

# 8

## THE ART OF ARGUMENTS

Let's see how it all fits together: The moral worldviews, visions, values, principles, frames, and language all come together in political arguments. As we look at arguments, we find certain characteristics common to all effective and successful arguments:

- They have moral premises, that is, they are about what is right.
- They use versions of contested values taken from a particular moral worldview.
- They have an implicit or explicit narrative structure, i.e., they all tell stories with heroes, villains, victims, common themes, etc.
- They also serve as counterarguments: They undermine arguments on the other side.
- They have issue-defining frames that set up the problem and the solution.
- They use commonplace frames—frames known so widely that they resonate immediately, whether true or not.
- They use language with surface frames that evoke deeper frames.

None of this should be surprising. Rhetoricians have long been aware of such details. But it is important that you know how all this works so you can use the knowledge.

### OBAMA ON THE ESTATE TAX

For a close look at a successful argument, let's review statements by Senator Barack Obama of Illinois on the proposed repeal of the estate tax, posted on his Web site on June 7, 2006.<sup>1</sup>

First of all, let's call this trillion-dollar giveaway what it is—the Paris Hilton Tax Break. It's about giving billions of dollars to billionaire heirs and heiresses at a time when American taxpayers just can't afford it. . . .

I'm eager for the American people to choose. Because if people want their government to spend one trillion dollars—an amount more than double what we've spent on Iraq, Afghanistan, and the War on Terror combined—on tax breaks for multimillionaires and multibillionaires, then the Republican Party is your party.

If the American people want to borrow billions more from the Chinese, spend billions more in taxes to pay the interest on our debt, and watch billions cut from health care and education and Gulf Coast Reconstruction, then the Paris Hilton Tax Break is your tax break.

This isn't about saving small businesses and family farms. We can reform the estate tax to protect these Americans. We can set it at a level where no small business or family farm is ever affected—and we can do it in a way that doesn't cost us a trillion dollars. In fact, we've offered to reform the estate tax in this way time and time again. . . .

I would ask the American people one question. At a time like this—a time where America finds itself deeply in debt, struggling to pay for a war in Iraq, a war in Afghanistan, security for our homeland, armor for our troops, health care for our workers, and education for our children—at a time of all this need, can you imagine opening Forbes magazine, looking at their list of the 400 wealthiest Americans, and realizing that our government gave the people on that list over a trillion dollars' worth of tax breaks?

I know I can't imagine that. And I would bet that most Americans can't imagine that either. So if the Republicans want to bring up their Paris Hilton Tax Break to use it as an election issue later, I say go for it. Because I can think of no better statement about where and how we differ in priorities than that.

There is a lot going on in those remarks that is worth looking at closely. What makes this a good progressive argument is its moral vision and political principles. First, there is empathy, a concern for the nation, for the safety of our soldiers, for the health of our workers, and for the education of our children. Second, there is the understanding of taxation in terms of the principle of using the common wealth for the common good—a health-care system for all and an educational system in need of funding.

Obama also invokes the commonplace knowledge about money, using the economic equivalence frame: Two economic actions with the same initial state and the same result are equivalent. Obama uses two instances of this.

1. Not to collect the estimated trillion dollars under the present estate tax is the equivalent of giving a trillion dollars of taxpayers' money to wealthy heirs and heiresses.
2. Not spending a trillion dollars of taxpayers' money where it is desperately needed by U.S. citizens is the equivalent of taking a trillion dollars from those citizens in desperate need.

Putting 1 and 2 together, we get 3 as a consequence.

3. Either spend a trillion dollars of taxpayers' money on the desperate needs of U.S. citizens or give those trillion dollars to wealthy heirs and heiresses.

His argument sets up an issue-defining frame: What is the estate tax?

American millionaires and billionaires will pay half of their accumulated millions and billions—and only after they are dead! The other half of the millions and billions will go to their heirs—the Paris Hiltons of the country—who did not earn it.

Question: What should we, the taxpayers, do with the trillion dollars owed to us? Should we put it into a health and educational infrastructure to benefit millions of the most needy and hardworking of our citizens? Or should we turn our backs on them and just give it away to the heirs who want all, not just half, of the millions and billions they didn't earn?

That is the issue; the answer is built in to the question.

If you have empathy, a commitment to the common good, and a sense of fairness, the answer is clear: As the fairness principle dictates, you should get what you deserve. Hardworking, needy people deserve the schools and hospitals those dollars can provide more than the heirs who didn't earn the money and who will get half of it anyway.

Obama's statements also use a narrative structure, complete with heroes and villains: Ending the estate tax is a threat to the most vulnerable people—taking away money for what they desperately need. They are the victims. The villains are those who would take it from them—conservative legislators and some of the nation's wealthiest families, who have spent tens of millions to lobby for the repeal of this tax. The hero, the rescuer, is you, the voter, who can change the course of the nation. Persuade your legislators to vote for what is moral, and turn them out of office if they refuse to do the right thing.

The inferences are the point of the speech, and he lays them out explicitly: Keeping the estate tax allows us to use our trillion dollars where it is most needed—on our health and education infrastructure and on protecting our troops—instead of giving it away to people who neither need it nor deserve it.

