notes with publicly available media and social media. Rural areas in Texas do not have the same media coverage as urban areas; several counties lacked a local newspaper or television station, and none of the interviewees made use of Twitter, a staple of the urban news cycle. Some of the elected leaders (county judges and city mayors) posted Facebook videos and press conferences to Facebook, posts that we compared with interview notes for further triangulation but that were infrequent enough to use as the basis of comparative analysis.

Identifying interviewees as policy narrators

We put forward a view of policy narrators as filling a specific set of roles within the policy-making process: policy actors that construct and tell narratives with a policy problem and policy solution through which they make sense of the world. Not all interviewees took on these roles. As an initial step in our analysis, we differentiate narrators from non-narrators using the following characteristics:

- **Policy narrators understand themselves as policy actors**, capable of enacting change or influencing the policy sphere. In academic terms, policy actors are "those individuals or organizations directly or indirectly seeking to influence policy processes" (Weible et al., 2022). In plain English, they view themselves as leaders or potential leaders in their community. They are empowered and cognizant of their ability to influence policy. If the interviewees do not demonstrate or recognize their ability to impact change or influence the policy sphere, then we do not consider them policy narrators. Policy narrators also need not be elected officials; they may also be public servants, business owners, or other actors within the community.
- **Policy narrators construct and tell stories** that meet a minimum level of narrativity by including setting, plot, characters, and moral, the generalizable structural elements from the NPF.
- **Policy narrators present a story as a policy problem with a policy solution**—in other words, policy narratives, rather than more general stories about the community. It is important to highlight that policy narrators need not produce or promote a narrative that involves policy *action*. Rather, their narrative may in fact revolve around limited government intervention: purposeful *inaction* as their desired policy outcome.

Eight of our 21 interviewees matched all three of these criteria (see Appendix A for detail). For the rest of the paper, we refer to these individuals as our policy narrators and to other interviewees as non-narrators. Two notes are important here. First, while two of the interviewees that we identify as policy narrators did not promote or implement specific policy responses, we consider them narrators because they explicitly promoted policies of limited government intervention—what we might call *policy inaction*. This contrasts with other potential narrators who did not propose policy solutions and lacked a clear policy narrative to accompany their (in)actions. Second, it is worth noting that while we study individual policy narrators here, policy narratives can be developed by a set of policy narrators. We examine individual policy narrators to systematically explore the policy narrator at the simplest level.

RESULTS

In this paper, we examine four sets of propositions about the behavior and position of policy narrators. In this section, we first present an overview of our findings, summarized in Table 2. Next, we introduce

TABLE 2 Propositions and results.

Theoretical element	P0	Proposition	Results
1. Narrative Sourcing	$P1_a$	Policy narrators will strategically source ideas by incorporating novel ideas from outside networks and resources that they have built up over time while simultaneously incorporating local cultural stock	**Partially Supported**. We found all narrators engaged in local sourcing, but we found variation in levels of sourcing novel ideas
	$P1_b$	Policy narrators with extensive work and educational experience outside of the community will be associated with wider narrative sourcing; correspondingly, policy narrators with limited outside experience will be associated with sourcing narrative stock from internal resources	**Supported**. Variation in sourcing is associated with the narrator's background
2. Narrative breach	$P2_a$	Narrators will compose narratives with maximum breach from the status quo	**Partially Supported**. We found variation in levels of breach
	$P2_b$	Narrators that compose narratives with low breach do so strategically, to compel acceptance rather than action	**Supported**. We found narrators strategically using breach depending on the action they request of their audience
3. Character selection	$P3_a$	Policy narrators will situate themselves as characters within the policy narrative to increase reliability and trust (with either minor or main roles)	**Partially Supported**. Just over half of narrators took on varying roles within their narratives
	$P3_b$	Policy narrators will work to position the audience they are persuading to act as the hero of the narrative they construct	**Supported**. Half of narrators placed audience as hero
	$P3_c$	Policy narrators will position themselves on the side of the audience hero in a position of support and guidance	**Partially Supported**. Narrators placed themselves in the narrative alongside their audience, but often as victims
	$P3_d$	Policy narrators will avoid casting members of their own community, or anyone with whom they will have to interact, as villains in their policy narratives; instead, their villains will be characters they need not or cannot directly engage with	**Supported**. Villains, when used in narratives, were generally nonlocal
4. Worldview congruence	$P4_a$	Policy narrators will demonstrate congruence with their audience, as expressed by their respective political worldviews	**Partially Supported**. On average, narrators held more moderate than conservative worldviews, despite being in a highly conservative region
	$P4_b$	Where policy narrators are not politically congruent with their audience, they will be more likely to emphasize other areas of congruence	**Supported**. Moderate narrators in conservative areas highlighted things like their local ties and community involvement

our narrators and the narratives they put forward, identifying when their behavior supported or failed to support each of our propositions. We then discuss each proposition individually, across cases.

Results: Policy narrators in rural Texas

As discussed above, eight of our 21 interviewees met all our policy narrator criteria: viewing themselves as policy actors; telling stories with identifiable narrative elements; and connecting those stories with policy

outcomes. Below, we introduce these narrators, with a table for each depicting whether their behavior supported our 10 propositions. For a collected version of these tables, see Table 11 in the following section.

