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Narrating success and failure: Congressional debates on the ‘Iran nuclear deal’

Kai Oppermann (University of Sussex, K.Oppermann@sussex.ac.uk)

Alexander Spencer (Otto-von-Guericke University Magdeburg, alexander.spencer@ovgu.de)

Abstract

This article applies a method of narrative analysis to investigate the discursive contestation over the ‘Iran nuclear deal’ in the United States. Specifically, it explores the struggle in the US Congress between narratives constituting the deal as a US foreign policy success or failure. The article argues that foreign policy successes and failures are socially constructed through narratives and suggests how narrative analysis as a discourse analytical method can be employed to trace discursive contests about such constructions. Based on insights from literary studies and narratology, it shows that stories of failures and successes follow similar structures and include a number of key elements, including a particular setting; a negative/positive characterization of individual and collective decision-makers; and an employment of success or failure through the attribution of credit/blame and responsibility. The article foregrounds the importance of how stories are told as an explanation for the dominance or marginality of narratives in political discourse.

Keywords

Narrative; success; failure; Iran nuclear deal; US

Whether the 2015 ‘Iran nuclear deal’ is a success or failure is open to contestation. The bargain at the heart of this agreement is that Iran gives up, limits or converts parts of its nuclear activities and agrees to put these activities under a monitoring and verification regime led by the International Atomic Energy Agency in return for relief from international sanctions related to its nuclear program (see MacFarlane, 2015). On an objective level, some may argue that it is too early to judge the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (plus Germany) – the P5+1 – and Iran. Whether or not the deal will achieve the key objective of the P5+1 to prevent Iran

from acquiring nuclear weapons by peaceful means will only become clear in the longer term, perhaps not before the current agreement runs out after 15 years. The political debate, however, on whether the nuclear deal should be seen as a success or failure is already in full swing. While some observers, including Donald Trump, criticise the agreement as “a bad deal that sets a dangerous precedent” (LoBianco and Tatum, 2015), the Obama administration pitched it as “a very good deal” that represents the “strongest non-proliferation agreement ever negotiated” (Obama, 2015a).

Against the backdrop of such contrasting views, the article traces the discursive contestation around the nuclear agreement in the US Congress and thereby contributes to three separate fields of scholarship and debate. First, it advances the literature on (foreign) policy failures (see, for example, Janis, 1982; Bovens and ‘t Hart, 1996; Roselle, 2006; Walker and Malici, 2011) and successes (see, for example, McConnell, 2011; Hutchings and Suri, 2015) in Public Policy and International Relations. Specifically, it takes the ‘middle ground’ between ‘objectivist’ and purely ‘relativist’ perspectives on the topic. On one hand, the article argues against a foundationalist tradition which has long been dominant in policy studies (Marsh and McConnell, 2010: 567) and which understands policy failures and successes as objective facts that can be independently identified and verified. In contrast, the article follows a constructivist critique which sees ‘success’ and ‘failure’ not as inherent attributes of policy, but as judgments about policy (Oppermann and Spencer, 2016). Whether policies come to be seen as failures or successes depends on the meaning imbued to them in political discourse and is the result of discursive contestation. At the same time, the article rejects purely relativist accounts for which success and failure are completely ‘in the eye of the beholder’ (McConnell, 2010: 351). Rather, it suggests that claims of success or failure are more powerful if they involve certain discursive elements that make for convincing stories of success or failure. Specifically, our argument is that policy successes and failures are constructed through narratives that follow a particular structure. The contestation over whether policies should be seen as failures or successes, in turn, plays out as a discursive struggle between narratives and counter-narratives which are similar in structure but different in content.

Second, the article adds to the growing literature on narrative analysis in IR by suggesting a heuristic means of ordering the analysis of ‘narratives’. While the concept of a ‘narrative’ has been used extensively in IR, this has often simply been used as a synonym for discourse or

rhetoric and has frequently ignored many of the advances made in the home turf of narrative analysis, namely Literary Studies and Narratology (Roberts, 2006; Suganami, 2008). Based on the insights in these fields the article holds that a narrative is made up of three essential elements which help structure and provide a heuristic order for the empirical analysis by focusing on 1.) a *setting* (the location or surrounding environment in which the narrative is set), 2.) *characterization* (description of the actors involved) and 3.) *emplotment* (the way in which setting, characters and events are (temporally and causally) linked). Not only does the article add to the literature by suggesting a specific structure for the analysis of narratives, it also contributes to the debate on why certain narratives gain dominance in public discourse and others are marginalised. As Krebs (2015a: 31) points out, ‘how particular narratives become dominant, triumphing over their competitors on the field of narrative play, is not well understood’. While some have emphasised the role of the narrator and their power to shape discourse (Sharman, 2007; Hülse, 2009), others have pointed to pre-existing cultural understandings of the audience which facilitate narrative dominance or marginality (Van Ham, 2002; Spencer, 2016). The article suggests an alternative explanation for narrative success or failure by emphasising *how* narratives are told.

Third, the article adds to our understanding of the *politics* of the ‘Iran nuclear deal’ in the US in that it foregrounds the deeply political and adversarial nature of the US debate. This complements existing scholarship which has focused on the diplomatic negotiations over the agreement and US-Iran relations more broadly (Sebenius and Singh, 2012; Shirvani and Vuković, 2015) or on analysing the detailed provisions of the agreement and their strengths and weaknesses (Samore et al., 2015; Tertrais, 2015). While such research tends to bracket the ‘contestedness’ of the agreement in US politics, the article also helps contextualise other contributions to the debate which precisely seek to partake in the discursive construction of the nuclear agreement as a ‘good deal’ (Fitzpatrick, 2015) or a ‘really bad deal’ (Norell, 2015). One implication of our analysis is that future US policy on the deal will not only depend on its ‘objective’ implementation but also on which side in the discursive struggle is able to develop a stronger narrative.