You—citizen, taxpayer, voter—can rescue tens of millions of worthy and needy people from the clutches of villainous conservatives who want to transfer a trillion dollars from the common wealth of hardworking Americans to wealthy individual heirs and heiresses who didn't earn it and don't need it.

Finally, Obama's remarks are carefully constructed to undermine the arguments of conservatives, who frame the social programs funded by taxation as government handouts to the undeserving. Obama flips the taxes-as-handouts frame on its head, to yield a frame in which tax breaks are handouts to the rich, and the estate tax is a transfer of wealth from ordinary taxpayers to wealthy individuals—a frame that tells a vital truth.

It is worth noting that this argument is not a perfect progressive argument. The "common good principle" has two parts, and this argument hits the first. Implicitly invoking the fact that the common wealth can serve the common good only when wealth is in the hands of the commons (and not the individual) is important. However, so is the notion that the opportunities afforded by the common wealth are what allow the accumulation of personal wealth. As such, everyone has a responsibility to repay the common wealth proportional to the benefits he or she derived from it. This part of the common good principle is missing from Obama's argument.

Nevertheless, Obama's remarks have the basic elements of a political argument that can be applied to all sorts of progress-ive issues besides the estate tax: the graduated income tax; the auctioning of the airwaves; the giving away or cheap sale of timber,

mineral, and grazing rights on public lands; the privatization of public lands; and private property rights vs. the environment.

The main concern of the frame is that money be kept in the common wealth (or the hands of the government) in order to be used for the common good.

#### HOW ARGUMENT FRAMES WORK

Let's take a step back and look at the general argument frame, which, in addition to the values and structure elements detailed above, shapes the progressive stance on the estate tax. Remember, frames are not simply about words. Frames are the mental structures by which we understand and interact with the world. In fact, frames can be constructed using other frames (as argument frames are). The general argument frame includes moral values, fundamental principles, issue-defining frames, commonplace frames, surface frames, and inferences. Argument frames apply to many issues. Depending on the issue-defining frame that's "plugged in," you can use the same argument frame across many issue areas.

For instance, let's look at the common wealth for the common good frame:

Moral values: Empathy and responsibility. We care about people and have a responsibility to act on that care.

Fundamental principles: (a) The common good—individual goals depend upon the use of the common wealth for the common good. (b) Fairness—it is unfair to take economic resources from the commons and transfer them to wealthy individuals who don't need them.

Issue-defining frame: The estate tax (other issues, as mentioned above, can fit here).

Commonplace frame: The economic equivalence frame. Not taking in money owed is economically equivalent to giving it away. Not giving money to those owed is economically equivalent to taking it away.

Inference: To protect the common good, we must maintain the common wealth.

Functioning as a progressive or conservative means having a stock of general argument frames that are used not just on one issue but on many issues. That is why someone attuned to politics can immediately understand or construct a "new" argument as soon as a new issue arises. The "new" argument is not really new at all. It is an instance of a general argument frame with a new issue-defining frame plugged in, and sometimes a new commonplace frame or surface frame. But the overall structure and content of the argument remain the same. We'll get to more of these argument frames in a moment, but first a bit needs to be said about the components of an argument frame.

Commonplace frames are used to understand how the world works. Some are relatively accurate. Some are grossly inaccurate. But, accurate or inaccurate, they are used in political arguments. It is important to recognize them for three reasons: so you're not taken in by the false ones, so you can recognize and counter them, and so you can factor them out to see the more general argument frame. They can be very general, that is, applying across many issue areas, or they can be relatively specific, having bearing on only one or several issues.

Commonplace frames are not a matter of moral values, or fundamental principles, or issue-defining frames, or even surface frames. They are taken as a matter of common knowledge or common sense. They can sometimes be picked out and discussed consciously, and ridiculed and undermined when they are false or ridiculous.

Let's look at some commonplace frames that are often used in political arguments.

**Bad apple frame.** Consider the saying "A bad apple spoils the barrel." The implication is that if you remove the bad apple or some small number of bad apples, the others will be fine. The rot is localized and will not spread. Rot here is a metaphor for immorality. In a case where there is immoral behavior, it points blame at one person or a few people—and not to any broader systemic immorality, an immoral policy, or an immoral culture.

This commonplace frame has been used to limit the inquiry into torture as a systemic problem in the military (as in the Abu Ghraib scandal), so the problem is contained. The army just got rid of the "bad apples"—the lowest-ranking military personnel involved. The same was true of Enron Corporation, where a few executives (Jeffrey Skilling and Kenneth Lay) were identified as bad apples, rather than the entire culture of Enron, where top-level and even midlevel employees commonly schemed to rip off the public by taking advantage of the deregulation of utilities with illegal actions like those code-named "Death Star" and "Get Shorty."

**Tradition is right frame.** This frame says that if some idea or institution has "passed the test of time," then it is right. This is used in arguments against allowing gays and lesbians to marry, where it is argued that marriage has traditionally been between a man and a woman, and therefore that is the right position to take on the question. A related argument is the commonplace Voters are Right frame, used against gay marriage on the grounds that, since legislatures in many states have passed laws to this effect, it is right.