De Soto County Narrator #1: "Keep the cash flowing"

Our first narrator, an elected leader in a midsized county, put together a policy narrative of low breach with the status quo and low expectations of government (Table 3). "[The public is] not relying on the local government to bail them out or anything like that," they believed. "I really think that our citizens have a mindset that they expect us to do everything we can to get out of the way." For this narrator, as with many, the onset of the pandemic was simply another kind of "bust" to navigate. "We've had we've had a lot of groups come in recently and tell us that we would never see another oil bust again. But most of the, the old timers around, said that's hog wash. We know that with the booms come the bust, we'll be ready for both." For this narrator, the focus was on doing what was necessary to help local businesses "open their doors and keep the cash flowing."

De Soto County Narrator #2: "Healthy jobs"

Our second narrator, an unelected official in the same county, used a similar narrative—of low breach, and with his role as a public official focused on giving people the "opportunity to start their dream job, be an entrepreneur." As with many of our narrators, it was that question of economic opportunity, rather than health concerns or the boom-and-bust cycle, that led this narrator to seek out business-focused policies from other parts of Texas, across which they had built their own network of local leaders. The plan they settled on, the "healthy jobs" plan, offered grants to local businesses that agreed to take certain health precautions (Table 4).

De Soto County Narrator #3: "Uncharted territory"

Unlike our first two narrators, our third narrator employed both high-breach and hero-driven storytelling:

> "And it just really hit our community, of course, it stopped the entire nation. We were no different. It stopped us as a county… [We were] trying to figure out, you know uncharted territory, you know, even if you wanted to think about, Lewis and Clark, where are they going, they were just here in a new land and that's kind of how I felt. Just brand new, you know, how do we navigate through this. There's no direction, there's no anything."

As with the other narrators in their county, this narrator emphasized the "healthy jobs" program, a policy solution that tackled what they saw as the two policy problems: keeping their community safe and keeping their businesses open (Table 5).

TABLE 3 Propositions supported by this policy narrator's actions.

Narrative sourcing		Narrative breach		Character selection				Worldview congruence	
$P1_a$	$P1_b$	$P2_a$	$P2_b$	$P3_a$	$P3_b$	$P3_c$	$P3_d$	$P4_a$	$P4_b$
✓✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓✓

Note: In column $P1_a$, ✓ = sourced locally and ✓✓ = sourced locally and externally. In $P3_a$, ✓ = victim or hero; ✓✓ = both. In P4b, ✓ = moderate and ✓✓ = high.

TABLE 4 Propositions supported by this policy narrator's actions.

$P1_a$	$P1_b$	$P2_a$	$P2_b$	$P3_a$	$P3_b$	$P3_c$	$P3_d$	$P4_a$	$P4_b$
✓✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓

Sabine County Narrator #1: "Double bust"

In addition to echoing many narrators' downplaying of the COVID-19 crisis, our fourth narrator exemplified the tendency of our policy narrators to cast local heroes, local victims, and distant villains (Table 6). For this narrator, the problems stemming from COVID-19 were not new, just part of a "double bust." Rather, their local problems were another example of how state-level restrictions on local tax decisions weakened local leaders' ability to respond to crisis. In this narrative, local leaders were heroes defending citizen victims against state-level villains. Speaking of his plan to continue to fight state lawmakers, this narrator said: "I testified three times last legislative session and I'll be there again."

Sabine County Narrator #2: "Zero debt"

Like their colleague above, our fifth narrator told a policy narrative that cast local government as both victim and hero, and in which their only policy consideration was maintaining the county's history of not taking on debt. In line with this narrative, and unlike in De Soto County above, this narrator did not consider putting forth policy proposals to achieve other policy goals, such as keeping people safe or employed; protecting local government and its employees' jobs was this narrator's main goal (Table 7).

Sabine County Narrator #3: "Our own little stimulus"

The policy narratives put forward by this unelected leader in Sabine County departed dramatically from those of their elected counterparts (Table 8). Like the narrators in De Soto County, our sixth narrator had two goals: keep people healthy and support local businesses. Their policy actions flowed directly from these goals. First, they brokered a deal with a large local company to begin manufacturing protective equipment and sanitizer, in short supply in the early days of the pandemic. They also launched a grant program for the employees of shuttered small businesses—not to keep them open, but to tide workers over, what the narrator described as "our own little stimulus."

Red River County Narrator #1: "Steady voice"

As with two of the Sabine County narrators, our seventh narrator put forward a narrative in which the state government was "consolidating power" away from local leaders, and the role of local leaders in such a situation was to focus on keeping the county debt-free while providing a "steady voice amid panic." "This isn't new," argued this narrator, whose priority was to keep mask mandates and shutdowns from being enforced (Table 9).

TABLE 5 Propositions supported by this policy narrator's actions.

$P1_a$	$P1_b$	$P2_a$	$P2_b$	$P3_a$	$P3_b$	$P3_c$	$P3_d$	$P4_a$	$P4_b$
✓	✓	✓	–	✓✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–

TABLE 6 Propositions supported by this policy narrator's actions.

$P1_a$	$P1_b$	$P2_a$	$P2_b$	$P3_a$	$P3_b$	$P3_c$	$P3_d$	$P4_a$	$P4_b$
✓	✓	✓	–	✓	✗	-	✓	✓	–

TABLE 7 Propositions supported by this policy narrator's actions.

$P1_a$	$P1_b$	$P2_a$	$P2_b$	$P3_a$	$P3_b$	$P3_c$	$P3_d$	$P4_a$	$P4_b$
✓	✗	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	–

TABLE 8 Propositions supported by this policy narrator's actions.

$P1_a$	$P1_b$	$P2_a$	$P2_b$	$P3_a$	$P3_b$	$P3_c$	$P3_d$	$P4_a$	$P4_b$
✓✓	✗	✓	–	✗	✗	–	✓	✗	✓

TABLE 9 Propositions supported by this policy narrator's actions.

