

The Personal and the Communal in  
Contesting Stories of Peoplehood  
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I. Introduction. Scholars of democratic representation and democratic leadership have long discerned many tensions, if not outright contradictions, in the expectations that democratic citizens have for those they select to govern them. As Hannah Pitkin argued four decades ago, ordinary language suggests that many citizens expect their elected leaders to act as “delegates,” implementing as fully as possible the policy preferences of those who voted for them; but many also believe that leaders should at least sometimes act as “trustees,” supporting policies that are in the leaders’ judgment in the best interests of their constituents, even if that means going against their voters’ current preferences. Often voters are likely to expect the best “delegates” to be those candidates who offer the fullest “descriptive representation,” who seem most like the voters themselves. But if voters are seeking “trustees” who can provide able “substantive representation,” the achievement of substantive results that are in their best interests, they may prefer candidates who appear to have the distinctive knowledge, experience, and special talents needed to do the job. Precisely because they are special, those candidates are likely to be in many ways very different from the voters (Pitkin, 1967).

In a recent paper, John Kane and Haig Patapan contend that these features of democratic representation pose fundamental problems for democratic legitimacy that cannot be overcome, only more or less well managed. They maintain that democratic officials who simply resemble their constituents and do what their constituents currently prefer will often be found to have failed to provide the kind of effective leadership voters really want. But if officials seek to exercise such leadership, if they act in ways that show that their identities, abilities, and aspirations are very different from those of their constituents, and if they use their distinctive talents in the service of policies that challenge the constituents’ preferences, they are often likely to be seen as oppressive elites, not as democratic representatives at all (Kane and Patapan 2008).

In this essay, I extend the framework for analyzing political leadership laid out in my 2003 book *Stories of Peoplehood* to suggest that although these tensions are real, they are not as severe as they may first appear. If political leaders are to inspire senses of trust in their leadership and belief in the worth of the policies they advance, they do face the challenge of articulating persuasive “stories of peoplehood” that connect in certain ways with both the personal stories of most voters and with the personal stories of the leaders themselves. Voters must be able to see in the vision of their political community a leader advances an account in which the voters’ own values, interests, and aspirations have a place. They must also be persuaded by a candidate’s personal story that if elected, the candidate will genuinely be able and determined to realize the “story of peoplehood” she or he is advancing. But if voters are assured of these two things—if they can see the connections between their own personal stories and the collective narrative of their political community a candidate articulates, and if they can also see reassuring connections between the candidate’s own story and the candidate’s communal account—they are not likely to be dismayed that the candidate’s personal story is in fact very different from their own, or that of most voters. The more they can see both themselves and the candidate in the candidate’s overarching “story of peoplehood,” I suggest, the

less they need to see the candidate as descriptively similar to themselves. They can vote for leaders distinctive enough to be truly able to lead, without casting severe doubt on those leaders' democratic legitimacy.

My chief goal here is simply to offer this suggestion as a hypothesis; but I will illustrate it, though by no means test it, with reference to the irresistibly appealing example of the current U.S. presidential campaign. In brief, I contend that for the most part, the three candidates who have won the widest support, John McCain, Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama, have not pretended to any great extent that they are they just like all those who they want to represent. With the partial exception of Clinton, the emphasis in their personal stories is on how special, not how typical, they are. But they have each sought to link their personal stories with a broader vision of America's political community and future in which voters can see their personal aspirations expressed and, in all likelihood, fulfilled. The fact that they have all had considerable electoral success suggests that democratic legitimacy in fact does not require descriptive representation so much as the somewhat more complex relationship between candidates' personal stories, voters' personal stories, and the candidates' communal "stories of peoplehood" that I describe here.

Let me add that the varying levels of success these candidates have had and are having in connecting voters stories and their own stories to their communal story may well have a significant impact on who is ultimately elected in November. The personal and communal stories the successful candidate advances will then provide criteria by which the subsequent administration will be judged—and, from a democratic point of view, legitimately judged. And though the analysis here offers some reassurances about the capacities of candidates to diverge from their constituents and still be democratically legitimate, it also highlights some obstacles to their success. Thus the larger point of this essay is strive to show that in various ways, issues of democratic representation, democratic leadership, and democratic legitimacy can be illuminated by recognizing the intertwined political roles of personal and communal "stories of peoplehood."