**Teenage minimum wage frame.** This frame is quite specific and claims that most people working at the minimum wage are teenagers in their first jobs (say, as grocery store baggers) who are supported by their parents. This is then used to argue against raising the minimum wage, which would kill off entry-level jobs since wages will be too high. Both are false, but the commonplace frame is widely accepted.

**Adaptation frame.** This frame occurs quite often. It says that if some phenomenon is natural or pervasive, you can't overcome it and may as well accept it and adapt as well as possible. Liberals use it to argue for legalizing marijuana: People are naturally going to smoke pot, just like they're going to drink alcohol, and you may as well legalize it. Liberals also use it in supporting sex education: People are going to have sex anyway, so the best thing to do is to educate them on safe practices and birth control methods. Safe abortion advocates also use the adaptation frame: Many women with unwanted pregnancies always have, and will, get abortions, so it's best to make abortion safe and legal. Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York has argued that immigrants are going to go where they can find work, so border walls won't keep them from entering the country.

**Slippery slope frame.** There is a point on a scale where everything appears to be fine. But there is also some force or tendency operating so that moving a short distance farther on the scale will lead to more and more movement in the same direction until either a disaster happens or something ludicrous results. This is used in *reductio ad absurdum* arguments against apparently small changes in a given direction.

For example, conservatives have been known to argue that if the minimum wage is to be raised from \$5.15 to \$7 an hour, why not \$10 an hour or \$100 an hour? Anti-gay marriage conservatives argue that if gays and lesbians are allowed to marry, the next thing will be people wanting to marry dogs. Asked about President Bush's veto of the stem cell research bill, Tony Snow, the White House press secretary, replied that the president didn't want to move along the slippery slope to permitting the killing of living human beings.

Prototype frames. Among the most important of the commonplace frames are the prototype frames, where you reason about a category on the basis of some subcategory (real or imagined). The best known is the social stereotype. For instance, both conservatives and progressives use stereotypes of immigrants, though very different ones. One stereotype is that they are "illegals"—felons who don't speak English, are uneducated and uneducable, take jobs away from Americans, use up local funding for education and health, and who, as criminals, are not to be trusted. This is common in conservative arguments. Another stereotype, common in progressive arguments, is the "undocumented worker"—the honest, hardworking, good family man or woman, doing essential work that Americans don't want to do for low pay, making our lifestyles possible, and seeking to find the American dream, just like Americans.

Many categories have prototypes for typical cases (used for reasoning about the category in the absence of other knowledge), ideal cases (setting standards for evaluation), and nightmare cases (to be avoided at all costs). President Bush projects the typical American male stereotype—well meaning, sincere and straightforward, religious, friendly and folksy, not overly well educated, but strong, strict, and in charge when he has to be. Progressives tend to see him as the nightmare president: stupid, ignorant, and incompetent; mean, greedy, selfish, and corrupt; arrogant, authoritarian, and unwilling to listen; untrustworthy and underhanded. When the late senator Paul Wellstone of Minnesota was alive, most progressives saw him as the ideal senator: honest, principled, caring, smart, courageous, and strong.

Finally, there are the salient examples, the cases so much on people's minds that they change judgments of probability. Thus, 9/11 is repeated so often as an example of a terrorist attack that people in Omaha, Dayton, and St. Louis think they have a high probability of being attacked by terrorists. Reagan repeated the "welfare queen" example so often that this unusual, indeed unique, example was taken as typical.

In summary, argument frames have the same overall structure. First, there are the moral values and fundamental principles, which both derive from the overall worldview. Then there are the issue-defining and commonplace frames, which exist independent of the overall worldviews but are chosen to fit them. Then there are the surface frames that go with words and slogans. These are chosen to fit all the other frames. And finally, there are the inferences that follow from all these frames.

## AMERICAN STORIES

Everybody loves a good story. A good argument includes a story—with heroes and villains. They help transform a set of values, principles, beliefs, and statistics into

stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Isolated political issues have little appeal. As stories, they begin to connect with a deeper understanding of personal and national identity.

Our most basic roles in narratives are hero, villain, victim, and helper. And some of our basic narrative forms are self-defense (villain hurts hero-victim), rescue (hero, with helpers, fights and wins over villain), overcoming obstacles (hero as victim of circumstance who surmounts difficulties), and achieving potential (hero has special potential and, through discipline and fortitude, achieves it).

Author and former labor secretary Robert Reich identified what he calls the “four essential American stories.”<sup>2</sup> The first of these narratives, “The Triumphant Individual,” tells the story of the self-made man. With courage, responsibility, and determination, anybody can pull himself up by his own bootstraps. This is the overcoming-obstacles narrative. Next, “The Benevolent Society” portrays a collective we’re-all-in-this-together effort to better the community. Here society is either a collective hero or the helper to the hero. A more negative story, “The Mob at the Gates,” places America on the top of a moral hierarchy and advocates the urgency of defending the nation against the threats that other nations and peoples pose. Here America is the victim to be protected or rescued. Finally, “Rot at the Top” warns against the evils of powerful elites who abuse their power to the detriment of the common good. Here there is often a collective villain to be fought, though the villain may be a powerful leader.

These narratives, Reich argues, have been repeated so often throughout American history that they have become a part of our culture. Accordingly, employing these narratives helps fashion an argument that resonates with the American public.