Apart from its intrinsic importance as a major nuclear non-proliferation agreement and, for better or worse, a central plank of President Obama’s foreign policy legacy, we have decided to focus on the case of the ‘Iran nuclear deal’ because it presents an excellent opportunity to explore the phenomena this article is interested in, that is discursive contests between

narratives of success and failure (Collier et al., 2004; Bennett and Elman, 2006: 460-463). Specifically, our analysis zooms in on the Congressional debates about the agreement in September 2015 which offer an ideal laboratory to study such contests. This is mainly for two reasons. First, these debates witnessed intense discursive struggles between the two opposing camps over whether the nuclear deal represents a US foreign policy success or failure. This reflects the significance attached to the deal both by Republicans and Democrats and the scale of ideological differences between the two sides. The institutional setting of the US Congress and the highly partisan nature of US politics further incentivised the narrative struggle. In any case, both sides used the debates as arenas to try to construct the agreement into a foreign policy success or failure of the Obama administration. Second, this discursive contestation took place against the backdrop of wide-ranging uncertainty about the consequences of the nuclear deal. The discursive attempts of Republicans and Democrats to present the agreement as a foreign policy failure or success did not have the benefit of hindsight and could not invoke 'objective' observations about how the deal works out in practice. It is important to note, however, that our understanding of foreign policy successes and failures as social constructions implies that discursive contests over such constructions are pervasive and not unique to contexts such as in the case of the 'Iran nuclear deal'. Rather, whether policies are seen as successes or failures will remain open to contestation even if there exists more experience with their results and consequences, if only because how policies are judged still depends, among other things, on the ideological, political or cultural predispositions of the evaluator as well as on their time-horizons and expectation levels (Bovens and 't Hart, 1996: 21-32). We still hold, however, that the Congressional debates around the nuclear agreement present a particularly promising opportunity for exploring narrative struggles about the social construction of foreign policy success or failure 'in the making'. That is primarily because the debates are embedded in an exceptionally open and fluid discursive environment in which no strong intersubjective consensus about how the agreement should be judged has been established. As a case in point, American public opinion is almost evenly divided over the issue. Depending on the poll, pluralities either disapprove of (48% to 38%) (Pew Research Center, 2015) or support the agreement (43% to 30%) (YouGov, 2015). This constitutes an unsettled narrative situation, in which no single narrative is dominant but in which competing narratives of success and failure have relatively equal standing (Krebs, 2015a: 32-36).

Against this background, the objective of this article is twofold. First, it traces key patterns in discursive contests about the social construction of foreign policy failures and successes. What discursive elements and strategies are central to such contests? How do critics of foreign policy decisions attempt to constitute these decisions as failures and how do supporters of the decisions try to construct them into successes? Second, the article foregrounds the importance of *how* stories are told for their success or failure in discursive struggles. Explanations which point to the authority of the narrator or the culturally embedded predispositions of the audience to explain narrative dominance would predict that either the success or the failure side of the narrative is dominant. While a narrator explanation would expect the more powerful side of the debate to gain the upper hand, in this case the ‘success’ story presented by the president and his administration, the audience approach would consider the ‘failure’ story to dominate due to pre-existing animosity in US public discourse towards the regime in Iran. In contrast to these approaches the article focuses attention on the relative salience of different narrative elements in the competing narratives as a possible determinant of their broader resonance. The article is able to show that both sides use very similar structural elements to tell their stories of success and failure which corresponds to the finding that neither success nor failure narratives dominate the public discourse on the ‘Iran nuclear deal’.

The next section will introduce narrative analysis as a method to study such discursive struggles and spell out the key dimensions and structural elements of narratives of success and failure. The article then moves on to present our empirical findings on the debates about the ‘Iran nuclear deal’ in the US Congress.

The Method of Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis has become a widely accepted method in political science and IR. An increasing number of scholars is employing a variant of this method to investigate a vast range of different political phenomena (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2013). This includes, for example, the analysis of national identity (Campbell, 1998; Hønneland, 2010), security (Hansen, 2006; Krebs, 2015a), foreign policy (Ringmar, 1996; Browning, 2008), violent non-state actors (Spencer, 2016) or public opinion (De Graaf, Dimitriu and Ringsmose, 2015).

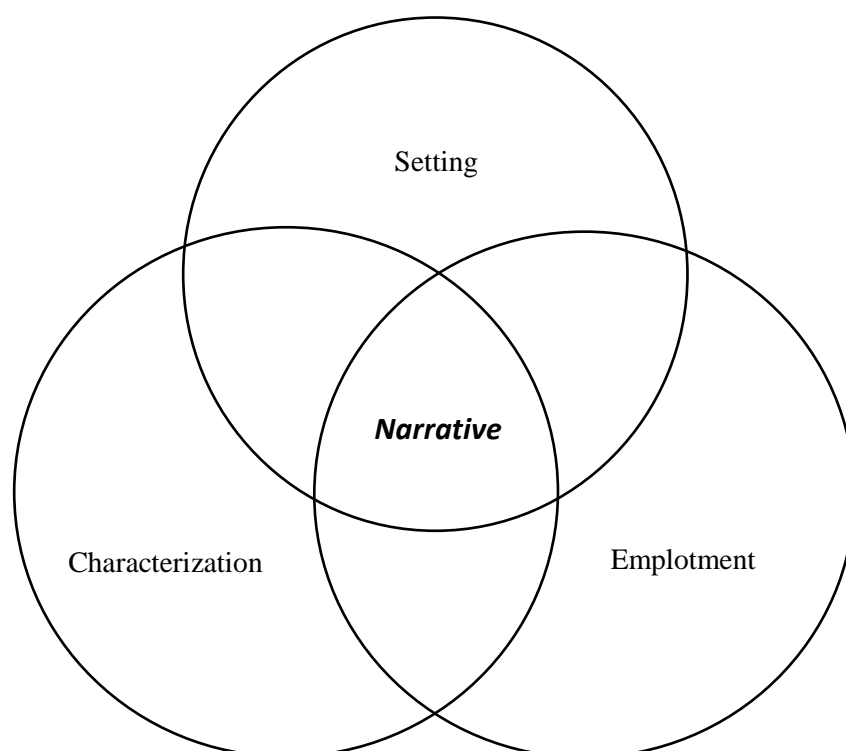
Within this research there are two interrelated arguments for why narratives are important for the understanding of international politics. For approaches in cognitive linguistics and narrative psychology, narratives are an essential instrument of human mental activity in that the human brain captures and organises complex relationships in the form of narrative structures (Sarbin, 1986; Turner, 1996; Sommer, 2009). Second, insights in narrative history and research by Hayden White (1987) suggest that narratives are present in every culture and essential to community building and the constitution of a common identity (Suganami, 2008; Erll, 2009; Fludernick, 2009). Overall, most scholars who analyse narratives in IR hold that humans comprehend the social world around them in the form of narratives from which they draw identities and which guide their actions. Narratives ‘do political work’ (Kohler Riessman, 2008: 8) as they play an important role in the constitution of norms, identities and ideologies and are fundamental to the construction of the political world (Somers, 1994; Ewick and Silbey, 1995; Shenhav, 2006), including the constitution of success and failure in politics.