II. Personal and Communal Stories of Peoplehood. In *Stories of Peoplehood*, I argued that aspirants to political power face two distinguishable challenges: to inspire in potential constituents a sense of trust in the aspirants themselves and also a sense of the worth of the vision of their political community's identity, purposes, and future that candidates advance.<sup>1</sup> I contended that would-be leaders seek to meet both these challenges through providing accounts of peoplehood that always contain, with varying

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<sup>1</sup> Promoting trust actually has two dimensions. Leaders must foster not only a sense in their constituents that the leaders can be trusted to pursue the proposed vision sincerely and effectively; they must also persuade diverse constituents that they can trust each other to join in the proposed common endeavors (Smith 2003, 59). I do not pursue the promotion of trust between fellow community members here.

emphases, three types of stories: economic stories, political power stories, and what I term “ethically constitutive” stories (Smith 2003, 56-71).

Economic stories promise that constituents’ personal economic fortunes will fare well through measures that will also advance the prosperity of the community as a whole. Political power stories promise both personal physical security and also a share in the collective power of a political community that will maintain or increase its regional or global influence. Such political power includes military power, for neither a society’s guarantees of personal physical security nor its international status are likely to seem reliably established without military efficacy. Ethically constitutive stories argue that membership in a particular people or community is somehow intrinsic to who the members really are, because of traits imbued with normative worth. Those traits may include religion, culture, race, ancestry, language, a distinctive history, or many other factors. Their defining feature is that they are presented as deeply constitutive of members’ personal identities, in ways that affirm the members’ moral value and also delineate their obligations. Though economic and political power stories also require implicit ethical components so that they do not appear avaricious or predatory, their stress is on the worldly benefits they offer. And though these sorts of benefits are often most persuasive, so that aspiring leaders stress them when they believe they can do so credibly, ethically constitutive stories are also indispensable. Sooner or later leaders must seek to sustain the allegiance of their constituents when neither prosperity nor great political power—or even personal physical security—seem at hand (93-102).

That earlier analysis already suggested something I now wish to assert and explore more explicitly: successful communal “stories of peoplehood” must be ones in which constituents can see reassuring connections to their own individual “stories of personhood”—including their individual economic aspirations, their longings for personal security and a meaningful share in communal political power, and their senses of what is ethically valuable in their personal identities. Though my earlier arguments are premised on the notion that constituents must perceive such connections, I did not call attention to how aspiring leaders seek to persuade people that the connections in fact exist. I also did not consider the relationship of candidates’ personal stories to the “peoplehood” narratives they advance, nor did I examine the direct relationship of the candidates’ personal stories to those of the constituents whose support they seek to win. I felt then that political scientists were paying more attention to senses of “trust” than senses of “worth” and to economic and political power appeals than to “ethically constitutive” ones, so I focused instead on the ways that stories of peoplehood sought to advance senses of collective moral worth. But as I acknowledged (16, 72-73), the resulting analysis was in important respects incomplete; and here I seek to take it further.

Some plausible extensions are immediately apparent. For constituents to see their personal stories, including their interests, identities, and aspirations, expressed in a candidate’s communal story of peoplehood, those stories must include discussions of people the constituents do see as like themselves, even if the candidates are not. And if those stories are to inspire senses of worth, they must provide persuasive grounds to believe that a government that pursued them would actually aid such people. Thus economic stories must project a grasp of the constituents’ economic circumstances and needs, combined with a plausible strategy for improvement for those constituents and the political community generally. Political power stories must speak to the specific forms of

physical vulnerability constituents are experiencing and to the ways they feel they are politically disempowered, as well as ways the political community generally is more vulnerable and less powerful than it should be. Ethically constitutive stories must find a place in the communal narrative for persons with the kind of valuable traits that constituents see as fundamental to their own identities and provide a credible account for how the values expressed therein will be sustained and advanced in the future.