$P1_a$	$P1_b$	$P2_a$	$P2_b$	$P3_a$	$P3_b$	$P3_c$	$P3_d$	$P4_a$	$P4_b$
✓✓	✓	✗	✓	✓✓	✗	–	✗	✓	–

Caddo County Narrator #1: "Working through it"

Our last narrator came into office committed to the small government project: "Number one, don't raise our taxes and number two stay out of our business." In the summer of 2020, as the second Covid-19 wave was building, this narrator was already moving on. "We're settling into a new normal. It's one of those things, you know, we're working through it." Their major response was to host "fireside chats" on Facebook, where they defended their lack of restrictions on local businesses (Table 10). "Well I mean there's not a whole lot the city can do there, other than to try to possibly, you know, lessen the impact of it on our citizens."

Results organized by proposition

In this section, we walk through each of our propositions in detail, describing the degree to which they are supported by narrators' behavior, when considered together, as in Table 11. For a similar table that also includes all non-narrators, see Appendix B.

Propositions 1a and 1b: Narrators' strategic sourcing of narrative elements

Our first set of propositions addresses the sources from which policy narrators gather the narrative elements that they weave into policy narratives. We expected to see narrators pulling narrative elements from both local "cultural stock" and from wider networks they have built up across industries and geographies (P1a). This was partially supported: Most narrators incorporated values of cooperation, grit/hard work, and friendliness into both their community's response to COVID-19, and some version of self-reliance into their community's response to both. Local sources of ideas and resources played major roles in policy responses of six narrators, including one in which a narrator called up local industrial leaders to ask them to make hand and surface sanitizer in exchange for lowered rent in the municipal industrial park.

Only half of our narrators made use of nonlocal sources of ideas, a strategy even less common among non-narrators (2/13). Outside sources of other ideas included working groups of other mayors and economic development leaders, local journalists, and news reports from other counties. The most obvious example of this was Bossier County's "healthy jobs" plan. There were multiple reports about where the idea had come from—through a journalist who had heard about another county in South Texas doing something similar, by one account—but it was quickly adopted in both Bossier County and De Soto County. As one judge put it: "We actually stole that from another city. And maybe I shouldn't use the word *stole*… I'm a firm believer, we don't have to reinvent the wheel. Can we make [the wheels]

TABLE 10 Propositions supported by this policy narrator's actions.

$P1_a$	$P1_b$	$P2_a$	$P2_b$	$P3_a$	$P3_b$	$P3_c$	$P3_d$	$P4_a$	$P4_b$
✓	✓	✗	✗	✓✓	✗	–	✓	✗	✓✓

TABLE 11 Propositions supported by narrators' actions.

	Narrative sourcing		Narrative breach		Character selection				Worldview congruence	
Narrator	$P1_a$	$P1_b$	$P2_a$	$P2_b$	$P3_a$	$P3_b$	$P3_c$	$P3_d$	$P4_a$	$P4_b$
De Soto 1	✓✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓✓
De Soto 2	✓✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓
De Soto 3	✓	✓	✓	–	✓✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–
Sabine 1	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	✗	–	✓	✓	–
Sabine 2	✓	✗	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	–
Sabine 3	✓	✗	✓	–	✗	✗	–	✓	✗	✓
Red River 1	✓✓	✓	✗	✓	✓✓	✗	–	✗	✓	–
Caddo 1	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓✓	✗	–	✓	✗	✓✓

Note: In column $P1_a$, ✓ = sourced locally and ✓✓ = sourced locally and externally. In $P3_a$, ✓ = victim or hero; ✓✓ = both. In P4b, ✓ = moderate and ✓✓ = high.

better? Absolutely." Two other narrators mentioned sourcing ideas from networks of leaders from nearby counties. While less common than incorporating cultural stock, sourcing of nonlocal ideas seems to have been a strategy more commonly used by policy narrators than non-narrators.

Our second proposition on narrative sourcing (P1b) was that local sourcing of ideas would be associated with deep local roots, while narrators with strong ties outside of the county would be more likely to incorporate novel/nonlocal sources of ideas. We found that interviewees that we classified as narrators were much more likely to have lived or worked outside of their county than non-narrators. Of the four narrators that engaged in nonlocal sourcing of ideas, three of them had lived outside of the county for a substantial amount of time. Likewise, the two non-narrators who nevertheless used nonlocal sourcing had spent significant time outside of the county.

Propositions 2a and 2b: Narrators' choices about narrative breach

Our second set of propositions addresses what the NPF calls narrative breach: The degree to which a narrative incorporates a marked, obvious break from the past. Narratives with more breach, according to theory, will be more persuasive; as a result, we expected to see policy narrators making use of breach in their narratives about both energy and COVID-19 crises (P2a). This was partially supported: roughly half of the narrators expressed a material level of breach, which we classified as highlighting that the events of 2020 were a clear break with expectations. Given the variation that we found in levels of breach, it seems that rather than always selecting narratives with high breach, policy narrators strategically choose levels of breach in the stories that they tell.

Our second proposition in this section (P2b) was that this variation would be associated with the level of action that policy narrators wanted to convince their audiences to take. In this oil-producing region of Texas, this was most evident regarding oil: When asked, most narrators emphasized that they were used to the boom-and-bust cycle of the oil and gas industry and accordingly did not propose or consider a policy response to the oil bust (6/8). The presentation of the bust as an inescapable force precludes any call to action from policy narrators to their audience, and, perhaps more importantly, any demand for a response from citizens to their policymakers.