These narratives don’t just compel the reader, they mold the arguments themselves. They require moral values and fundamental principles to identify heroes, villains, and victims. They require issue-defining frames to tell just what the offenses, rescues, and forms of justice are.

Consider a kicking-the-habit narrative. It is a self-defense narrative where addiction is the villain to be overcome. Metaphorically, it is characterized by an undesirable dependence on a detrimental substance (welfare, taxes, fossil fuels, etc.). It is powerful and can destroy the hero-victim. Shedding this dependence requires will and determination. But the fight is internal—the villain is threatening the hero-victim from within.

We acknowledge the power of the substance and sympathize with the addict kicking the habit. We understand that addicts need and deserve help to overcome the problem. Anyone who stands in the way impedes a moral process. Making the story more complex is another simple narrative on top of this. The distributors of the addictive substance are the villains, utterly immoral within this narrative. They are predatory and self-serving (drug dealers, government, oil companies), and their greed would destroy the hero-victim.

In short, narratives give arguments a trajectory that both compels an audience and guides their understanding of the issue itself. To identify the narrative of an argument, start by finding a victim and a villain. What’s at stake? Who will rescue the victim and how?



In political life there are ongoing narrative structures. The culture war narrative has liberals as the villains (an elite that represents “rot at the top”), ordinary conservatives as the victims, and conservative leaders as the heroes. The “war on terror” is a self-defense narrative, with “the terrorists” as villains. The Iraq war started as self-defense against the evil Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction. When the weapons were not found, it became a rescue narrative, with the Iraqi people as victims to be rescued from tyranny and provided with democracy.

When it comes to general argument frames used in politics, there are a few basic ones. We will look at two of them here: the “crime-and-punishment frame,” used mostly by conservatives, and the “safety-net frame,” used mostly by progressives.

#### THE CRIME-AND-PUNISHMENT FRAME

This frame follows the structure we discussed above and has those same basic elements:

Moral value: Strict father morality—offenses must be punished, or there will be no incentive to avoid future offenses; all order will break down.

Fundamental principle: Moral accounting—justice is retribution. Retribution for an offense should be in proportion to the offense. Justice is, therefore, the appropriately harsh punishment for the offender.

Issue-defining frame: This can be filled with different issues; it is also what allows this argument form to go across issues.

Commonplace frame: (a) Moral essence—extreme or repeat offenses show that the offender is inherently bad. (b) Deterrence—punishment must be harsh to deter future offenses by others.

Inferences: Leniency and mercy remove the incentive to avoid offenses, thus undermining moral values and the very idea of justice. Victims have a right to justice, that is, to harsh sentences for offenders.

Narrative roles: The villains are the offenders. The victims are both the crime victims and members of society in general. The heroes are those who enforce the law.

This frame is used to argue for a great many conservative policies, such as the death penalty, three-strikes laws, mandatory sentencing for drug crimes, treating illegal immigrants as felons, no automatic promotions in public schools, and so on. Let’s take a look at three examples (death penalty, three strikes, and standardized testing) of conservative arguments that are instances of this frame, and one example (tort law) of a liberal application of the frame.

Death penalty: Around the world and over millennia, cultures have recognized the basic tenet of a fair justice system: “an eye for an eye” (fundamental principle). If a criminal takes an innocent life, the only fair punishment is to take his or her life in return (moral value). Furthermore, anybody who commits the most serious of crimes—intentionally taking a life—has no chance of reform and no place in society (commonplace frame). If we don’t have the courage to uphold justice, we send a dangerous message of leniency to criminals everywhere (commonplace frame).



Three strikes: The logic is simple: If you commit a crime, you go to jail. Individuals need to be held accountable for their actions; sentences need to be proportionate to the crimes (fundamental principle). At a certain point, criminals demonstrate to the public that they can't be reformed (commonplace frame). They simply have no regard for the laws that structure a stable society (commonplace frame). At this point, society has a duty to say "enough is enough" (moral value). We must protect ourselves by removing repeat offenders: Three strikes and you're out.

Standardized testing: Schools are training grounds for adult life. They teach our sons and daughters the skills they need for the workplace and the work ethic that will ensure their success. The best and the brightest students should be rewarded for hard work, discipline, and scholastic achievement (moral value). Metaphorically, these students are moral people, obeying the law. Tests are both a measure of scholastic achievement and a predictor of future success. Teaching to the test is teaching for success. These tests also provide incentive for the lower-performing students to do better (commonplace frame). Those who repeatedly fail are "breaking the law" and should not be promoted or permitted to graduate—that's their penalty (fundamental principle). Allowing them to pass would undermine the educational system itself, which provides the competition and incentive needed to succeed.

Tort law violations: Interestingly, progressives have adopted the crime-and-punishment frame for tort law violations. Corporations that harm people can be brought to justice through lawsuits in the civil justice system. In such lawsuits, the corporation accused of doing harm—the villain—is the defendant, and the victim is the plaintiff. The trial lawyers are the detectives and prosecutors—the heroes in this story. The funds to support the detective work and prosecution come from the percentage of damages that are paid to the trial lawyers. Corporations can be found "guilty" and are "punished" by having to pay considerable damages.