We should note, however, that empirical studies of voting and public opinion offer powerful evidence indicating that most citizens are concerned about how the broader community and various groups within it are faring, as much or more as they are about their own personal prospects (e.g. Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Mutz and Mondak 1997; Funk and Garcia-Monet, 1997; Funk 2000). That is why one reason why it is so important for aspiring leaders to articulate compelling *communal* stories of peoplehood, not simply to make promises to different constituencies. Even so, none of this research suggests that most voters will support candidates who seem likely to make the voters' economic condition significantly worse, or deprive them of physical safety, political voice or national defense capabilities, or to embrace policies that are hostile to the things that voters see as most normatively worthwhile in their own lives and identities. It only seems reasonable to believe that voters want candidates to offer communal economic, political and military power, and ethical accounts in which they can see their specific concerns incorporated, respected, and advanced.

When it comes to the relationship between candidates' personal stories and the communal stories of peoplehood they advance, voters' expectations are likely to be different. They are not likely to be particularly eager to hear that the candidate's economic welfare, power ambitions, or even the aspiring leader's most valued personal traits will be furthered if the political community embraces the candidate's vision of shared peoplehood, purposes, and policies—though when it comes to the candidate's personal ethically constitutive traits, the situation is a bit different, as discussed below. Rather than seeking assurance that a candidate will pursue his or her own economic and power interests, voters are likely to want to be persuaded by a candidate's personal story that they can trust the candidate to be *dedicated to* and *capable of* achieving the economic, power, and ethical aims the candidate's communal story defines. Most voters probably want to hear a candidate biography that gives them reason to believe the candidate will strive ardently to do what he or she is promising to do in these matters, and that the candidate has a track record and personal abilities that augur success. That is why governors who have presided over state economies plunged into recession, generals who have lost battles, and reformers who are found to be on the payrolls of the gangsters or malevolent corporations they claim to battle are rarely viable candidates.

But if it is correct that many, perhaps most voters are concerned chiefly with whether candidates are offering a compelling vision of economic, political, and ethical well-being for the community as a whole, and one in which they can see their own interests and aspirations as having a place, then it is probably *not* so important for constituents to see the candidates' personal stories as just like their own. What matters most is for voters to be attracted to the various forms of worth promised in a candidate's communal story of peoplehood, and for voters to believe that the candidate, if elected, will actually provide those forms of economic, political power, and ethical worth, at least in significant measure. As Kane and Patapan argue, voters may in fact have more

confidence that they can trust candidates to achieve what they promise if the candidates appear to have experiences and talents that set them well apart from, and dare I say it, even above their typical constituents in certain regards.

So long, that is, as voters trust not only the candidates' abilities but also their motives and goals. That is why, I suggest, the ethically constitutive elements in the personal stories of candidates operate somewhat differently than the economic and political power elements. Though the ethical components of candidates' identities, the qualities they present as morally estimable, need not be precisely identical to those of most people they are seeking to lead, they must involve values that potential voters do esteem and not ones that they see as opposed to their own. Furthermore, the ethical traits candidates present as deeply embedded in their characters must reinforce, rather than undermine, their accounts of how they can achieve the communal economic and power goals they propose. Thus when generals become presidential candidates, as they often do, many of the electorate may well regard them as having ethical qualities of patriotism and martial valor that are genuinely exceptional. Many voters may see these qualities as highly desirable, because they inspire trust that once elected, the former general will seek to improve national security and will be able to do so. Many successful American presidential candidates such as Ulysses S. Grant and Dwight D. Eisenhower have benefited from such perceptions.

But if voters see the candidates' love of country and martial spirit as more reckless and brutal than virtuous, as in the case of George Wallace's Vice Presidential candidate, General Curtis LeMay, whose policy toward America's enemies was to "bomb them back to the Stone Age," then voters are likely both to doubt the ethical worth of the candidate's vision and to distrust the ways the candidate would pursue their goals of heightened communal political and military power. If a candidate is portrayed as having exaggerated or outright lied about his record of service and sacrifice, as the Swift Boat ads said John Kerrey had done, similarly a basis for regarding the candidate as admirable and credible can turn into fuel for condemnation. It is likely, then, that in most cases, voters wish to see the ethical features of a candidate's personal story as fairly close to their own normative values, even if the candidate's personal story remains in many ways distinctive, much more than voters demand that the candidate's personal economic or political power interests be very similar to their own. They can also be expected to demand that the candidates' personal story of ethical identity inspire confidence that the candidate will reliably pursue whatever communal goals—economic, political, or normative—the candidates' story of peoplehood advances.