By contrast, many of the narrators who emphasized the departure from status quo of either of the crises also put forth policy proposals. This was clearest in Sabine County, which enacted the most extensive set of policy responses. In addition to business grants and PPE production, one city in the county cut all utilities bills in half, and the county quickly reassessed tax rates to address a pending budget shortfall caused by oil rates coming to a "screaming halt." There was one exception to this low-breach, low-action connection. In De Soto County, two of three narrators used low-breach language ("As you drive around town you wonder if there really is something out there that has changed… Some of our restaurants probably did better during Covid") but put forward interesting and novel programs in response to the pandemic, including a work-safe grant program.

One way to account for this difference in De Soto is the repeated reference among interviewees there (and to a lesser extent in other counties) of long-term economic diversification away from oil and gas, primarily through solar and wind energy. On paper De Soto's economy is not more diverse, or its concentration of oil and gas any lower, than other counties in the Atchafalaya Shale—in fact, just the opposite. This narrative about a long-term transition allowed narrators to maintain a low-breach narrative around the crises of 2020. They were focused instead, according to this narrative, on long-scale problems, and long-term solutions. As the Bossier County Judge put it, "I keep saying that I want oil to be icing on the cake, but not the whole cake."

Propositions 3a-3d: Narrators' selection of characters

The choice of villains, heroes, and victims is a core component of NPF. Less well understood is how those characters are cast in their roles. Our third set of propositions examine the choices that narrators make about characters, including the question of where narrators place themselves within their narrative. On this front, given that policy narrators aim to persuade audience members of their narrative, we expected to see policy narrators strategically placing themselves as active participants in the policy narrative, either as part of the victim group or as a hero, rather than as disinterested third-party narrators (P3a).

This proposition was partially supported, with 5/8 narrators placing themselves as either heroes or the local government they belonged to as victims. Contrary to our expectations, but perhaps in line with more traditional understandings of politicians' tendency toward self-promotion, five of eight policy narrators centered themselves squarely as heroes, either as the "voice of reason" steadying the community against the unknown of COVID-19 or fighting against state government with a history of taking actions that made running the county more difficult. Only four/eight narrators put the audience in the hero's role, and of those only two presented themselves as a hero, so we consider P3c as only "partially supported." What we did find, however, is that policy narrators consistently placed themselves in whatever role they placed the community, their policy audience. Where they presented their community as heroes or victims, or neither, they overwhelmingly (7/8) tended to frame themselves that way, as well.

Another common narrative practice was placing community members as the heroes of the story. Four out of eight narrators did so, sharing stories of resilience and of how community members tended to look after one another by opening soup kitchens, taking care of others' children, and looking after the elderly. As one narrator put it, "One of the things you said about the public not relying on the local government to bail them out or anything like that. I really think that our citizens have a mindset that they expect us to do everything we can to get out of the way." These results speak to our second proposition (P3b) that policy narrators would reserve the role of hero for their audience—the community they were working to persuade to act (or not). On balance, this proposition was supported, but not for the reasons we expected. These policy narrators seemed to place the independent, resilient community as the heroes of the story not to encourage them to act or to accept a policy change, but rather to underscore that no policy was needed. Citizens convinced that they are the heroes of the story are unlikely to expect or demand policy action.

Our last character selection proposition was about who policy narrators would choose as villains. In line with our expectations (P3d), four narrators chose to use state or federal government as villains in their policy narrative. Some of the frustrations voiced were in response to the state's approach to COVID-19. But, the state government had a history of being cast as villain in this region, with a reputation for

unfunded mandates, a recent tax-rewrite preventing local governments from raising taxes beyond a certain level without a referendum, and not fixing local roads: "Well, we can take it very personal too," one narrator told us. "[We fuel the] state economy, national economy, arguably for a while the world economy. And we can't get the funds back here to repair the roads they've torn up to collect that oil."

These rural policy narrators were happy to speak negatively about the state government, even though all but one of them were of the same political party as state leaders. They were much less likely to speak of any other local actor negatively, including the oil and gas industry. When oil and gas was placed in the villain role—only twice among all interviewees and not once by those identified as narrators—the villains were foreign governments involved in price wars, not local oil and gas companies. One narrator even claimed that COVID-19 was the cause of the oil and gas price bust, avoiding placing any blame on the oil and gas industry.

There were three exceptions to the rule of policy narrators casting nonlocal actors as villains. First, there was one narrator that discussed—and then carefully hedged—her smaller town's having to fight to get resources from the larger county seat. Second, two narrators engaged in the time-worn tactic of blaming current issues on previous administrations, though not in specific reference to COVID-19 nor the oil price crisis. Third, a handful of narrators in De Soto and Sabine County avoided speaking negatively of *any* actor, or in any terms that could be construed as blaming language. These narrators were also most active in proposing policy ideas and reacting quickly to the crises.

Propositions 4a and 4b: Narrators' use of congruence to gain trust

Successful policy narrators depend on their audience's trust, and one path to trust is for a narrator to convince an audience of shared values and beliefs. As such, we expected to find that policy narrators would have similar worldviews to those of their communities (P4a). Despite their being in overwhelmingly Republican-voting counties,[3] we found that policy narrators were only sometimes politically congruent with their constituencies and that narrators' political worldview scores did not regularly match the voting patterns of their counties. In fact, the average worldview score among policy narrators was 2.13, only slightly right of center, with respondents spread out across the political spectrum. In our follow-up question, narrators self-identified as moderate as often as they did conservative.

