A Narrative Analysis of the Party Platforms: The Democrats and Republicans of 1984

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This essay examines the 1984 party platforms from the perspective of Fisher's narrative paradigm. In doing so the author evaluates Fisher's logic of good reasons in action within these two partisan constructions of political reality. The work concludes that though these two narratives followed different strategies, they both displayed the internal consistency required by Fisher's perspective as they reflected transcendent values that were both relevant to and consistent with party tradition.

KEY CONCEPTS Narrative paradigm, party platforms, narrative fidelity, logic of good reasons

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The 1984 Democratic National Convention produced several memorable moments: The historic nomination of Geraldine Ferraro, the controversy concerning the selection of Bert Lance to replace Charles Manatt as party chair, and the debates regarding the language of the party platform. These were but a few of that assembly's noteworthy happenings. As with virtually every nominating convention, the disputes over the platform captured the assembly's attention during the Tuesday session.

Jesse Jackson's promise of a "war" (Williams and Johnson, 1984, p. 1) over the platform's language inspired a variety of reactions as observers discussed not only the nature of that particular conflict, but the significance of the platform within the nomination process. Popular opinion seemed to suggest that the platform—and, indeed, the convention as a whole—represented a "dinosaur" from a forgotten age of American politics. Yet, there were some who argued how these activities were central to the convention's purpose. One writer in support of the platform function was commentator George Will. Will (1984) observed: "In politics, style and substance are often interestingly related: rhetoric reveals temperament, which drives policy" (p. 88). To Will, the platforms contain evidence of the worldviews that guide policy making and, therefore, are indispensable reflections of party philosophy.

Will's remark embraces the essential purpose of that quadrennial happening known as the national nominating convention. The convention is the one occasion where party faithfults from across the country assemble to articulate their construc-
tions of political reality. Participants pursue that end by telling stories that reveal their interpretations of party tradition and the implications of those images for present and future action. Through podium speeches, films, floor demonstrations, and other activities partisans exchange views as they negotiate realities regarding that year’s general election.

The platform drafting function of the convention performs a valuable role in this process as it is the only time these potentially diverse tales are transformed into a single expression of party resolve. In its final form the platform reflects the character of that year’s coalition and, consequently, provides insight regarding the worldviews of the nation’s two major political parties. Through an application of Fisher’s (1987) narrative paradigm and his “logic of good reasons” (p. 5) I examine the storytelling strategies evidenced in the 1984 platforms. This effort, then, endeavors to generate knowledge of these activities and to demonstrate their significance as a rhetorical enterprise in the presidential nominating convention.

The 1984 Party Platforms: A Narrative View

The narrative paradigm treats “people as storytellers—authors and co-authors who creatively read and evaluate the texts of life and literature” (Fisher, 1985, p. 86). The “primary function” of the narrative paradigm is to “offer a way of interpreting and assessing human communication” in a fashion that leads to “critique, a determination of whether or not a given instance of discourse provides a reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to thought and action in the world” (Fisher, 1986, p. 351.)

The degree to which a story offers a trustworthy guide to action indicates its “narrative fidelity” (Fisher, 1987, p. 5). A narrative’s fidelity “pertains to the individuated components” of the tale and “whether they represent accurate assertions about social reality and thereby constitute good reasons for belief or action” (p. 105).

Fisher (1985) concluded that institutions provide plots for storytellers; therefore, an examination of the internal workings of an artifact such as a party platform—a product of an established institution—may yield insights regarding those narrators, the institutions, and their perceived conditions. In fact, party tradition provides a plot that, in essence, is recreated every four years. Hence, I undertake to interpret the logic of good reasons presented in the 1984 versions of that continuing saga.

A narrative interpretation of the platforms necessarily begins with a consideration of story structure. Chatman’s (1978) structuralist theory of narrative provides that starting point. While the content dimension of Chatman’s model is emphasized here, some comment on the stories’ manifestation of expression is in order.

Both parties followed similar strategies regarding the layout of their platforms. That is, they opened with a preamble and followed with separate sections outlining the parties’ views on specific topics. The Democrats supported their preamble with three chapters (entitled “Economic Growth, Prosperity, and Jobs”; “Justice, Dignity, and Opportunity”; and “Peace, Security, and Freedom”) with a closing “Minority Reports” section.