III. The Cases of the American Presidential Candidates. At this point I wish to make this abstract discussion more concrete and, I hope, more convincing by taking as case studies the personal and communal stories of the three candidates who have had substantial success in the presidential primaries of 2008. In what is admittedly not a model of thorough, systematic empirical research, I rely on how the candidates' websites present their biographies, supplemented in Barack Obama's case by discussion of the 2004 keynote speech that catapulted him to national prominence, since it is closely followed in his website bio. My evidence is offered as illustrative, not definitive; but I do think these website accounts represent the most visible, accessible, and official ways that the candidates advance their personal stories and seek to link them to their communal narratives of American peoplehood.

The briefest bio is John McCain's, only 18 sentences long.<sup>2</sup> Its second sentence states its three themes: McCain's life shows that he is dedicated to "reforming Washington, eliminating wasteful government spending, and strengthening our nation's armed forces." But these themes receive highly unequal treatment. The bio devotes one sentence each to asserting McCain's commitment to reducing governmental spending and fighting the undue influence of special interests in Washington. Two-thirds of the presentation—12 sentences, arrayed in five paragraphs—aims at buttressing confidence in McCain's ability to accomplish the third goal, strengthening the military. The website relates the extraordinary story of how the Arizona Senator "continued the McCain tradition of service to country passed down to him from his father and grandfather," both "distinguished Navy admirals," by serving in Vietnam, and how he spent five and a half years in the "Hanoi Hilton" after being shot down and badly injured on a bombing mission in 1967. The website lists his five naval medals and concludes by mentioning his wife Cindy and "seven children and four grandchildren."

This personal story is obviously not one that defines John McCain as descriptively similar to many other Americans. Its overwhelming stress is on how he is a military hero from a line of military heroes, one who has taken exceptional risks, endured incredible suffering, and rendered extraordinary service in defense of the American people. Correspondingly, his website responds to the question "Why John McCain" by continually mentioning first the importance of "a strong national defense," by insisting that "American Faces a Dangerous, Relentless Enemy in the War Against Islamic Extremists," and by contending that "John McCain is best prepared to lead and defend our nation and its global allies as Commander-in-Chief from day one," enabling us to "defeat our enemy."<sup>3</sup> McCain's website also discusses his themes of strengthening the economy through limiting tax and spending and restoring trust in government through fighting special interests, fulfilling the needs for economic and ethical stories. But his overwhelming emphasis is on his political power story, here focused on the military challenge of having a government strong and determined enough to protect citizens' personal security from terrorist attacks at home and defeat the enemy around the globe.

This story is certainly one in which many voters can see themselves as deeply implicated: most people, after all, wish to feel that they and their families, friends, and neighbors are safe against the sorts of terrible physical violence the nation experienced on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Few wish to see their country tormented on the world stage by repeated, successful terrorist attacks. And undeniably, McCain's personal story offers most Americans grounds to believe that he feels these concerns as deeply as they do, if not more so. Nonetheless, the central appeal of McCain's biography is not that it suggests the former combat pilot is descriptively much the same as those he would represent. He is instead presented as fit for leadership because he is "remarkable," with an "unwavering lifetime commitment to service" and achievements of martial valor that few American living or dead can match. It is what is different about him, much more than what is the same, that fosters trust in his dedication and capacity to realize his story

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.johnmccain.com/about/>, accessed May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.johnmccain.com/Undecided/WhyMcCain.htm>, accessed May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

of, above all, enhanced military security and power for all Americans—a story expressing purposes to which most Americans assign very great worth.

Hillary Clinton’s website biography is by far the longest of the three candidates, and as noted it strives hardest to persuade voters that this long-famous, long-controversial candidate actually has a great deal in common with most Americans.<sup>4</sup> It begins, “Hillary was raised in a middle-class family in the middle of America.” From this “classic suburban childhood,” it states, she went on to “become one of America’s foremost advocates for children and families,” as well as a nationally influential attorney, a state and national First Lady who championed schools, health care, women’s rights and human rights around the world, and then a Senator who has been “a steadfast advocate for middle-class families” and a “tough” and “fierce” advocate for “military families” as the first New Yorker on the Senate Armed Services Committee. The website proceeds to detail how Clinton’s life shows the reality of “the promise of America,” because her father, “the son of a factory worker,” built his own (initially) “small business,” and her mother had a “tough childhood,” left by her young parents to be raised by her “strict grandmother.” But Hillary’s mother ultimately learned “what a loving family could be,” and she created with her husband “a classic 1950s middle-class suburban childhood” for her children, one in which young Hillary was a Brownie, then a Girl Scout, even a “Goldwater girl,” as well as a “regular in her church youth group.”