Given the evidence of a lack of political congruence, we explore whether those who were incongruent emphasized their congruence in other aspects (P4b). We found evidence that the four "incongruent" narrators stressed their congruence with their communities in other areas, as proposed: either in political party affiliation, biographical local ties, involvement in the community, or familial ties to the community.

DISCUSSION

Narrative Policy Framework research contains many hypotheses about the behavior of policy actors and empirical research testing those hypotheses. Curiously, however, NPF scholars have not yet pulled those hypotheses into an overarching theory of the policy actor we might reasonably expect to be at the center of the Narrative Policy Framework, the *policy narrator*. In this paper, we put together a three-part test of whether an actor counts as a policy narrator. First, do they identify themselves as policy actors? Second, do they compose and tell stories? And third, do those stories present a policy problem and policy solution, that is, are they policy narratives? We then develop a set of propositions, based on NPF hypotheses, about how policy narrators might behave, testing to see if policy narrators act in the way those NPF hypotheses might predict.

Our most straightforward contribution is to build on existing work on the strategic role of narrative in the policy-making process. First, our findings align with past research that has suggested that actors select narratives strategically (Kirkpatrick & Stoutenborough, 2018b). Second, our findings suggest that the use of villains and heroes may be informed by the context of the narrative, or by characteristics of the narrator, adding a contextual element to scholarship around the effectiveness of the "devil-angel" shift, which has had mixed evidence in NPF literature. Third, previous research on congruence between narrators

and audience members suggested that higher levels of congruence were more persuasive. We found that narrators were not always in congruence with their audiences—but where they were not, they emphasized their local ties or community involvement, likely as other manners of demonstrating congruence.

NPF literature, informed by narratology literature, has also posited that a mixture of breach and canonicity lead to higher levels of narrativity and persuasiveness (Herman, 2004; Jones & McBeth, 2010). As such, we expected to see our policy narrators incorporate significant levels of breach to increase persuasiveness. While many did, it was not universal. Our findings suggest that when policy narrators prefer and promote small government, low levels of breach may be coherent with a narrative moral (policy outcome) of nonaction. Future research could further explore when policy narrators strategically use low levels of breach.

Narratology literature also informed our expectations on where a policy narrator may situate themselves within the policy narrative, as it can influence an audience's interpretation and evaluation of a narrative. Narratology literature suggests that audiences may find narrators unreliable if they are too absent, or if they are overly involved and thus biased (Rimmon-Kenan, 2003). While we found that narrators did take an active role in the narrative (*intragiegetic*) thereby avoiding unreliability via absence, some narrators placed themselves as main characters (*autodiegetic*), suggesting that absence may be more harmful to the policy narrative than biases caused by personal involvement. As we discussed previously, there may be some contextual or narrative-specific characteristics that influence when a policy narrator can take on a main character (in our cases hero) role. This is an area for future research to explore.

Individually, each of these findings contributes to the body of work on the strategic selection of narratives in the policy process. We believe our most important contribution, however, is to shine a light on a set of policy actors we believe usefully labeled *policy narrators*. Our results lead us to two conclusions: First, our three-question test for identifying policy narrators made it easy for us to label policy actors as policy narrators or not, an initial test of the coherence of the idea of the *policy narrator* label. Second, there was a high level of consistency in the behaviors of those policy narrators. Based on these findings, we propose a working definition of policy narrators:

> **Policy narrators** are policy actors who compose and tell a narrative of their context and current events that presents a policy problem and supports the adoption of their favored policy solutions. They strategically collect and assemble ideas and cultural elements into a coherent narrative designed to build their credibility, persuade a policy audience, and shape the policy agenda.

Centering the policy narrator in the narrative policy framework

In the next section, we address how the introduction of the policy narrator interfaces with prior work on other named policy actors (including stakeholders, marketers, entrepreneurs). But first, we present our third contribution: An updated model of the Narrative Policy Framework, one with the policy narrator at its center. In such a model, depicted in Figure 1, the formation of the policy narrative is a strategic set of decisions on the part of the policy narrator that takes into consideration the existing sociopolitical environment in which they operate, the characteristics of the audience they are attempting to persuade, and the narrators' own perceptions (which might prove incorrect) about their context and audience. Both the narrator and the audience's beliefs, policy preferences, trust, and knowledge are influenced by the history and behavior of both parties. From these, and given a window of opportunity, the policy narrator builds a policy narrative they hope will persuade an audience to update their beliefs and/or preferences and alter coalitions in hopes of enacting their preferred policy. If those narratives do not persuade, then the policy narrator will be forced to update their perceptions of their audience and environment, refashioning a policy narrative that can effectively persuade. If a policy narrative is persuasive, which we call "success" in the diagram, the narrative audience and policy coalitions will adopt the narrative and update their policy preferences and strategies accordingly. While this initial study explores individual policy narrators, coalition or group narrators may have similar but more complex interactions between group and individual perceptions.