As Edelman (1988: 31) argues ‘a policy failure, like all news developments, is a creation of the language used to depict it; its identification is a political act, not a recognition of a fact’. A number of authors have pointed out that the constitution of policy failure and the attribution of blame is down to a contest of competing narratives or frames (Brändström and Kuipers 2003; Boin, ‘t Hart and McConnell, 2009; Oppermann and Spencer 2016). The analysis of how narratives of foreign policy success and failure are told and compete in a struggle for the interpretation of complex events in international politics ultimately helps to understand the distribution of discursive power (Freedman, 2006: 22-26; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2013: 1-11; Patterson and Renwick Monroe, 1998: 315-316).

We consider narrative analysis as a specific type of discourse analysis which, similar to other discourse analytical methods such as metaphor analysis (Oppermann and Spencer 2013), focuses on specific elements of a discourse. Narratives as a ‘mode of verbal representation’ (White 1987: 26) are a way of structuring and organising discourse. Based on insights in Literary Studies and Narratology our suggested method of narrative analysis focuses on three specific structuring elements of a narrative: (1) the *setting* of the story, (2) the *characterization* of actors and (3) the causal and temporal *epitome* of events. On each of these dimensions, narratives of foreign policy success and failure involve contestation over a set of key elements of foreign policy decisions and their broader context. These elements are the categories of the coding frame we have used to analyse the selected Congressional

debates. This does not mean that these elements are the only way of structuring narratives or that our suggestions should be understood as the only way to do narrative analysis. Based on the discussions in Literary Studies on what constitutes a narrative we decided to focus on these three elements because they cover many of the key components of narratives. Thus, the setting comprises physical elements of the background as well as ideational elements of the theme or motif of the story; characterization includes the attributes of actors or agents involved in the story; and emplotment covers actions, events and causation. Without doubt the broad labels we use of setting, characterization and emplotment could be substituted with others (for example theme or motif for setting), but we believe that regardless of the label given to the narrative elements, all three notions are essential to constituting narratives. At the same time it is important to note that the three narrative elements can overlap. For example, aspects of the setting can be the reason for action by an agent and therefore also be part of the emplotment of a narrative. The aim of the exercise is not so much to clearly place certain aspects of a narrative in one or the other category, but to consider all the elements as important for the constitution of a narrative. Overall the analytical framework should be understood as a heuristic which helps order and guide the empirical analysis which is to follow.

Figure 1: Elements of a narrative



Before going into detail with regard to the three narrative elements we have to emphasise that we are also telling a story by constituting the object of analysis in a particular way. For example, by naming the event the ‘Iran nuclear deal’ in contrast to, say, ‘nuclear bargain’ or ‘swindle’ we are actively participating in its narrative constitution. Adopting a Foucauldian understanding of discursive power we accept that we are bounded by discourse and unable to stand outside of the discursive formation of objects we seek to analyse. In line with Paul Ricoeur’s notion of mimesis 1 we cannot grasp or retell a story from the outside of an already existing interpretative structure or ‘pre-narrative quality of human experience’ (Ricoeur, 1991: 29) or what Charles Taylor would refer to as interpretative framework (Taylor, 1971). We are therefore only able to understand the narrative through our pre-existing familiarity with many of the concepts, orders and rules of the narrative world of the ‘Iran nuclear deal’ story. In the story of this article we decided to stick to the ‘Iran nuclear deal’ phrase as this is one of the most commonly used labels in both the academic writing on the topic and the political debate on both sides of the success and failure narrative.

Setting

With regard to the *setting* the idea is that similar to a stage play or film the background or location in front of which the story unfolds is of importance for the narrative as a whole (Toolan, 2001: 41). Specifically there are four overlapping aspects of the setting which are important for narrative struggles over foreign policy success or failure. Firstly, the setting of both success and failure involves the articulation of the high stakes involved (S1). Narrative struggles over foreign policy success or failure tend to take place primarily over decisions which are constituted as highly important (Bovens and ‘t Hart, 2016: 659-660; Boin, ‘t Hart and McConnell, 2009: 85-86; Howlett, 2012: 542-543; Brandström and Kuipers, 2003: 290-292). Only if the setting can be articulated to represent a situation that is considered important by a large number of actors will claims of success or failure gain the necessary salience and prominence in discourse.

Secondly, narrative struggles over foreign policy success and failure involve contestation over the availability of alternatives (S2). Allegations of policy failure will be more powerful if they involve settings which allow for the possibility of viable alternatives and different behavior. Narratives in which agents are left with no alternative but to act the ways they did are generally not told as a failure (Ingram and Mann 1980: 14). The very notion of ‘failure’ is

often seen to imply the existence of ‘better’ alternatives which decision-makers have failed to identify or implement (Grant, 2009: 559). While narratives of foreign policy failure will involve settings which open up space for agency and choice, counter-narratives will deny the availability of alternatives (Bovens and ‘t Hart 1996: 73-84; Hood, 2002).

Thirdly, the setting elaborates on the broader context in which foreign policy decisions are being made (S3). It contributes to the representation of foreign policy problems to which such decisions respond (Sylvan 1998) and thus forms the background to judgments about their suitability. Specifically, foreign policy decisions will more likely come to be seen as failures if the decision context is represented in such a way that they appear as transgressions of widely shared norms and values and thus look inappropriate and illegitimate (Gray, 1998a; McConnell, 2016: 673). The narrative struggle over the success or failure of foreign policy thus involves contestation over the appropriate and truthful interpretation of the decision context.