After these points connecting Hillary’s life with experiences with which many Americans can identify, the website biography becomes an account of great achievements, including commencement speaker at Wellesley, followed by the Yale Law School; but the website stresses how there Clinton “focused on questions about how the law affected children.” It then states that she “followed her heart and a man named Bill Clinton to Arkansas.” The emphasis in discussions of her subsequent career remains on her multifaceted concerns for children, modified only by the addition, after her election to the Senate, that as Clinton has “continued her advocacy for children and families,” she has also become “a national leader on homeland security and national security issues.” Still, foremost on her website’s list of issues is “strengthening the middle class” and “working families.” That goal is followed by “providing affordable and accessible health care,” with particular notice of children; next by “ending the war in Iraq;” and then the website proceeds to indicate her positions on eleven other issues.<sup>5</sup>

What to make of this presentation of Clinton’s personal story in relationship to her communal American “story of peoplehood”? Undeniably, the website depicts her as someone with a great deal in common with middle-class Americans of both parties and with those who see themselves as having risen or as striving to rise from tough working-class backgrounds via “hard work” and playing “by the rules.” It explicitly links her personal story to the understanding of the “promise of America” that she seeks to further through her leadership. This promise—Clinton’s communal “story of peoplehood”—is defined above all as being able “to provide a good life for your family.” The website unites economic, power, and ethical themes around a vision of an America in which all

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<sup>4</sup> [Http://www.hillaryclinton.com/about](http://www.hillaryclinton.com/about), accessed May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> [Http://www.hillaryclinton.com/issues](http://www.hillaryclinton.com/issues), accessed May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

families are physically, financially and medically safe and secure, offering the love and support that can enable their members to flourish.

But though the website fosters a sense that Hillary Clinton can be trusted to pursue those goals because of experiences and qualities she has in common with most middle-class and working-class Americans, it is at least equally devoted to highlighting what is distinctive about the candidate. Admittedly, it does not call attention to the fact that she is the first woman to have a serious chance at winning a major party presidential nomination. Still, its most constant theme is her advocacy for children and families, causes for which many voters may feel women are particularly suited. Along with that theme, Clinton's website emphasizes her extensive experience more generally and her work on the Senate Armed Services Committee, making the case that she has unusual knowledge and ability to address military problems as well as domestic ones. Though the stress is less on how exceptional she is than is true of McCain's website presentation of his personal story, there is still at least as much attention given to Clinton's unusual qualities as to her descriptively representative ones. She is portrayed as experienced and tough, but above all as an extremely smart and dedicated woman—daughter, wife, and mother—who champions children and families. Such a candidate is unprecedented in American presidential politics; yet Clinton can credibly claim to be able to contribute to an exceptional degree to the realization of family values that most Americans share and wish to see featured in their common story of American peoplehood.

Barack Obama, whose candidacy is probably even more novel, has chosen explicitly to stress how his story is highly unusual. Yet it is also, in his telling, very much “part of the larger American story,” as he asserted in his celebrated 2004 Democratic National Convention keynote speech.<sup>6</sup> His campaign website's candidate biography tracks portions of that speech closely.<sup>7</sup> It begins by calling attention to how Obama's father grew up a goat-herder in Kenya, while his mother was born in Kansas to parents who served in various ways in WW II, then benefited from the GI Bill and the Federal Housing Program, before finally settling in Hawaii, Obama's birthplace. The website notes Obama's educational achievements and his work as a community organizer, civil rights lawyer, and legislator prior to contending, “It has been the rich and varied experiences of Barack Obama's life—growing up in different places with people who had different ideas—that have animated his political journey...he still believes in the ability to unite people around a politics of purpose” focused on “solving the challenges of everyday Americans.” The website then describes his work in the Illinois and U.S. Senate providing tax breaks for “working families,” supporting education, reforming criminal justice procedures, promoting transparency and ethics reform in government, and working to aid veterans and advance the nation's military and economic security. In so doing, the website mentions by name two Republican Senators with whom he has worked, and not any Democrats. The website concludes that Obama is “most proud and