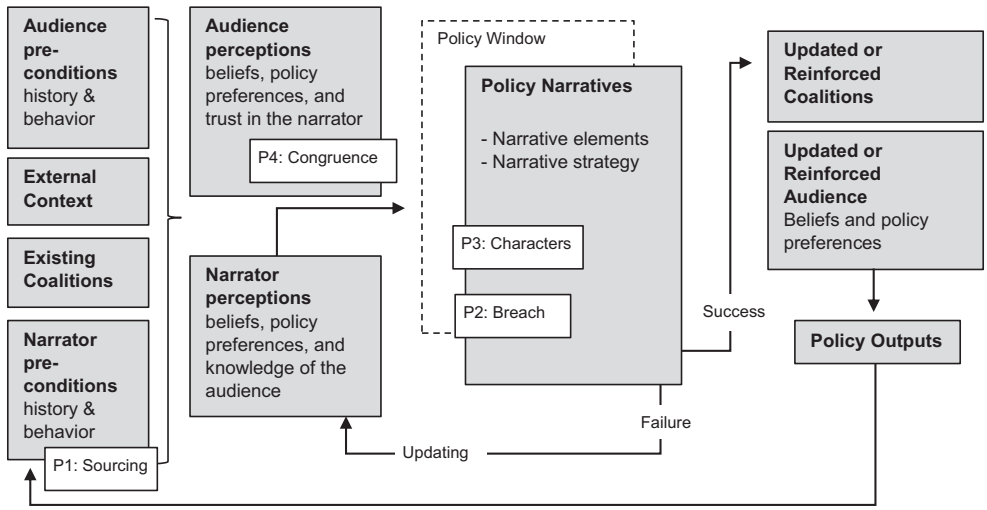

FIGURE 1 Modified model of the Policy Narrative Framework

Narrators, entrepreneurs, and marketers: Comparing policy actors

In 1984, political scientist John Kingdon wrote that when attempting to explain change in political systems, "social scientists are inclined to look at structural changes while journalists are inclined to emphasize the right person in the right place at the right time" (Kingdon & Stano, 1984). Both are right, he argued. Long focused on structure, policy scholars have begun to take agency seriously, examining the role of different types of policy actors in the policy process. The multiple streams framework (MSF) has two types of actors: Brokers that define problems, and entrepreneurs that couple the problem, policy, and political streams (Knaggård, 2015). In the policy stages framework, individuals set agendas, articulate problems, and identify solutions (Anderson, 1975). In the narrative policy framework (NPF), as we have seen, policy marketers and policy entrepreneurs are understood as building and selling narratives, defining the policy setting, characters, plot, and conflict (McBeth, Jones, & Shanahan, 2014). In the advocacy coalition framework (ACF), effective political actors, policy entrepreneurs among them, construct, maintain, and broker across subsystems (Mintrom & Vergari, 1996). In information processing theory (IPT), which incorporates punctuated equilibrium theory and agenda-setting, actors process information—usually poorly—but key actors might also be seen as driving information flow or processing information more effectively (B. Jones & Baumgartner, 2012). The institutional analysis and design framework (IAD) views actors primarily as making choices from received options, but successful actors might also architect others' choice environments (Polski & Ostrom, 1999).

Most recently, scholars have refocused their attention on the *policy entrepreneur* as a type of policy actor that might serve to bridge these multiple theories of the policy process (Petridou & Mintrom, 2021). In this frame, the policy narrators we describe here might be viewed as one subtype of policy entrepreneur, rather than as a different type of actor. But as those same authors point out, there is a "fuzziness" about the phrase policy entrepreneur that makes it difficult to use as a bridging term across public policy theories. This may be a result of having been stretched too far and too wide to be useful (Petridou et al., 2015).

We share the goal of building bridges among policy process theories which are too seldom forced into contest with one another. But, we suspect that describing more potential policy actors, rather than fewer, may get us there more effectively. To illustrate the point, Table 12 compares our conception of the policy narrator to existing conceptions of the policy entrepreneur, policy marketer, and stakeholder in the NPF. Each of these actors—marketers, entrepreneurs, narrators, and stakeholders—might serve distinct roles in the policy process. And in fact, the roles ascribed to policy entrepreneurs are so diverse that they might also more helpfully be broken up into policy actor types described in other policy process theories,

such as brokers, leaders, or activists. In this way, conceptualizing a range of policy actors, each serving distinct roles within each framework, might serve policy process scholarship better than a single concept understood differently by scholars of different frameworks.

Limitations and future work

We hope for this initial work to be a first step toward a more precise, helpful identification of policy actors in the Narrative Policy Framework and, by extension, in public policy theories. But, this work is just that—a first step. We hope that its limitations inspire other policy scholars to contest our definition, the three-part test we used to identify policy narrators, and the propositions we tested.

The primary limitation of this work is that the peculiarities of the "Atchafalaya Basin" where we conducted our research limits the degree to which we can claim that the specific propositions tested here will apply in other geographies or at other levels of government. We would point to at least four important barriers to generalization from this work. The first is the reason we chose to study these counties: they are understudied because they are rural. We suspect that a rural setting brings with it what narrators themselves reported: a built-in sense of shared identity, a knowledge that what one does and says becomes widely known and not easily forgotten; and dense social networks with multiple kinds of overlapping ties among actors. We think this is most relevant to our propositions on narrative sourcing; urban policy narrators may feel less pressure to use local cultural stock and have greater access to others' nonlocal knowledge. The second peculiarity of this region is that while rural, it is also relatively wealthy, thanks to oil and gas production. Many rural and urban areas in the United States are experiencing decline, rather than growth, as is the case in this region. Third, narrators in rural areas, and perhaps in rural Texas specifically, may be less likely to adopt their party's national narratives than their urban counterparts.

Lastly, we intentionally studied these counties during a period of crisis, to watch in real time how narratives formed in response to that crisis. In doing so, we build on the work of Mintrom and O'Connor, who identified three common characteristics of policy narratives associated with effective responses to the pandemic: a consistent, overarching message; acceptability in local contexts; and an alignment between the narrative and enacted policies (Mintrom & O'Connor, 2020).