Fourthly, a widely used discursive tool in narrative struggles over policy success or failure to represent foreign policy problems and to emphasize the high stakes involved are historical analogies (S4) (Khong, 1992). Specifically, analogies are used to connect current to past settings as intertextual linguistic figures. They are a means of explicitly linking the narrative currently told to previously existing and at times culturally embedded ones on which we have already formed a dominant opinion. Similar to metaphors, analogies make us understand one event with the help of another whereby we transfer knowledge including assumptions on success or failure from one historically “settled” setting to the current policy debate in which the struggle is ongoing (Shimko, 1994; Spencer, 2012; Oppermann and Spencer, 2013).

Characterization

The second dimension of narratives is the *characterization* of the agents involved in a story (Fludernik, 2001: 46). Narratives of policy failure or success crucially depend on the identification and characterization of agents both on the individual and collective level who have been influential in formulating the foreign policy in question (Gray, 1998b: 8).

There are a four ways in which the characterization of such actors can be influenced with regard to narrative struggles over policy success or failure. The first involves giving decision-makers a label or nickname which informs the relationship between the reader and the agent in the story (C1). For example, referring to Margaret Thatcher as the “Iron Lady” or George

W. Bush as a “cowboy” constitutes them in a particular fashion making failures more or less easily stick. Similarly, labeling other states as ‘old friends’ or ‘historical adversaries’ has implications for what behavior is considered appropriate towards them.

Secondly, characterization includes contestation over the personal traits, motives and behavior of decision-makers (C2). Narratives of policy failure portray these agents in a negative light, whereas narratives of policy success involve positive characterizations of decision-makers. Specifically, narrative constructions of foreign policy failure or success can be driven by characterizations of decision-makers which cast doubt on or highlight their competence, credibility and sincerity. Examples in failure narratives include allegations of inexperience, weakness, dishonesty or arrogance as well as the imputation of personal or domestic political motives for foreign policy decisions (Boin, ‘t Hart and McConnell, 2009: 96-100; Bovens, ‘t Hart and Peters, 1998: 199; Dunleavy, 1995: 61-64; Gray, 1998a: 117-119). Moreover, an important aspect of characterization is the way in which agents are said to act. The description of behavior affects how we perceive characters to be like. While narratives of failure might characterize such behavior as, for example, thoughtless, reckless, irresolute or ill-judged, narratives of success might portray it as well-balanced, considerate, decisive and well-informed.

Thirdly, an important way in which decision-makers can be characterized is by placing them in relationship to other actors (C3). This ‘characterization by association’ relies on transferring the reputation and image of actors to which an agent is linked to that agent itself. For example, narratives of success might portray decision-makers in a positive light by associating them with other well-respected actors, including experts, moral authorities, other states or the general public. In contrast, narratives of failure might seek to discredit decision-makers by linking them to dubious characters and villains one would generally not like to be associated with (Fludernik, 2001: 44-45).

Fourthly, on the collective level the characterization focuses on the process of foreign policy decision-making (C4). Narrative struggles over the failure or success of foreign policy will often involve contestation over process characteristics, because they provide readers with cues to judge the quality and legitimacy of foreign policy decisions and outcomes. In the case of failure narratives, prime examples of negative characterizations of foreign policy decision-making processes include undue haste, excessive informality, biased information processing,

ineffective checks and balances and lack of broader consultation (Janis, 1989: 3-24; Dunleavy, 1995: 59-68; Marsh and McConnell, 2010: 572-573).

Emplotment

The third constitutive dimension of narratives of success or failure is the event and its *emplotment*: in a narrative something has to happen (Fludernik, 2001: 5). What is more, the event understood as an action has to lead to more action. The events in a narrative do not stand on their own, they have to be placed in relation to each other (Baker, 2010: 353). As Paul Ricoeur (1981: 167; emphasis in original) illustrates: ‘A story is made out of events to the extent that plot *makes* events *into* a story’. Here, one has to distinguish a temporal and a causal dimension in the ordering of events and action. While the temporal elements of narratives foreground certain events and limit or silence others, the ‘causal emplotment’ elaborates the causal relationship between the elements of a narrative. Emplotment allows to weigh and explain events rather than to just list them, i.e. to turn a set of propositions into an intelligible sequence of connected events about which we can form an opinion and attribute responsibility.

Again there are four specific aspects which contribute to the emplotment in the narrative struggle over foreign policy success or failure. In both success and failure narratives, the emplotment starts out with the labeling of an event or action as either a success or a failure (or a similar concept). These labels construe the policy as something that is ‘out of the ordinary’, either in a positive or a negative sense (E1) (Howlett, 2012: 543-544).

Furthermore, the emplotment dimension elaborates on the reasons for why a policy should be considered a success or failure. This generally involves two different stories: In the first, the reasons for considering a policy a success or failure are down to whether or not it meets its set objectives (E2). In policy evaluation studies this is one of the most common and straightforward means of judging a policy. Policies count as a failure if they fall short of certain objective criteria or benchmarks for success (Howlett, 2012: 541-542; McConnell, 2010: 349-351). Narrative struggles over success and failure will thus involve claims and counter-claims that a policy will or won’t achieve its stated objectives. This is closely intertwined with the debate over appropriate and viable objectives and entails a discussion over what can *realistically* be achieved in a given setting (see S3). In the second story the reasons for considering a policy a success or failure are down to its positive or negative

consequences (E3). Here, narrative struggles include broader references to, for example, the costs of a policy, the damage caused by it as well as its unintended and adverse consequences (King and Crewe, 2013: 4; Dunleavy, 1995: 52). Success or failure are emplotted into a chain of events which have resulted in something considered (un)desirable (Gray, 1998b: 8).

Finally, the emplotment involves the explanation of why a success or failure has occurred and who is to blame for it (E4). Success and failure narratives depend on establishing a causal link between the actions or non-actions of agents and the policies or consequences which are described as (un)desirable. Related to the characterization of influential agents, the narrative needs the allocation of responsibility and credit or blame as a crucial ingredient to any social construction of policy success or failure on which the audience can form an opinion (Gray, 1998b 8-9). Importantly, the causal explanation of policy failures and successes and the attribution of responsibility are interconnected. As Bovens and 't Hart (1996: 129) hold: 'to explain is to blame'. Here, failure narratives are most compelling if they make plausible claims to the effect that the negative implications of a foreign policy were foreseeable and controllable when the policy was formulated (Bovens and 't Hart, 1996: 73-90; Howlett, 2012: 543). Also, the attribution of responsibility is facilitated if the selected policy was widely praised/criticized already in its own time and went along with or against the advice of relevant observers or participants of decision-making (Tuchman, 1984: 5).