Incidentally, conservatives are attempting to destroy this system via "tort reform," the capping of damages at levels so low that the attorneys could no longer afford to function as police and prosecutors and the whole system would break down. Their motivation is to make the market "free" from the loss of profit through lawsuits for harming or defrauding the public.

#### THE SAFETY-NET FRAME

This frame is almost never used by conservatives, while it is quite frequently used by progressives. It also follows the same structure as the crime-and-punishment frame.

Moral values: (a) Empathy and responsibility—we care about people and have a responsibility to act on that care. (b) Freedom—this is primarily freedom from want.

Fundamental principles: (a) Human dignity—there is a baseline of human well-being below which no one should fall in a wealthy, civilized country. (b) The common good—we're all in this together. We all bear responsibility for the nation as a whole.

Issue-defining frame: This can be filled with different issues, like universal health care and minimum wage.

Commonplace frame: The world's wealthiest nation can afford to uphold human dignity.

Inference: This issue (universal health care, minimum wage, etc.) should be handled by government, whose job it is to maximize our inherent freedoms, especially freedom from want. It can—and should—be handled by the government because there is sufficient wealth in the nation as a whole.

Narrative roles: The victims are people vulnerable to falling below the threshold of human dignity. The villains are those who would take away support for them and force indignity upon them. The heroes are citizens who stand up for humane values.

The safety-net frame can be applied to a host of issues, including welfare, corporate responsibility, immigration, Social Security, Medicare, housing for the homeless, the treatment of refugees, pre- and postnatal care, and so on.

If the issue is the status of children of impoverished mothers, the inference is that the government is responsible for seeing that they have enough to eat, a roof over their heads, clothing, immunization shots, and basic health care. Better still, the government should provide reasonable jobs, child care, and transportation so the mothers can earn those things.

Let's take a closer look at three major issues—universal health care, minimum wage, and Social Security—that are compelling cases for the safety-net frame.

Universal health care: Health is the foundation of a full, productive, meaningful life. Without good health, you cannot be what you want to be; you cannot enjoy life to the fullest or be a productive member of society (moral value). Our country was founded on the principle that all Americans have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (fundamental principle). Illness can interfere with all of them—it can bankrupt a family. Illness does not affect only the weak or the aged—illness touches everyone. No one can afford not to have adequate health care.

It is our job—as a free, civilized, and wealthy nation—to ensure that our citizens are free from want and needless suffering. A prosperous First World country can afford to guarantee all citizens the right to basic health care and preventive medicine (commonplace frame). Other First World countries do. Health care is not a privilege for those who can afford it (fundamental principle). Because our fundamental freedoms include freedom from want, health care is a basic right. And it is our responsibility as a nation to secure that right for all (moral value).

Minimum wage: “There is a tacit understanding in America—a promise that if you work hard, you should be able to provide for yourself and your family” (commonplace frame).<sup>3</sup> More than thirty million Americans are working hard but living in poverty because we aren't holding up our end of the bargain. In hard times, when the demand for jobs is high, employers can drive down wages below a livable standard. This may create more profits for them or lower consumer prices, but it violates the promise of our nation (fundamental principle). The money America has promised to its workers is going to others—employers and consumers (commonplace frame).

When you can't make a living through hard work, you can lose your home, your dignity, and your stake in society. Raising the minimum wage is a practical thing to do. In states where it has been done, employment has gone up because poor people put their money right back into the economy, creating jobs. But it is also the moral thing to do. It is our moral commitment to our fellow Americans to raise the minimum wage (moral

value). To fail to keep the promise of America is to lose the America that has always been a beacon of hope to the world, to lose the America that believes in fair play, and to lose the idea that America, as a wealthy civilized nation, still upholds our basic freedoms, including freedom from want.

Social Security: From deteriorating health to decreased independence, old age is scary. It's even scarier to think about it without necessary financial support (moral value). Our Social Security system guarantees that support; it ensures that the nation doesn't turn its back on hardworking Americans once they reach retirement age. Freedom from want is one of our most cherished freedoms. After a lifetime of dedicated work, it is the government's duty to guarantee that freedom to its elderly, to ensure that its citizens can retire with dignity and not be forced to live in poverty (fundamental principle).

Privatization jeopardizes the very security that Social Security is supposed to guarantee. Inevitably, millions of hardworking Americans who aren't expert investors or who simply have bad luck will wind up losing their lifetime of savings. Their loss will become Wall Street's gain. We must preserve a unified Social Security system and not have the government shirk its responsibility and leave the elderly to play the stock market lottery (commonplace frame).

These arguments all fit the general safety-net frame. But they each require other elements as well. The universal health-care argument uses commonplace knowledge about the effects of ill health. The minimum wage argument uses the knowledge that in states that have raised the minimum wage, jobs have increased; this undercuts the opposition frame, that raising the minimum wage eliminates jobs. The Social Security frame uses two commonplace frames, one about the ravages of old age and one that points out that most people are not expert investors and don't want to risk trying to be.

So we have seen that individual arguments have a general argument frame structure, that political arguments all have a moral basis, that political arguments have the narrative roles of moral stories with heroes and villains, and that the good arguments counter crucial points in the other side's arguments. It is now time to move from arguments to stories.