In this paper, we apply generalized propositions about policy narrators to acute moments of crisis. It is possible that policymakers behave in a meaningfully different way during crisis—or in this instance, during multiple concurrent crises—than in times of relative stability. For example, we suspect that during more stable periods, policy narrators are more limited in the level of breach they can credibly incorporate into their policy narratives. Similarly, prior work has suggested that stability allows room for potential audiences to engage in their own narrating, generating resistance to narratives of change, as demonstrated by Kirkpatrick and Stoutenborough (2018a). The third major difference we believe distinguishes policy narrating during moments of crisis from moments of stability is *speed*. During more stable times, policy narrators have the luxury of more carefully testing the acceptability of narratives with a particular audience. During a crisis, the space for this kind of iteration shrinks dramatically.

We argue that these are differences in degree, rather than in kind. Future work might explore the relative salience of these behaviors during times of stability, single crisis, and multiple crisis. But, we expect that our core findings, built from NPF theory designed to generalize across policy contexts—will hold during periods of stability, too.

The qualitative nature of this work also prevented us from asking further questions about the relationship between policy narrators' strategy and the context in which they were narrating. We suspect that, given the variation in character selection, there may be some narrator or county-specific factors that influence character choices. For example: when we grouped our narrators according to the heroes and villains that they chose, then compared those groups across a range of county-level variables, we found that when narrators placed their community in the role of the victim, they were more likely to be in counties with high unemployment, lower rates of health insurance, and lower access to broadband. Meanwhile, when the community or businesses were placed in the hero role, counties tended to have higher rates of insurance and lower rates of unemployment. In the few instances where narrators viewed (their own) local government as the villain,

TABLE 12 Conceptions of policy actors within the NPF.

Actor	Source	Position	Context	Actions	Goals
Policy broker	Ingold (2011)	Often public agencies, experts, and industry groups	Policy subsystems, or spaces between subsystems	Negotiate agreements between coalitions	Reach a "reasonable" solution
Policy marketer	McBeth and Shanahan (2004)	Interest groups, the media, and elected officials; not citizens.	Postindustrial contexts	Construct public problems; define relevant policy beliefs; reduce complex and interrelated societal problems into simple policy marketing packages; market public opinion to consumer-oriented citizens	Define issues and construct self-images of citizens; perpetuate intractable marketing packages
Policy Marketer	Petridou and Mintrom (2021)	A wide variety of roles	–	Expand or contain the scope of conflict Ascribe causal mechanisms to assign responsibility or blame Deploy the devil–angel shift	Influence the policy process
Policy entrepreneur	Kirkpatrick and Stoutenborough (2018b)	Stakeholders	Policy subsystem	Strategically select and switch policy narratives	Persuade the public, influence stakeholders, and impact the success of policy initiatives
Policy entrepreneur	Petridou and Mintrom (2021)	In or out of the government, in elected or appointed positions, in interest groups or research organizations	Various stages of the policy-making process, policy sectors, systems/levels of government, or contexts	Transform policy ideas into policy innovations; frame problems; built teams; networking; lead by example; explore ways to scale up change processes; assemble new evidence; make novel arguments; author the narrative; engage in 20+ other strategies	Future return; propel political and policy changes; disrupt status quo policy arrangements and political alignments

TABLE 12 (Continued)

Actor	Source	Position	Context	Actions	Goals
Stakeholder	McBeth et al. (2016)	Individuals with influence and interest; ideally representative of a larger swath of the public; generally situational experts	Policy subsystem	Consult to decision makers; communicate in ways that draw support to their interpretation of an issue; craft and switch messages to evoke narrative templates that are culturally congenial to target audiences	Influence the policy outcome
Stakeholder	Crow and Berggren (2014)	–	–	Use villains, assign blame, and in general use more narrative components than "policy losers"	Become "policy winners"
Policy narrator	*This study*	A recognized policy actor or set of interacting actors in a policy system or subsystem; can be in or out of government	A policy system or subsystem	Assembling, testing, and recruiting support for policy narratives	Build credibility; persuade an audience; shape the agenda; achieve a policy goal

those counties suffered from high unemployment, low broadband access, and lower health insurance. The interviewees that employed this character selection were typically less "local" themselves, having moved to the county rather than having deep family ties there. These patterns are broadly in line with both NPF and cultural entrepreneurship literature, in which narrators' environments both enable and constrain the choices they make about what elements to include in their policy narratives, including the characters they select.

Future work is also needed to further delimit the types of agents at play in the NPF understanding of the policy process. In this paper, we have identified some behaviors that we believe policy narrators regularly engage in; however, we studied (a) individual actors mostly in (b) positions of official authority. But, the shaping of public policy is not restricted to public officials, and it is often coalitions of people, rather than individuals, that shape policy narratives and in turn the policy agenda. Future exploration of policy narrators may also explore coalitions as a narrating body, and how coalition narrators differ from individual narrators. It could be, for example, that distinct sets of actors play the part of idea gathering, narrative assembling and testing, and coalition building—and all that before negotiating, codifying into policy, and managing a policy through the legislative process and implementation. In our view, the policy narrator serves primarily in those first few roles. But, in smaller political systems with fewer actors, the individuals serving as policy narrators may also find themselves responsible for all the other roles, as well, or they may fill those roles as a group, as one policy narrator described to us in detail:

> "I formed a committee that consisted of the county, the school, the hospital… and the city… And we brought the sheriff in and the city manager and we brought in our… health authority here in [the county] and it helped us make decisions. You know the guidance from the health authority and what the governor is tell us and we all came together and worked as

> one…. in my mind I've got a picture set of all these leaders and we're actually working on a document together. And it was our declaration, and it was just amazing to me to sit back and think wow, I'm a part of this and that's the blessing. But we came together."