Table 1: Narrative Elements of Foreign Policy Success and Failure

Setting	Characterisation	Emplotment
S1: High stakes	C1: Labelling of decision-makers	E1: Labelling of policy as 'out of the ordinary': negative/positive
S2: Availability of alternatives	C2: Personal characteristics, motives and behavior of decision-makers	E2: (Not) Meeting Objectives
S3: Representation of decision context	C3: Placing main decision-makers in relationship to other characters	E3: Highly negative/positive consequences
S4: Historical analogies, 'historical setting' of decision context	C4: Decision-making process	E4: Attribution of responsibility

Success and Failure Contestation on the ‘Iran Nuclear Deal’

This section retells the story of the ‘Iran nuclear deal’ and presents our data on the contestation over the ‘deal’ in the US Congress. The data comes from a narrative analysis of selected key debates on the deal in the US Senate and House of Representatives.¹ For the Senate, we focused on the debates on 10 and 16 September 2015 in which the Democrats succeeded in blocking Republican attempts to have a vote on a resolution disapproving of the agreement. For the House, we studied the debates on 10 and 11 September 2015 about a resolution approving the nuclear deal which was defeated by 269 to 162 votes.²

Both sides of the divide used the debates as high-profile opportunities to put forward their particular narratives about the nuclear agreement. These debates took place against the backdrop of attempts of the Obama administration to constitute the agreement as a “historic diplomatic breakthrough” (Obama, 2015a) that “makes [the US], and the world, safer and more secure” (Obama, 2015b). In particular, the main line of the administration was that the deal “meets every single one” (Obama, 2015b) of its objectives in that it cuts off all pathways for Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon and includes a comprehensive and intrusive inspection regime which ensures that “if Iran cheats, we can catch them” (Obama, 2015a). While the Congressional Democrats put forward a narrative to support the efforts of the Obama administration to construct the nuclear agreement as an important foreign policy success, the Republicans developed a counter-narrative that tried to constitute the deal as a significant foreign policy failure.

Specifically, the objective is to trace the contestation over the nuclear agreement that pitted a Democratic narrative of success against a Republican narrative of failure and to identify the main discursive elements that were employed in the contest. To this purpose, our analysis relies on a coding frame that categorises the Congressional speeches according to the narrative elements of foreign policy success and failure spelled out in Table 1. We used the MAXQDA data analysis software to code our material and to interpret our findings.³

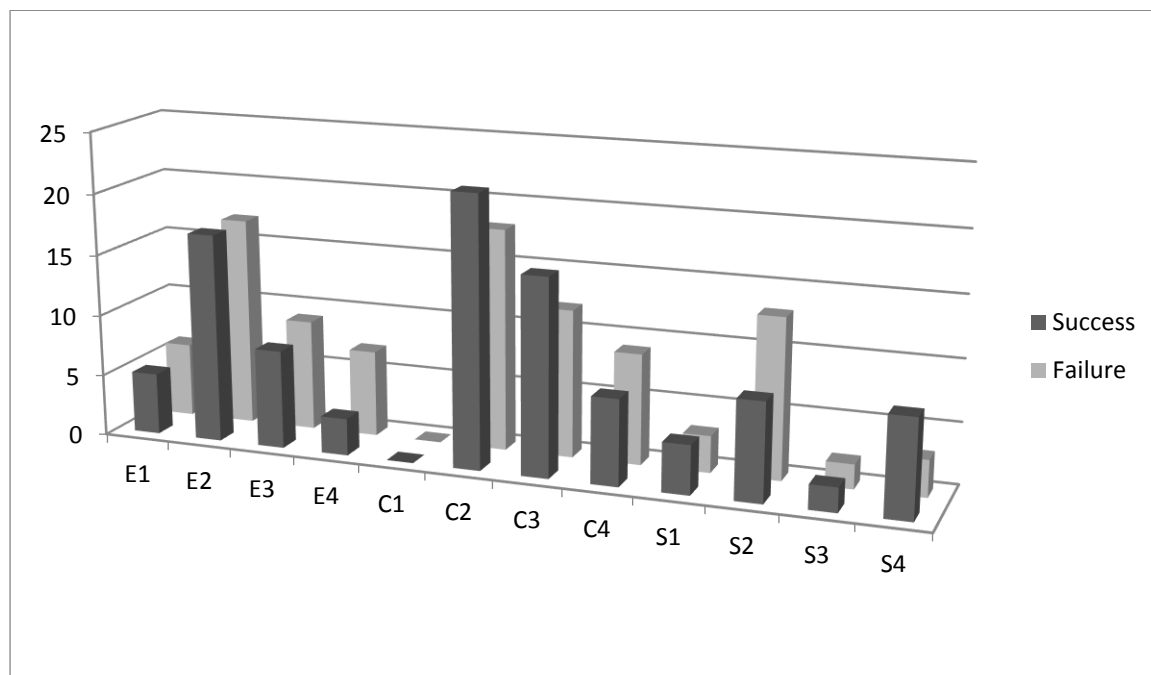
1 For reasons of readability and space, we reference quotes from these debates in the following format: page number in the Congressional Record, last name of the speaker. For example: S6560, Coats (Senate debate) or H5874, DeFazio (House debate).

2 For the full text of the debates, see: Congressional Record (2015): Proceedings and Debates of the 114th Congress, First Session, Vol. 161, No. 130, 131 and 133.

3 The full MAXQDA dataset with our coding frame and all coded material is available on the journal website.

We hope that the transparency of our coding frame and of how we have coded our material enables the replication of our study in different case studies.