#### POLITICAL STORIES AS ARGUMENTS

Perhaps the most effective political arguments come not in the form of arguments but in the form of stories. We have seen that arguments have implicit story elements—heroes, victims, villains, crimes, rewards, punishments. The reverse is also true: Stories have implicit argument elements, the elements in an argument frame. Here is an example of a progressive story, summarized from the Goldman Foundation. The narrative elements in the story include victims, hero, crime, villain, victory, justice, and moral. The story is a self-defense narrative, since the hero is one of the victims. The hero is the “triumphant individual” and the villain represents “rot at the top.”

Margie Eugene-Richard [hero] grew up in a poor African-American neighborhood in Norco, Louisiana, located between a Shell Chemicals plant and a Motiva oil

refinery owned by a Shell subsidiary. The neighborhood was known as “Cancer Alley” because of the very high rates of cancer, birth defects, and other serious health ailments among its residents. [crime] Most residents could not afford to move out of the area. [victims]

Shell had been buying up property from area residents, many of whom were descendants of sharecroppers and slaves predating the Civil War. There had been some serious accidents at the plant resulting in worker deaths and the release of toxins into the air. [villain]

Richard founded Concerned Citizens of Norco in 1989 to seek justice from Shell in the form of fair resettlement costs for her family and neighbors. She collaborated with environmentalists and researchers to release a report that showed that the Shell refinery was releasing more than two million pounds of toxic chemicals into the air each year. She fought court battles and publicly criticized Shell. Her efforts finally led to an investigation by the EPA that faulted Shell for failing to ensure plant safety and for falsifying its emissions reporting. [victory: hero defeats villain]

In 2000, mostly due to Richard’s efforts, Shell agreed to reduce its emissions by 30 percent, give \$5 million for a community development fund, and pay full voluntary relocation costs for neighborhood residents. This was the first community relocation victory in the Deep South and an inspiration for activists battling environmental racism in their own areas. [justice: hero and victims rewarded; villain punished]

“Every time we as black Americans stand up for what is right, they say it’s for greed of money. It’s a fight for longevity,” Richard said. “Truth and justice for the betterment of life, the environment and government is the stairway to upward mobility.”<sup>4</sup> [moral]

We have seen stories of this form countless times. But this is not just a story; it is a political argument. First, it uses the general “community activism frame.” Second, it adds to that frame additional commonplace frames that turn it into an environmental justice argument frame.

Here is the argument frame, followed by the additional elements that apply community activism to environmental justice.

- Argument frame: Community activism.
- Moral values: Empathy (for victims) and responsibility (by hero).
- Principles: Common good and human dignity.
- Value: Justice.
- Issue-defining frame: Pick your favorite activist issue.
- Commonplace frames: (a) Criminals should be punished and victims compensated. (b) When community members stand up for themselves, they can win, even against powerful interests. (c) Community leaders who work for the common good and have to overcome severe difficulties to do it should be honored.
- Inferences: Those discriminated against should stand up for themselves. Corporations should not trample on the basic human dignity of citizens.

Corporations should work for the common good and be held accountable when they harm the public.

Environmental justice additions:

- Issue-defining frame: Corporate disregard for a poor minority community is racism. Pollution causes cancer (systemic causation).
- Inferences: Racism must be fought. Governmental oversight and regulation should be enforced, and corporations doing wrong should be punished and victims compensated.

In Margie Eugene-Richard's story, we unconsciously and automatically recognize the general narrative structure and the argument frame that we are so familiar with. That is what gives the story its power.

#### PHOTOS AS STORIES

Like stories, photos can have political content. In particular, they tell stories with political morals and make arguments with political inferences. Consider, for example, the official photograph of President Bush's veto of the stem cell bill (available on the White House Web site at [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/07/20060719-3.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/07/20060719-3.html)). He is surrounded by "snow-flake babies" and their families. "Snowflake babies" are children who were "adopted" as frozen embryos left over from other families' attempts at in vitro fertilization. They were later born via in vitro fertilization of their "adoptive" mother. There are an estimated four hundred thousand such frozen embryos in America today.

Notice what is "said" by this photo in this context. First, it tells a rescue story. If the "snowflake babies" had not been "adopted," they would still be frozen embryos in a freezer somewhere. Worse yet, had the president not vetoed the stem cell research bill, they might have been destroyed as part of a stem cell experiment. The picture connects the children to the frozen "embryos," which are actually blastocysts, hollow spheres with only stem cells—no brain cells, arm cells, heart cells, nerve cells, or any other kind of cell. The term "embryo" activates an image of a little child, which is not what is in frozen form, nor is it used in stem cell research. The picture reinforces the idea that little babies are what are used in stem cell research. Conservative language experts have for years been insisting that it be called "embryonic" stem cell research to reinforce this image; they now insist on using the term "rescue" and have begun to call these embryos "preborn babies." It's like calling an acorn a "preborn oak tree."

The result is that the photo tells a rescue story, which has embedded in it the same "community activist" story frame that we saw above. Here the parents are the activists who brought attention to the problem and began "adopting children"—they did all that they could. Indeed, the evil Congress went so far as to support stem cell research. With persistence and determination, these parents brought it to the attention of the president, who is now stepping in, making government policy. The president's veto is

rescuing children, like the ones shown behind him, from stem cell research. There are two kinds of rescuers in this story—the parents and the president.