The policy narrator, then, is not a fixed and identifiable role within a policy context (such as a legislative parliamentarian, or a county clerk) but a collection of behaviors some policy actors engage in, and that others do not. We suspect that this pragmatic shift might hold the key to dissolving what William James, Charles Peirce, and other pragmatists might the "irresoluble dilemma" of clearly demarcating among policy leaders, policy activists, policy brokers, policy marketers, policy stakeholders, policy audiences, and other policy actors (Peirce & Hetzel, 1878; Seigfried, 1978). If we shift our attention from labels (what seems to be) to what happens (the actions policy actors take), we believe we may be more effective in clarifying the role of individual agents within the policy process.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest, and there are no materials reproduced from other sources in the document.

ETHICS STATEMENT

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ENDNOTES

[1] We coded narrative breach when narrators framed the oil and gas and/or COVID-19 pandemic as events that were very different from events that their community had previously experienced, and thus departures from the status quo in their community. Phrases like "unprecedented;" "out of left field;" "something we have never experienced before;" and "uncharted territory" we coded as "breach."

[2] The Railroad Commission of Texas used to regulate railroads but lost its last regulatory authority over railroads in 2005. Act of May 30, 2005, 79th Leg., R.S., ch. 282, 2005 Tex. Gen. Laws 778, 778–840. Instead, the Commission is Texas's regulator for oil and gas wells and common-carrier pipelines. See Tex. Nat. Res. Code § 81.051. There have been multiple attempts, including by the technocrats at the Texas Sunset Commission, to update its name to reflect its current purpose. For more, see https://www.chron.com/business/energy/article/Permian-oil-companies-donate-16-5M-for-new-14097381.php.

[3] "Republican-voting" is an imperfect, though increasingly correlated, proxy for conservatism: 75% of Republicans and 12% of Democrats described themselves as conservative in 2020, according to a 2021 Pew study available here: https://news.gallup.com/poll/328367/americans-political-ideology-held-steady-2020.aspx.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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APPENDIX A: CLASSIFYING NARRATORS

County pseudonym	Interviewee No.	View themselves as policy actor	Incorporate narrative component	Policy proposal that maps to narrative	Narrator?
De Soto	1	✓	✓	✓	Yes
De Soto	2	✓	✓	✓	Yes
De Soto	3	✓	✓	✓	Yes
De Soto	4	✓	✓	–	No
Sabine	5	✓	✓	✓	Yes
Sabine	6	✓	✓	✓	Yes
Sabine	7	✓	✓	✓	Yes
Sabine	8	–	–	–	No
Sabine	9	✓	-	-	No
Sabine	10	–	✓	–	No
Natchitoches	11	–	–	–	No
Natchitoches	12	✓	✓	–	No
Red River	13	✓	✓	✓	Yes
Red River	14	–	✓	–	No
Vernon	15	✓	✓	–	No
Vernon	16	✓	✓	–	No
Bossier	17	–	✓	–	No
Bossier	18	✓	✓	–	No
Bossier	19	–	–	–	No
Caddo	20	✓	✓	✓	Yes
Caddo	21	✓	✓	–	No

APPENDIX B: BEHAVIOR ACROSS ALL PROPOSITIONS BY NARRATORS AND NON-NARRATORS

			Narrative sourcing		Narrative breach		Character selection				Worldview congruence	
County pseudonym	**No.**	**Narrator**	**$P1_a$**	**$P1_b$**	**$P2_a$**	**$P2_b$**	**$P3_a$**	**$P3_b$**	**$P3_c$**	**$P3_d$**	**$P4_a$**	**$P4_b$**
De Soto 1	1	Yes	✓✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓✓
De Soto 2	2	Yes	✓✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓
De Soto 3	3	Yes	✓	✓	✓✓	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–
De Soto 4	4	No	✓✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	–	✓	✓	
Sabine 1	5	Yes	✓	✓	✓✓	–	✓✓	✗	–	✓	✓	–
Sabine 2	6	Yes	✓	✗	✓✓	–	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	–
Sabine 3	7	Yes	✓✓	✗	✓✓	–	✗	✗	–	✓	✗	✓
Sabine 4	8	No	✓	✗	✓✓	–	✓	✗	–	✗	✗	✓✓
Sabine 5	9	No	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	–	✓	✗	✗
Sabine 6	10	No	✓	✓	✓✓	–	✗	✗	–	✓	✓	–
Natchitoches 1	11	No	✗	✓	✓	–	✗	✗	–	✓	✗	✓✓
Natchitoches 2	12	No	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	–
Red River 1	13	Yes	✓✓	✓	✗	✓	✓✓	✗	–	✗	✓	–
Red River 2	14	No	✗	✗	✓✓	–	✗	✗	–	✗	✓	–
Vernon 1	15	No	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓✓
Vernon 2	16	No	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	–	✓	✗	✗
Bossier 1	17	No	✓	✓	✓✓	–	✗	✗	–	✗	✗✗	✗
Bossier 2	18	No	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–
Bossier 3	19	No	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓✓
Caddo 1	20	Yes	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓✓	✗	–	✓	✗	✓✓
Caddo 2	21	No	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–

Note: In column $P1_a$, ✓ = sourced locally and ✓✓ = sourced locally and externally. In $P3_a$, ✓ = victim or hero; ✓✓ = both. In P4b, ✓ = moderate and ✓✓ = high.