After their preamble the Republicans presented sections entitled “Economic Freedom and Prosperity”; “Security For The Individual”; “A Free and Just Society”; and “America Secure and the World at Peace.” As a result of this format, the platforms assumed a storytelling strategy in which the cast of characters introduced in the preamble was featured across the variety of scenes that were the individual sections.
In San Francisco Democrats told a story predicated on a “victimage” plot as they expressed the need for “fairness” in American society. This tale constructed a condition in which the various groups of the Democratic coalition were victimized by unfair, elitist Republican policies. The Democrats portrayed an administration that rewarded the “strong” at the expense of the “weak” in a way that restricted the growth of emerging political movements—many of which are active in the Democratic Party.

The Republicans told a fundamentally different story as they portrayed “big government” as a hindrance to individual initiative. This narrative used “scapegoating” in its plot in that “big government” was presented as a source of evil that restricted the prosperity of all Americans. By using “big government” as a scapegoat the Republicans were able to show how individuals and/or groups suffered at the hands of this villainous, potentially unpatriotic, entity. To counteract this threat, the GOP advanced the hero of its story: Ronald Reagan.

These are the two plots that organized the 1984 platforms. For more detail, let us examine the values projected through these tales; their relevance, consequences, and consistency dimensions; and their resolutions.

The Party Values—Transcendent Issues Dimension

The Democratic Party described itself as a coalition of diverse groups seeking “justice” for all facets of society. The Democrats declared their belief “in the dignity of the individual, and the enormous potential of collective action” (p. 1) as they stressed “fulfilling America’s highest promise, equal justice for all” as the “Democratic agenda for a just future” (p. 27). The San Francisco assembly advocated “bridging our differences, not deepening them” (p. 1); hence, the platform asserted the need for justice in societal decision making and contrasted that objective with the “‘trickle down’ policies [of the Reagan Administration] that never reach those on the bottom” (p. 52).

Through these excerpts we observe how the Democrats identified themselves as the “party of the people” in conflict with the elitist philosophy that personified the villain in their story, the GOP. To Democratic narrators, the Republicans’ “trickle down” policies threatened the first principle of American Democracy, justice for all.

The principal value in the Democrats’ story, then, was justice. Justice provided the transcendent issue that represented the “good reason” for partisan action. Virtually all Democrats viewed justice as both relevant to and consistent with their worldviews. Thus, the story’s plot relied on the threat posed by the failure to restore justice for all Americans.

In contrast, the Republican Party described itself as the party of “individuals” as opposed to a collection of groups. The GOP platform argued that Republican “policies will maximize the role of the individual and build on the success of the past four years” (p. 4). Republicans claimed America was founded on the “institutions of home, family, religion, and neighborhood” which produced “self-reliant individuals” who aspired to be “independent of government” (p. 20). Thus, the GOP portrayed itself as the “party of limited government” with “private property” serving as the “cornerstone” of liberty and the free enterprise system” (p. 51).

Unlike Democrats, the Republicans emphasized the positive—a trait no doubt associated with incumbency—as they referred to basic values such as “home, family, and religion” as transcendent considerations; yet, there was a villain in this tale as
well—a villain that hinders individual prosperity through attacks on “liberty and the free enterprise system.” That villain was big government; therefore, Republican narrators constructed a story that made individual prosperity relevant to the lives and values of all Americans as it addressed the threats posed by the federal bureaucracy.

Without question, these descriptions of party values reflect the traditional philosophies of the two organizations. The emergence of these two plots comes as little surprise; still, a recognition that tradition merely provided the stories’ structure is required in that the activities portrayed through those plots involved concerns currently before the parties.

Partisan tradition entered in another fashion as both groups engaged in the use of inflammatory language to describe the villains in their stories. The Democratic Party demonstrated this trait through an attack on the integrity of the incumbent administration. The platform advised women that “as long as this Administration remains in office” the Equal Rights Amendment has “nothing less than an enemy in the White House” and continued by stating that if “this is true for women” it is “equally true for disadvantaged minorities who must depend on this government’s sense of justice to secure their rights” (p. 30). Democrats assured constituents that “in the America of Ronald Reagan, you will get as much justice as you pay for” (p. 28).

The Democrats also introduced the GOP’s “roll of dishonor” as they presented Richard Allen, Rita Lavelle, James Watt, and others as evidence of “Republican cronyism and malfeasance” (p. 38). Democrats declared “an Administration that cannot run its own house fairly cannot serve the American people fairly” (p. 38).