Figure 1: Distribution of Narrative Elements in the Success and Failure Narratives (in %)



The first thing to note is that the distribution of narrative elements in the two competing narratives supports our argument that stories of success and failure follow a similar structure. As Figure 1 indicates, the two narratives bear a close resemblance regarding the patterns of relative salience of the different narrative elements. Also, our results show that there are only a few narrative elements – in particular S2, S4 and E4 – which are slightly more prominent in one narrative than in the other. The following discussion reconstructs the contestation between the two narratives on each of the three constitutive dimensions of narratives, *setting*, *characterisation* and *emplotment*.

Setting

The failure and success narratives both locate their stories in a setting that foregrounds the high stakes involved in the nuclear deal (S1). Indeed, the two sides use very similar language to signify the unusual importance of the agreement. Thus, Republican critics constitute the deal as “one of the most important issues of our time” (S6544, McConnell) and “the most consequential foreign policy decision in modern history” (S6547, Graham) which will have “long-lasting impacts on our national security and the security of our friends and allies”

(S6561, Grassley). Supporters of the agreement on the Democratic side of the aisle concur that the deal represents “one of the most critical national security issues of our time” (S6543, Reid) that will have “monumental and enduring consequences” (S6578, Mikulski). Both sides should thus be able to subscribe to this reminder of a Republican opponent of the deal: “We can’t afford to get this one wrong, folks. We owe it to our children and grandchildren to get this right” (S6550, Flake).

In contrast, one of the key areas of contention between the two sides is about whether or not the negotiations about the nuclear deal took place in a setting in which the Obama administration had room for meaningful choice between different policy options (S2). The debates show a sharp disagreement between opponents and supporters of the agreement about whether there would have been viable and better alternatives which the administration failed to pursue. On one hand, a central discursive plank of the success narrative is that “this deal is the best available strategy for blocking Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons” (S6564, Merkley). The narrative constitutes the policy as “the only viable option” (S6557, Brown): “I have given [the opponents of the deal] numerous opportunities to convince me there was a viable alternative. The conclusion I have reached is that there is not” (S6575, Warner).

The hypothetical and unacceptable alternative put forward by the supporters of the policy is said to be military intervention in Iran:

And now what do the Republicans offer as an alternative? Nothing. They have no plan, no plan other than to kill this agreement, which means that Iran will either obtain a nuclear weapon or the U.S. goes to war to stop them (H5899, McCollum).

In particular, these claims rest on the argument put forward by many Democrats (for example, S6568, Markey; S6568, Horino) that America’s international partners would not be prepared to negotiate another deal or agree to re-impose sanctions against Iran if the US rejected the agreement: “If the U.S. were to walk away from this deal and say we want to go back to the table, they will be sitting in an empty room” (H5874, DeFazio).⁴

This portrayal of the setting is flatly rejected by Republican critics of the nuclear deal: “A better deal was possible” (S6587, Capito). “[T]here is an alternative. The alternative to this bad deal is a better deal” (S6571, Portman). Most notably, the opponents of the deal refute the claim they attribute to the Obama administration that the choice is between the negotiated

⁴ This discursive element of the success narrative reinforces a key argument of the Obama administration that “no deal means no lasting constraints on Iran’s nuclear program” and “a greater chance of more war in the Middle East” (Obama, 2015b).

agreement and war: “The President presents a false narrative: war or this agreement. I could not disagree more” (H5889, Carter).

Moreover, the failure and success narratives diverge on how they represent the decision context and thus constitute settings in which different courses of action appear suitable and appropriate (S3). The success narrative essentially takes an optimistic view of the broader context of US policy towards Iran that highlights the chances for positive change which must not be missed. The nuclear talks with Iran are represented as a “transformative opportunity” (S6553, Carper) for “peace in a powder keg region of the world (H5883, Slaughter) and as “a tremendous opportunity for us to avoid a nuclear-armed Iran and secure at least that part of a peaceful Middle East and more secure world” (S6556, King).⁵ The failure narrative, in contrast, gives a much more pessimistic outlook on the decision context which highlights the dangers and risks of negotiations with Iran: [T]hese are dangerous times and [...] the regime in Iran is a dangerous threat to world peace” (H5878, Wilson). In particular, the dangers and risks of the negotiations are said to come from the “completely untrustworthy” (S6665, Toomey) nature of the “dictatorial and fanatical” (S6545, Hatch) Iranian regime which is “world’s largest state sponsor of terror” (H5872, Fitzpatrick) and “the world’s worst bad actor” (S6558, Coats).

Finally, the opponents and supporters of the nuclear deal employ different historical analogies to activate knowledge about past foreign policy issues in order to accentuate certain features of the current decision context (S4). The failure narrative relies in particular on two analogies. First, it likens President Obama’s support for the nuclear agreement to the 1938 Munich agreement and Neville Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement of Nazi Germany (H5876, McClintock; S6580, Cotton). Second, opponents of the deal draw parallels to the negotiations about North Korea’s nuclear programme under President Clinton in the 1990s (S6580, Rubio; S6663, Thune). “Have we learned nothing from our past mistakes? The same person that negotiated the deal with North Korea also led the discussions with Iran” (H5899, Shuster). This analogy more than anything serves to cast doubt on the verification regime of the nuclear agreement and to suggest that Iran, just like North Korea, will have ample opportunity to cheat: “If this deal is approved, in just a few years, Iran may test a nuclear device, as North Korea did in 2006, just 12 years after a similar nuclear agreement” (S6579, Cotton).

⁵ This echoes President Obama’s representation of the agreement as “an opportunity to move in a new direction” (Obama, 2015b).

On the opposite side of the argument, the success narrative links the Obama administration's negotiations with Iran to President Nixon's diplomatic initiative towards China and President Reagan's arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union. The lesson supporters of the 'Iran nuclear deal' wish to be drawn from these analogies to major foreign policy successes of previous Republican administrations is that negotiations with enemies of the United States are possible and can contribute to America's national security: "President Nixon went to China when it was Red China, an absolute adversary of this country and our way of life, and it has worked to the benefit of the national security of this country, and President Reagan did the same. [...] You have to negotiate with people that are your adversaries" (H5885, Welch).⁶ Moreover, supporters of the nuclear agreement not only invoke positive analogies to past foreign policy successes but also a negative analogy to "the disastrous invasion of Iraq" (S6567, Franken) in 2003. In particular, the success narrative brings to mind the false assumptions on which "the worst foreign policy decision ever made by our country" (S6583, Reid) was based in order to discredit Republican suggestions of a military solution in Iran (H5887, DeLauro).