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.barackobama.com/2004/07/27/keynote\\_address\\_at\\_the\\_2004\\_de.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2004/07/27/keynote_address_at_the_2004_de.php),

accessed May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.barackobama.com/learn/meet\\_barack.php](http://www.barackobama.com/learn/meet_barack.php), accessed May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2008.



grateful for his family” and lists their names and their membership in the Trinity United Church of Christ.

Though Obama’s website biography is brief compared to Clinton’s, his “issues” section is even longer. It includes 21 issues arrayed in alphabetical order, with the first being “civil rights,” focused on his efforts to enforce voting rights. No particular issue, not even Obama’s early opposition to the Iraq war, is featured on the website as a whole. Instead, it is headed with a quotation that connects the candidate’s personal story and those of the voters to the vision of American peoplehood his campaign has consistently advanced. The quotation states: “I’m asking you to believe. Not just in my ability to bring about real change in Washington...I’m asking you to believe in yours.” Among the issues the site lists is “service,” and it similarly tells voters, “Your own story and the American story are not separate—they are shared. And they will both be enriched if we stand up together, and answer a new call to service to meet the challenges of our new century.” This call echoes his 2004 keynote speech, which stressed that “we are connected as one people,” as a “single American family.” He also then referred to America as “a magical place...a beacon of freedom and opportunity to so many,” premised on equal inalienable rights and the belief that along with the pursuit of their “individual dreams” that these rights make possible, Americans recognize that they have obligations to each other, that “I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sister’s keeper.”

Thus the Obama website suggests that the very distinctiveness of Obama’s personal story is what gives him understanding of and faith in America’s communal story of rights and freedoms, equal opportunities, and civic concern for others. And he presents that story as one in which all Americans have a stake, born of their aspirations for themselves and their families and also the values that help make them who they are as Americans, as members of the larger American family. It is hard to think of a clearer example of a candidate overtly connecting constituents’ personal stories and his personal story, not so directly to each other, but to a shared communal story of peoplehood, in ways that seek to inspire trust in the candidate and faith in the worth of the common vision being advanced.

To be sure, Obama’s website biography does present elements in which many Americans may see themselves directly. His story may foster a sense of personal identification among Midwestern and west coast Americans; immigrants; veterans, beneficiaries of federal education and housing programs; church-goers; social justice supporters; and devotees of family. Yet the reality remains that very few Americans really have backgrounds very similar to Barack Obama’s, so his main theme is how “the diversity of my heritage,” not his descriptive similarity to most voters, is a major source of his dedication to what he sees as “the true genius of America.” His campaign has faltered not so much when Obama has called attention to the ways he is different, but rather when he has conveyed the impression that he may not understand many of those from whom he is different, like the blue collar workers of Ohio and Pennsylvania, and even more, that he may not grant their interests and values an appropriate place in his American story. His distinctiveness can, indeed, be a source of doubts about him in democratic politics and therefore a political liability. Yet it cannot be denied that his emphasis on his unusual background, accompanied by his skill in connecting it with an uplifting narrative of American peoplehood in which many voters can see their own stories, has produced one of the most meteoric rises in the history of American politics.

IV. Conclusion and Caution. I believe the evidence of these three campaign websites provides some reason to conclude that, as I have argued, it is important for candidates to offer compelling stories of peoplehood with economic, political power (including military), and ethically constitutive elements. It is also important for candidates to persuade voters that both the candidates' personal stories and the voters' personal stories find reassuring expression in the candidates' communal stories defining collective policies and purposes. It is less vital that voters see candidates' personal stories as descriptively similar to their own, so long as the candidates' personal economic and power interests do not seem actively opposed to those of the voters. But it is necessary for candidates' ethically constitutive values to be generally aligned with those of most voters, and for candidates to show understanding of the diverse economic, power and security, and partly distinctive values of those whom they wish both to represent and to lead.