The Republicans also cast the negative as they described the “liberal Democrats” as a disruptive influence on traditional American institutions. To the GOP, Democrats “disrupted our traditional patterns of caring, sharing, and helping” as they centralized “the responsibility for social programs in Washington” (p. 20). The Republicans claimed these “liberal experimenters destroyed the sense of community that sustains local institutions” as “Washington’s governing elite” assumed control over spending the “people’s money” (p. 20). The platform lamented: “Worst of all, they tried to build their brave new world by assaulting our basic values. They mocked our work ethic. They scorned frugality. . . . They ignored traditional morality. And they still do” (p. 20).

To no one’s surprise, the actors in these stories assume different characteristics depending upon the point of view of the narrator. While both tales stressed basic values predicated on party traditions, they provided distinct rationales for action through an emphasis on different transcendent issues. These motives become clearer as we examine the relevance, consequence, and consistency dimensions of the two stories.

The Relevance, Consequence, and Consistency Dimensions

When turning to the relevance of the values depicted in these stories, their possible consequences, and their consistency with party tradition, further evidence of the victimage and scapegoating stories emerges. Herein lies the trust of the respective stories’ logic in that the two narrators used party tradition as the starting point for their arguments. From there, the relevance and possible consequences of current issues served as the rationales for action in 1984.

For instance, Democrats advocated “an economy that works for everyone—not just the favored few” (p. 2); a system of higher education that “does not become a
luxury affordable only by the children of the rich” (p. 12); and “a future of growth and opportunity” that promotes “fairness instead of widening inequality” (p. 2). The platform depicted the Reagan tax policies as a “bonanza for the very rich, and a disaster for poor and middle-class Americans” (p. 2) as it argued for “a fair balance between corporate and personal tax increases” and an end to the “economic distortions” (p. 9) that guide the incumbent administration.

The San Francisco conclave extended its argument by recalling yet another symbol from days gone by. The platform stated: “If in the past decades we won the right for minorities to ride at the front of the bus, in coming years we must assure that minorities have the opportunity to own the bus company” (p. 27). The Democrats claimed a “nation is only as strong as its commitment to justice and equality”; however, they observed, “a corrosive unfairness eats at the underpinnings of our society” (p. 27). Democrats maintained civil rights laws were under attack by an administration that “consciously seeks to turn the clock back to an era when second-class citizenship for women and minorities, disenfranchisement, and de jure and de facto segregation were very much the facts of life for well over half of America’s population” (p. 27).

Through the victimage story line the San Francisco assembly reinforced the value of justice and, in turn, elevated its role as a transcendent issue. This was achieved through an emphasis on the relevance of the situation for the groups of the Democratic coalition. In doing so the party turned to the past to demonstrate the possible consequences of the situation and the consistency of their appeals with party history. In order to insure the continuation of the transcendent issue justice, the party must unite against the villain, Reagan. No doubt, a very different story from that of the GOP.

The Republican platform declared that “the role of federal government should be limited” since “state and local governments closest to the people are the best and most efficient” governors (p. 3). The GOP argued against government regulation since it “did not achieve its goals or made improvements at exorbitant costs” (p. 8). The Republicans observed how the scapegoat of their story “created a hellish cycle of dependency” (p. 22); how “excessive federal regulations . . . have been a crushing burden” (p. 16); and they concluded that “only government could have wasted billions of dollars to create the instant slums which disgrace our cities” (p. 21).

To fight the villain, big government, the GOP advocated the “privatization of government services whenever possible” since it “maximizes consumer freedom and choice” and “reduces the size and cost of government” (p. 49). Republicans claimed this “stimulates the private sector, increases prosperity, and creates jobs” as “it demonstrates the primacy of individual action which . . . can address human needs most effectively” (p. 50).

The GOP depicted a situation relevant to all Americans through its portrayal of an out-of-control federal government. To Republicans, this trend threatened the citizenry as it violated the transcendent value “personal prosperity.” That this value was not only consistent with the American Dream, but also representative of party tradition was the essence of the GOP’s story.