Characterisation

The second site for the discursive struggle between supporters and opponents of the agreement is the characterisation of key actors and the decision-making process. The targets of attempts at characterising the main protagonists of the two narratives are both the leading US negotiators of the deal in the Obama administration as well as the supporters and critics of the agreement.

The first discursive tool the two sides of the debate infrequently use to characterise important agents in their stories is to put a label on them (C1). Such labels serve as cognitive shortcuts which activate knowledge about the personal characteristics of these agents and construct them in a particular way. The main labels employed in the failure and success narratives seize on historical analogies that they put forward to constitute the settings of the two stories which speaks to the symbiotic relationship between the different narrative dimensions. Specifically, the failure narrative took up the 'Munich' analogy to label President Obama as "appeaser" and "our Neville Chamberlain" (H5874, Williams). The success narrative, in turn, revisits its

⁶ President Obama also quoted President Kennedy to invoke a historical analogy to Kennedy's leadership in seeking discussions with the Soviet Union to contain the spread of nuclear weapons: "Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate" (Obama, 2015b).

analogy to the 2003 Iraq war by labelling the Republican critics of the nuclear deal as “neocons” (H5899, McCollum). On each of the two sides, therefore, labels served the purpose of casting the respective ‘Other’ in a negative light.

Broadening out from these labels, the narrative struggle about the nuclear agreement involves intense contestation over the personal characteristics, motives and behaviour of key actors (C2). The focal point of this contestation is the characterisation of President Obama and his negotiating team. On one side, the failure narrative constitutes President Obama as “entirely naïve” (H5879, Crawford) and as someone who “has no idea what he is talking about” (S6548, Graham). He is seen as “a lameduck President” (S6580, Cotton) who has “surrendered” or who “is blinded by deal euphoria” (S6549, Barrasso) and “only cares about shaping and moulding his legacy” (H5874, Williams). The administration are considered “weak negotiators because of an absolute desperation for a deal – almost any deal” (S6546, Hatch; see also: S6562, Grassley).

On the other side, those who seek to constitute the Iran deal as a foreign policy success applaud “President Obama’s unwavering leadership” (H5899, McCollum) and “leadership and commitment” (S6569, Markey). The deal is the result of “complex negotiations” (S6555, Peters) with Iran that were successful thanks to “the President’s good-faith effort” (S6552, Durbin) and “steadfast resolve” (S6569, Whitehouse). The entire negotiation team of “dedicated American officials” deserves credit for their “hard work” (S6569, Whitehouse) and “tireless efforts and service to our country” (S6569, Markey) for a deal which was “carefully negotiated” (H5883, Slaughter). Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz, in particular, is described as “a genius” (S6554, Carper).⁷

Moreover, the contestation in the Senate and House over the personal characteristics, motives and behaviour of key agents went beyond the Obama administration and included the proponents of the failure and success narratives in Congress themselves. Here, the critics and supporters of the deal used similar language to put a positive spin on their own motives and behaviour. Both sides constituted their opposition or support for the deal as the result of “thoughtful consideration” (S6565, Manchin), “exhaustive assessment and careful thought”, (S6565, Donnelly) and “numerous briefings [...] and a great deal of personal reflection” (S6569, Whitehouse). Just as critics of the deal invoke a “devotion to principle” (S6575,

⁷ Along similar lines, President Obama praised Moniz as “one of the best [nuclear experts] in the world” (Obama, 2015a).

Menendez) to describe their motivation, supporters explain their decision as a “matter of conscience” (S6663, Thune).

At the same time, both sides employ discursive tools to cast doubt on the character, motives and behavior of their opponents in the debate. The failure narrative portrays supporters of the nuclear deal as “irresponsible” (S6549, Barrasso) or “naïve” (H5893, Nunes), accusing them of looking at the agreement “through rose-coloured glasses” (S6563, Roberts) and of taking their position “based on hope” (S6575, Menendez) or “ideological grounds” (S6664, Thune). The most sustained attack in the failure narrative on the motives of the supporters of the agreement, however, is the allegation that the Congressional Democrats “turn a blind eye on [the deal’s] obvious failings” for reasons of “party discipline” (S6560, Coats).

On the opposite side of the divide, the success narrative links opposition to the nuclear deal to “unrealistic expectations, [...] a hunger to send Americans into another war, or [...] petty partisanship” (S6567, Franken). The Republican critique of the deal “doesn’t show good faith” (S6552, Durbin). While Democrats have arrived at “thoughtful, informed decisions” (S6557, Brown) in favour of the agreement, this is contrasted with the behaviour of Republican critics who are accused of having castigated the agreement “within hours of [its] announcement” (S6568, Horino) “almost as soon as the ink was dry on it and well before they ever read it” (S6553, Carper; see also: S6558, Brown).⁸

Most notably, perhaps, the supporters of the deal seek to discredit the character and behavior of their Republican opponents by repeatedly bringing up an open letter of 47 Republican Senators to Iran during the negotiations which reminds the Iranian leaders that the next American President can revoke any executive agreement between the two countries “with a stroke of a pen” (New York Times, 2015). For Democrats, this represents the “unprecedented step” (S6567, Franken) of saying to the Iranian leaders: “‘Don’t waste your time negotiating with the United States of America.’ That has never happened in the history of the United States – never.” (S6552, Durbin). Consequently, the success narrative constitutes the letter as “a clear attempt to undermine American diplomacy” (S6567, Franken) and likens it to “treason” (S6669, Durbin).

A third discursive element that is widely employed in the narrative contest to characterise the main agents in the competing stories can be described as ‘characterisation by association’

⁸ President Obama used almost exactly the same line when he accused Republicans of “knee-jerk partisanship”: “[B]efore the ink was even dry on this deal – before Congress even read it – a majority of Republicans declared their virulent opposition” (Obama, 2015a).

(C3). Both the failure and the success narrative often rely on relating key decision-makers and participants in the debate to third characters either to enhance or to undermine their image and reputation. In case of the failure narrative, this discursive tool is used primarily to cast the supporters of the deal in a negative light by putting them in opposition to the “American people” (S6544, McConnell; H5098, Blackburn), a range of political and military experts and America’s foremost ally in the Middle East, Israel.