This photo, with its rescue story, thus makes a political argument: Stem cell research is immoral. It kills children. The government, in its responsibility to protect the security of its citizens, should stop such research. Notice that this type of photo and argument generalize to abortion, too.

You can bet that had a president supportive of stem cell research signed the bill into law, he would have had the photo taken in front of a group of people with Parkinson's disease, MS, Alzheimer's, or a host of other diseases that could potentially be cured through stem cell research. President Bush could not have had such sufferers of disease in the photo. It would have told a very different story and argued for a different position.

#### ARGUING NET NEUTRALITY

We are constantly faced with new cases and new issues. How do we know what constitutes a progressive versus a conservative argument or narrative? How do we make up new arguments and stories when faced with a new situation? The answer is learning to frame—the progressive deep frames, the moral worldview, the values, the principles, and the general argument frames and narrative frames. We don't mean learning by memorizing but rather learning by acquaintance and by doing. But having it all explicitly laid out helps.

Let's look at the new controversy over "Net neutrality." The arguments—conservative and progressive—were constructed in short order to fit the two systems of values and principles.

We begin with Google's argument in favor of Net neutrality.<sup>5</sup>

Network neutrality is the principle that Internet users should be in control of what content they view and what applications they use on the Internet. The Internet has operated according to this neutrality principle since its earliest days. Indeed, it is this neutrality that has allowed many companies, including Google, to launch, grow, and innovate. Fundamentally, Net neutrality is about equal access to the Internet. In our view, the broadband carriers should not be permitted to use their market power to discriminate against competing applications or content. Just as telephone companies are not permitted to tell consumers who they can call or what they can say, broadband carriers should not be allowed to use their market power to control activity online. Today, the neutrality of the Internet is at stake as the broadband carriers want Congress's permission to determine what content gets to you first and fastest. Put simply, this would fundamentally alter the openness of the Internet.

Eric Schmidt, Google's CEO, continues the argument, using the "information superhighway" metaphor:



Today the Internet is an information highway where anybody—no matter how large or small, how traditional or unconventional—has equal access. But the phone and cable monopolies, who control almost all Internet access, want the power to choose who gets access to high-speed lanes and whose content gets seen first and fastest. They want to build a two-tiered system and block the on-ramps for those who can't pay.

The legal, regulatory, and legislative battle is taken up by law professors Lawrence Lessig and Timothy Wu, representing an ad hoc group, the Coalition of Broadband Users and Innovators (CBUI). The CBUI wants the FCC to adopt the following rule:

A broadband network operator shall not, on a discriminatory or unreasonable basis, interfere with or impair subscribers' ability to use their broadband service to access lawful Internet content or services, use applications or services in connection with their broadband service, or attach non-harmful devices to the network.

Thus, the argument for Net neutrality becomes an argument for government regulation in this form by the FCC.

The issue is new, but we have seen the values, principles, general argument, and narrative forms before. The Internet is seen as a commons—part of the infrastructure for the common good developed through the common wealth (taxpayer money). The values are freedom (of access) and equality (of access). The government is seen as the protector of freedom and equality through regulation (via the FCC). Substitute "Internet" for "parks" or "clean water" or "telephones," and the same argument applies—government should secure the equal and fair access to the commons.

The villains are the broadband service providers, or BSPs (e.g., Comcast, Verizon, AT&T, AOL), who own the lines and control access. Their crime is the threat to freedom and equality for the sake of profit. The victims are the citizens using the Internet. The heroes are the companies of CBUI (Google, Microsoft, Yahoo), famous spokespeople like Lawrence Lessig, Vint Cerf, and the Internet community itself, especially the bloggers, who have catapulted this issue to national attention.

The conservative side of the argument can be seen in a Cato Institute report and a Wall Street Journal editorial. First, Cato begins with cases of what it considers reasonable limitations on Internet content by BSPs:

It is certainly plausible that BSPs might deny consumers access to Internet content or prohibit attachment of various devices or networks at the edge of the system. Although there are few examples of BSPs engaging in such activities today, there may exist situations in which it is perfectly sensible for a network owner to impose use restrictions or differential pricing schemes on its broadband customers. Network owners may want to discourage the use of certain devices on their networks to avoid system crashes, interference, or "signal theft." They may want to price services differently to avoid network congestion or capture greater revenues on bandwidth-intensive services. They may want to vertically integrate content and conduit on their systems, or partner with other firms that can help



them reach new customers and offer superior services. And there might exist scenarios in which blocking access to certain sites makes sense for network operators. They may want to block access to certain controversial websites that contain material some subscribers might find objectionable, or they may want to block sites simply to avoid running the ads of a leading competitor.

Then Cato gets to the real rationale behind the industry position—and the rationale that makes the above reasonable:

Net neutrality regulation also flouts the property rights ISPs possess in the infrastructure they own and operate. Worse yet, by ignoring property rights and opening the door to increased regulatory meddling, Net neutrality regulation threatens to retard innovation and investment in new broadband facilities.