Notice how the platform elevated the importance of personal prosperity in its story. This traditional Republican value provided the good reason for action; however, the position was not presented as partisan—to the contrary—it was cast as the patriotic alternative. Hence, the GOP sought to cross party lines in pursuit of objectives of interest to all Americans.
That these two stories represented distinct constructions of political reality is beyond question. To one party, the system was under attack by people in pursuit of individual objectives that threatened the prosperity of the less fortunate. To the other, the system was under siege by a menacing bureaucracy that achieved little while demanding huge sacrifices from the people. Correspondingly, each story clearly delineated the relevance of the situation with regard to party tradition (i.e., the story's consistency) and contemplated the consequences of their respective scenarios. Further evidence of these strategies emerges as we turn to the two stories' resolutions.

The Resolutions

The Republican resolution stressed the need to "get government's hand" out of the people's "pocketbooks" (p. 24) and to continue the trend of individual prosperity. To achieve that end, the GOP offered the following resolution: Four more years of Ronald Reagan. To realize that objective, the platform addressed specific legislative initiatives that would assist the President in his efforts to combat the villain, big government.

As a case in point, the platform suggested that "the President is denied proper control over the federal budget" and, as a result, the platform advocated the line-item veto as a means to "prevent wasteful spending" (p. 7). Through initiatives such as the line-item veto, the heroic Reagan would gain the capacity to check the federal bureaucracy's growth and promote the welfare of all the people.

The GOP noted that "only sustained economic growth . . . can give credible hope to those at the bottom of the opportunity ladder" (p. 23) and it asserted "the American people want an opportunity society, not a welfare state" (p. 41). Here the Republicans referred to the product of big government—a welfare state—and, again, contrasted that result with the American Dream: An "opportunity society."

The Democrats' resolution stressed the party unity that was needed to overcome the victimage inherent in Reagan's "Social Darwinism." In offering this view they emphasized the "fear" of four more years of Reagan as they described what might happen if the Republicans were not defeated.

The three principal areas where the Democrats used the fear strategy were in discussions of the deficit, the arms race, and social legislation (the three sections of their platform). Regarding the deficit, Democrats declared "the Reagan deficits mortgage the future and threaten the present" (p. 2); "another term will bring four more years of negligence" (p. 3); and cited Republican Howard Baker's view that the Reagan policies are a "riverboat gamble" in which "the very wealthiest in our society have been big winners—but the future generations of Americans will be the losers" (p. 7).

Concerning the arms race the San Francisco convention proclaimed that "Mr. Reagan wants to open the heavens for warfare" (p. 43); "beguiles the American public with false claims that nuclear war can be survived with enough shovels" (p. 41); and the platform advocated a reversal of "the automatic militarization of foreign policy" (p. 46). The fear theme extended into the area of domestic legislation as the platform stated "as Democrats, we believe that human rights and economy of opportunity are two sides of the same coin of justice" and pledged "an end to the Reagan Administration's punitive policy toward women, minorities, and the poor" (p. 27).
These excerpts capture the thrust of the two narratives; however, these statements were essentially reiterations of the respective preambles. That is, both narratives used foreshadowing to establish their story lines through their preambles. As a result, readers knew where the various parts of the platform were leading as they contemplated each section.

The Democrat’s preamble declared that “America stands at a crossroads” as the nation faced “a fundamental choice” between “two futures” (p. 1). Democrats declared this choice to be “between solving our problems, and pretending they don’t exist; between the spirit of community, and the corrosion of selfishness; between justice for all, and advantage for some; between social decency and social Darwinism” (p. 1).

The Democrats’ preamble noted the “failures” of the Reagan Administration as it introduced the fear portion of the story’s plot. To Democrats, a “different direction” was in order through which young families could buy homes “instead of fearing the explosion of their adjustable rate mortgages”; workers could feel “secure” in their jobs “instead of fearing layoffs and lower wages”; and senior citizens could look forward to retirement “instead of fearing it” (p. 1). Indeed, the Democrat platform opened with a dismal assessment of Reagan’s performance as it stressed the fear of a continuation of that administration.

This was in stark contrast to the tone of the Republicans’ preamble. The Dallas assembly claimed that the public “will choose between two diametrically opposed visions of what America should be” (p. 1). The GOP captured this choice through a reference to the Democrats’ platform noting “one of history’s major ironies”; that is, “the party whose 1932 standard-bearer told the American people, as president, that all we have to fear is fear itself has itself become the party of fear” (pp. 1–2).