In so arguing, I do not mean to suggest that democratic voters really only want substantively effective "trustees," not descriptively representative "delegates," or that the tension Kane and Patapan discern between appearing to be "one of the people" and to be an appropriately gifted leader of the people is non-existent. Again, in the area of ethical values, a significant amount of descriptive representation is probably a necessity; and it is likely more generally that voters will trust candidates and be inclined to embrace the worth of their communal stories if they do perceive the candidates as in many ways people like themselves. It is probably no accident that the two historically most distinctive candidates, Obama and Clinton, devote significant space in their official biographies to what can be read as assurances that these candidates are actually more like most Americans than they may first appear. This is particularly true of Clinton, since Obama has made his potential to strengthen senses of American unity in the face of acknowledged diversity a centerpiece, perhaps the centerpiece, of his campaign and career. Yet probably because voters do want leaders who can lead, as well as represent, it seems not only safe but in fact necessary also to call attention to the ways candidates are special, not just distinctive but distinguished--so long as the exceptional talents and experiences they claim appear to be directed to the service of larger causes in which voters can see their own stories being advanced.

Still, left there, these conclusions may be too sanguine. The analysis laid out here also suggests some sobering lessons for many candidates and elected officials seeking to sustain popular acceptance of their leadership and legitimacy. It seems indisputable that officials whose communal stories have promised prosperity and power will be in trouble with their constituents if their society instead experiences deepening poverty and frequent invasions during their watch. I have previously suggested, however, that the ethically constitutive elements in stories of peoplehood can provide leaders with some insurance against such economic and power downturns. If voters really believe that their leaders are championing, for example, the one true religion; their community's precious cultural heritage; or indeed its pristine ethnic purity, the leaders may be able to retain support even in the face of adverse material developments (Smith 2003, 98-117).

But if it is true that it is particularly important for voters to believe that their leaders' ethical values are broadly consonant with if not identical to their own, then it is likely that officials with whom most voters have only limited descriptive similarities may be less able to count on such insurance than those who are widely seen as in virtually all

respects “one of us.” Not only may they have more difficulty as candidates in initially inspiring voters with trust that they genuinely share and will further the voters’ ethical commitments. They are also likely to be more vulnerable to having trust in their ethical legitimacy eroded by adverse developments in any arena, including economic and security affairs, but perhaps especially in ones with pronounced normative features. These points suggest that it would probably be much more damaging to Hillary Clinton to be exposed as a distant, uncaring parent than it would have been for Ronald Reagan (who, indeed, was one), because the Clinton campaign presents her maternal qualities as central to her ethical appeal. Similarly, it would be far more risky for her as President to seek to cut funding for school lunches (as Reagan also did). Reagan presented himself as a fighter against dictatorial foreign Communism and wasteful domestic big government, so his ethical appeal was not so threatened by these facts. And though I do not have polling data to prove it, I suspect it has likewise been more troublesome for Barack Obama to be associated with a pastor seen as racially extreme and divisive than it has been for John McCain to be associated with pastors seen as bigoted in different ways. Obama’s core ethical appeal is that he unites despite diversity. McCain’s is martial virtue, and that appeal is less undercut by alliances with intolerant religious zealots.

But if McCain as President adopted military and foreign policies that made him appear timid or insufficiently loyal to American national interests, it seems inconceivable that he could sustain the allegiance of his political base. And if Obama supported social policies that appeared to give corrupt favors to non-white special interests, it seems certain that most white Americans would repudiate him as morally reprehensible. To put the caution generally, I suspect that voters are likely to be slower to trust candidates who appear descriptively dissimilar except in their ethical goals, and that voters are then likely to be more deeply outraged by such candidates if they appear over time to be untrue to their ethical appeals. If this is so, candidates who have succeeded by especially stressing their distinctive qualities, tempered only by shared ethical values, may need to succeed more extensively over time, and particularly to be more visibly true to their ethical commitments, than other, more descriptively “typical” officials, if they are to be seen as legitimate democratic leaders.

To put it, suitably enough, in a sound bite: from both the standpoints of electoral success and democratic legitimacy, it is actually ok for candidates to have personal stories that represent change from the voters’ stories and from the stories of past candidates. But in the campaign and in office, it must indeed be change that voters can believe in. If not, in a democratic society, there are always other rascals with attractive stories waiting to be thrown in.

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