Cato is using the conservative argument for the sanctity of property rights—the market is moral and natural, property is the reward for moral action, and property owners have the right to do what they want with their property. Moreover, the market will make everything right. And then Cato gives the “moral market” argument:

Proponents of Net neutrality also tend to ignore the fact that network capacity use and the profit motive will provide very powerful checks on overly restrictive carrier activities. Carriers make money only by carrying more traffic.<sup>6</sup>

And here is *The Wall Street Journal*:

The FCC statement says, “consumers are entitled” (our emphasis) to the “content,” “applications” and “devices” of their choice on the Internet. They are also “entitled to competition among network providers, application and service providers, and content providers.”

Take a moment to pause over this expansive list of “entitlements.” If we take the FCC at its word, access to online pornography is now a right, even though in a different context the FCC is increasingly preoccupied with policing “decency” standards on television. We’d have thought FCC Chairman Kevin Martin would find all that entitlement talk a little embarrassing, given his campaign for decency standards. . . . Non-discrimination cases could well be brought against Net neutrality backers like Google—say, for placing a competitor too low in their search results. Google’s recent complaint that Microsoft’s new operating system was anti-competitive is a foretaste of what the battles over a “neutral” Net would look like. Yet Google and other Web site operators have jumped on the Net neutrality bandwagon lest they have to pay a fee to get a guaranteed level of service from a Verizon or other Internet service provider. They don’t seem to comprehend the legal and political danger they’ll face once they open the neutrality floodgates.<sup>7</sup>

*The Wall Street Journal* gives the traditional conservative arguments against “entitlements.” Nobody is “entitled” to anything given by the government; government

handouts are immoral. Moreover, government regulation is dangerous, and companies functioning in the market should know that regulation can be against their self-interest, partly because regulatory agencies may have an opposing agenda (decency standards) and partly because companies can open themselves to lawsuits.

The broadband service providers, in the face of strong opposition from the Internet community, hired Mike McCurry, a public relations specialist, formerly of the Clinton White House. McCurry takes on the blogosphere directly by writing on the Huffington Post:

The Internet is not a free public good. It is a bunch of wires and switches and connections and pipes and it is creaky. You all worship at Vince [sic] Cerf who has a clear financial interest in the outcome of this debate but you immediately castigate all of us who disagree and impugn our motives. I get paid a reasonable but small sum to argue what I believe. How many of the net neuts out there are honest about the financial resources and special interests behind your side of the argument? Do you really believe this is good v. evil or just an honest disagreement about what will make the “net flourish and prosper”? What do you make of David Farber’s recent caution about the unintended consequences of regulating the Internet?

I am against giving the FCC and other government regulators the power to decide how the Internet will build out in the future. That is what you net neuts are for. The Internet has worked absent regulation and now you want to introduce it for a solution to what? What content is being denied? What service is being degraded? What is not right with the Internet that you are trying to cure?

Instead, you have some myth about dangers ahead if someone actually asks (horrors!) that we pay for the billions it will take to make the Internet to work in the decades ahead? Do you want to pay or do you want to make the giant content companies that will be streaming video and data rich services to pay? I’d rather have a robust Internet that can handle the volume of traffic that we will put on it in the near future rather than a public Internet where we all wait in line for the next porno-spammer to let his content go before we get to have arguments like this.

This is not an issue where there is a progressive, pro–little guy, pro-Dem stand versus the big bad companies that pay big bad lobbyists (what a joke you think I am one of them). This is a clear disagreement on principle about what will get us the next generation of the Internet that will work for all of us.<sup>8</sup>

McCurry uses the following strategies:

- Undermine the profit motive arguments against the service providers by accusing the Net neutrality backers (e.g., Vint Cerf of Google) of a profit motive as well. This can’t work, because Cerf is a genuine Internet folk hero going back well before Google days.
- Undermine the commons argument by framing the Internet as nothing more than its physical manifestation (“a bunch of wires and switches and connections and pipes and it is creaky”). This can’t work, because the savvy

Internet community knows that it is a huge amount more—software (especially free open source) and the dedicated work of hundreds of thousands of volunteers.

- Deny that the Internet is a commons at all (“The Internet is not a free public good”). Big mistake. Negating the opponents’ frame simply reminds them that it has functioned since its inception as a commons, which is what has allowed the huge volunteer effort by its community.
- Deny that this is a battle between greedy big corporations and little guys (“This is not an issue where there is a progressive, pro–little guy, pro-Dem stand versus the big bad companies that pay big bad lobbyists”). Another instance of negating the other guy’s frame. He is reminding the Internet audience that this is exactly the issue at hand.
- Reframe the issue as a pragmatic one: Which path will make for an Internet that works better? Invoke the spirit of entrepreneurship and innovation. Ask who should pay—the companies or the people? Here he’s representing the right and trying to get support from the left by appearing to move to the left. This can’t work, either. This community isn’t dumb; they’re in the business. If the companies pay, they will pass the charges on to the public plus a lot for their profits. Moreover, the actual plan by the companies is to charge for content right away, on the basis of their previous investments, which are making them a handy profit already.

What we have seen is that (1) the progressive and conservative arguments are just the general argument frames used for a new issue, and (2) McCurry tries to reframe in favor of the big corporations and falls into the standard traps.

This should provide some insight about how arguments work. We hope this chapter has been illuminating.