From there, the Republicans advanced their thesis: “It has been said that mercy must have a human heart and pity a human face. We agree” (p. 2). The GOP continued: “Democrats measure social programs in terms of government activity alone. But the divine command to help our neighbor is directed to each individual and not to a bureaucratic machine. Not every problem cries out for a federal solution” (p. 2).

This strategic use of foreshadowing allowed both narrators to establish a context for subsequent sections of their platforms. By presenting their resolutions first the platforms set the scene for the often-disjointed sections that were to follow. Yet, these preambles did more than identify the characters and plots of the two stories; they established the motives for action (“justice” vs. “individual prosperity”) based on widely acknowledged—and traditional—transcendent issues.

The 1984 Party Platforms: A Summary

The 1984 platforms represent two coherent constructions of political reality. Though written by partisan pens, these stories provided motives for action based on issues of appeal to both their particular audience and those outside party ranks.

The Democrats told a story of victimage that depicted the ravages of Republican elitism on the essential value of the story: Justice. This narrative elevated the relevance of justice as an issue as it expressed the fear of four more years of Ronald Reagan (clear references to the consequences of a failure to unite). Finally, the Democrats recreated history for the audience in a manner that demonstrated the
consistency of their appeals with party tradition. Thus, the transcendent issue of justice served as the central organizing factor of the story which, subsequently, provided the good reason for action.

The Republicans projected a contrasting story oriented to the transcendent issue of “individual prosperity.” The internal logic of this tale appealed to the audience’s feelings regarding the significance of personal prosperity, its relevance to the American Dream (thus, its patriotic overtones), and the possible consequences of a wasteful, out-of-control federal government. By using individual prosperity as the central organizing value, the GOP offered an appeal that potentially crossed party lines through its patriotism theme.

I conclude, then, that audiences could order their experiences through the logic of good reasons displayed within these two story lines. Both platforms provided a consistent guide to action based on values that were not only relevant but of consequence to all Americans.

**Conclusion**

As noted in the opening, while it may be popular to characterize the convention as a dinosaur, a more thoughtful review of the American political system reveals quite another conclusion. Presidential campaigns are protracted dramas that extend across time with the convention serving as the one occasion where the individual tales of the primaries may be transformed into the party narratives for the general election. It is this function—the construction of a working coalition for the fall—that secures the role of the convention and its platform building in the American electoral process.

These narratives reflect the values around which the parties rally their constituencies and, as a result, provide critical insights regarding the parties’ motives for action. That these stories offer reliable, trustworthy guides to action for partisans can be seen through an analysis of those documents in terms of their narrative fidelity.

In 1984 the stories told through the two platforms met Fisher’s criteria for a logic of good reasons. That these plots were not new is of little consequence; in fact, the reliance on party tradition to organize the stories’ structures provided the logic that established the good reasons for partisan action in 1984. Platforms are continuing sagas that take the issues of the times and cast them in terms of established points of view.

No doubt the Atlanta Democrats and the New Orleans Republicans of 1988 will follow similar strategies as they negotiate realities with constituents for that election. As critics examine the 1988 versions of these coalitions, they would be remiss to omit the platforms as evidence of those worldviews. Through evaluations of those artifacts, scholars may not only observe the internal strategies of platform rhetoric, but generate knowledge of the human propensity for storytelling as a means of ordering experiences in pursuit of collective action.

**NOTES**

1The five dimensions of Fisher’s (1987) logic of good reasons are: (1) questions of fact that explore the “implicit and explicit values embedded in a message”; (2) concerns over the relevance of those values; (3) questions of consequence that ask “what would be the effects of adhering to the values” projected in the story; (4) the consistency of the story with regard to the ideals held by the audience; and, (5) the transcendent issues presented in the story (i.e., the “ultimate values” that express “one’s most fundamental commitments”) (p. 109).
Chatman’s (1978) structuralist theory of narrative consists of two basic parts: The content dimension which involves the “chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting)” and the “discourse” dimension or “manifestation” which refers to how the content is expressed (p. 19–22). Chatman noted the content is “the what in a narrative” whereas the discourse is “the how” (p. 22).

Excerpts from the Democratic Party platform are from “The Report of the Platform Committee to the 1984 Democratic National Convention.” A copy of this report was provided by the Democratic National Committee, Charles T. Manatt, Chairman. Excerpts from the Republican Party platform are from the “Republican Platform: America’s Future Free and Secure.” A copy of this report was provided by the Republican National Committee, Frank Fahrenkopf, Chairman.

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