

Polarization, Hyperbole and the Battle for Control of the Narrative
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This paper examines the interaction between three unhelpful features of the current political landscape: elite polarization, hyperbole in public discourse and the growing preoccupation among political adversaries with “narrative control.” The cost of polarization is well documented—legislative gridlock and government failures. Hyperbolic political discourse degrades the process of information transmission from experts to the public sphere, muddying the distinction between genuine data and “fake news.” In this environment the stakes in the battle for narrative control are particularly high, since the hallmark of a well-crafted narrative is that the controller can use hyperbole to great effect while, for the opposing side, counter-hyperbole is relatively ineffectual. Consider, for example, the payoff to the Trump camp in the 2016 US presidential election from focusing the narrative on Clinton’s email infractions. Had the Clinton campaign been successful in redirecting the spotlight onto Trump’s transgressions, the public’s perception of Clinton’s trustworthiness would have been less tarnished and the election outcome might have been different.

What is the relationship between the three features above, and what can be gained by studying them together? To address these questions we construct a two-stage game. In the first stage, two opposing factions choose one of four possible narrative backdrops for the second stage, in which faction members parlay their expertise as they jockey to influence a policy decision. To illustrate the first stage, we recall media coverage of candidates Clinton and Trump. In two narratives, the topic is the same and factions are treated symmetrically: *which candidate is less well suited to be President?* In one of these—we call it the **sym** narrative—all players hyperbolize; in the other—the **truth** narrative—they truthfully report their private information. In the remaining two narratives an asymmetry arises because in these contexts, extreme hyperbole in one direction is much less credible than in the other. Consider for example these narratives: *Does Trump’s “Access Hollywood” video establish conclusively his unsuitability for the office?* *Clinton’s private email server usage establish conclusively her unsuitability for the office?* Even the most hyperbolic claims about the egregiousness of Hillary Clinton’s email practices—“treason,” “firing squad”—had traction in some circles; by contrast, counter-hyperbole of comparable magnitude—“her email practices were selfless and heroic”—would have been dismissed as ridiculous. Faced with this baked-in imbalance, the best option available to the Clinton camp would have been to change the subject.

In the second stage, faction members play an information aggregation game framed by the selected narrative backdrop. The exogenous variable is the dispersion in elite political orientations—we call this “preference polarization.” In all but the **truth** backdrop, hyperbole emerges endogenously—we call it “platform polarization.” The level of platform polarization—which increases with preference polarization and at a faster rate—determines the outcome of each continuation game, and these outcomes in turn imply choices in the first stage. Since hyperbole is costly from an information transmission perspective, **truth** will be the unique equilibrium continuation unless a faction’s preferred asymmetric narrative yields it a sufficiently large partisan advantage; when **truth** is not an equilibrium, **sym** will be the unique continuation iff when the other faction’s preferred narrative is selected, the cost imposed on the disadvantaged faction dominates the increment in information degradation from choosing the **sym** narrative. We analyze the comparative statics impact on narrative selection and welfare of two classes of polarizations—increased intra-faction cohesion and increased inter-faction dispersion—that have been extensively empirically. When factions are initially quite polarized, a further polarization of the first type reduces welfare. Surprisingly, for the second type, the direction of impact is reversed.