First, the Obama administration and the Democratic supporters of the agreement are constituted by their critics as ignoring “a bipartisan majority across America that opposes the deal” (S6664, Toomey; see also: S6581, Corker). The failure narrative reports national and state-level opinion polls (S6551, Daines; S6561, Grassley) to support its claim that “the American people overwhelmingly oppose this agreement” (S6561, Grassley). “When 80 percent of the American people say “no” to this deal, how can America’s House, how can we who have been elected by the American people, come here and say, ‘You are wrong, and we are right?’ A vote for this deal is a vote against the American people” (H5885, Kelly).

Second, the failure narrative seeks to undermine the perceived competence of the Obama administration and its supporters by lining up “a who’s who of experts” (S6558, Coats; see also: S6565, Manchin) who are said to be critical of the agreement or of negotiations with Iran more generally. These experts include military leaders (H5888, Byrne) as well as prominent individuals from Henry Kissinger, Georg Shultz (S6560, Coats) and Jimmy Carter (S6584, McConnell) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (S6561, Grassley). “There is a real disconnect here between what the experts tell us and what the administration is doing” (H5873, Fitzpatrick).

Third, the opponents of the nuclear agreement assert that the Obama administration acts against the opposition of Israel and the warnings of its Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that “the very future existence of my country is at risk” (S6560, Coats): “You are telling the world that this is the best deal for Israel. Guess what. Nobody in Israel in the current government agrees with you” (S6547, Graham; see also S6584, McConnell).

The success narrative, for its part, counters the portrayal of the failure narrative by associating the Obama administration and the proponents of the nuclear deal with a broad range of supporters of the agreement in the international community and among experts and moral authorities. It also directly contests the attempt of opponents of the deal to put the

Obama administration in opposition to US public opinion: “According to a recent [...] poll, 55 percent said that Congress should get behind this agreement” (H5888, Lee).

In particular, the success narrative constitutes the agreement as “a joint effort among six sovereign countries” (S6569, Whitehouse) that “involved the world’s major powers” (S6556, King) and is backed by “an amazing alliance of nations” (S6668, Durbin): “All nations involved in the negotiations said this is a good agreement and should move forward. In addition to that, we have the support from the Security Council of the United Nations. Over 100 countries have endorsed this” (S6551, Durbin). In this context, the supporters of the deal explicitly challenge the allegation of the failure narrative that Israel opposes the nuclear deal by pointing to the “dozens, and actually scores, of former Israeli military leaders and intelligence leaders” (S6553, Carper) who believe the US should support the agreement.

Moreover, the success narrative enlists the support of a wide coalition of “arms control experts, nuclear scientists, diplomats, and military and intelligence leaders” (S6568, Horino). This coalition includes, for example, “100 former American ambassadors” (S6569, Whitehouse), “75 nonproliferation experts and diplomats” (S6564, Merkley) and “29 leading American nuclear scientists, including six Nobel laureates” (S6568, Markey). Similarly, the narrative associates supporters of the deal with religious and moral authorities who are said to be in favour of the agreement: “Domestic faith leaders have implored this Congress to follow the Old Testament creed to “seek peace and pursue it”. (H5884, Slaughter). This includes “His Holiness and the Vatican” (S6661, Reid), “more than 4000 Catholic religious women [and] more than 400 American Rabbis” (E1264, Eshoo) as well as over 4000 Catholic nuns” (H5901, Pesoli). Also, the success narrative brings in prominent supporters of the deal on the Republican side in order to counter the suggestion in the failure narrative that the agreement lacks bipartisan support. Among others, this includes the former Secretary of State General Colin Powell, the former Senator Richard Lugar and the former National Security Advisor to Presidents Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush, Brent Scowcroft (S6557, Brown; S6565, Donnelly; S6585, Kaine; H5884, Slaughter).

Finally, the discursive struggle between the failure and success narratives involves contestation over the characterisation of the process of US decision-making on the nuclear agreement (C4). On the side of the failure narrative, the attempt to constitute this process as illegitimate and illegal rests on three pillars. First, President Obama is criticised for negotiating the nuclear deal “as an executive agreement rather than a treaty” (S6550, Flake; see also: S6562 Roberts) and “not to respect the constitutional requirement to get two-thirds

of the Senate to support [the deal]” (S6665, Toomey): “[The President] decided to circumvent the Constitution, the Congress, the United States Senate, and the will of the American people” (S6665, Toomey).

Second, the opponents of the nuclear deal object to “secret side deals” (S6664, Thune; H5874, Williams) between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency that “none of us are allowed to see” (S6571, Portman) and that “we can’t review” (S6561, Grassley). This is constituted as being “contrary [...] to the Iran review act that was passed by Congress and was signed into law by the President of the United States” (S6571, Portman) and thus as “a clear, explicit violation of the law” (S6665, Toomey).

Third, the failure narrative accuses the Democratic supporters of the nuclear deal of “trying to hide behind a filibuster” (S6550, Barrasso) and “to stifle the voices of the American people” (S6665, Toomey): “Our Democratic colleagues are filibustering an attempt to have a debate and an up-or-down vote on the most consequential foreign policy decision in modern history” (S6547, Graham).

The success narrative directly contests some of the main allegations of the Republican opponents of the nuclear deal and offers a very different characterisation of the Congressional debates. In particular, the supporters of the agreement assert that Congress has reviewed the deal “in accordance with the law [...] for the past 53 days” (S6578, Mikulski). Rather, it is the Republican procedural manoeuvres to obstruct the deal which are constituted as “a perversion of legislative process [involving] bills that might as well have been scribbled on the back of a cocktail napkin. These bills trivialise our institution” (H5883, Slaughter).

Furthermore, supporters of the deal address the criticism of secret side deals (H5898, Schiff) and take issue with Republican charges of filibustering the debate. Specifically, they contend that Democrats have twice made “a good-faith offer” (S6551, Durbin) to the Republicans not to use a filibuster and to have an up-or-down vote in the Senate with a threshold of 60 votes. That offer was rejected, however, although “it is absolutely clear from the legislative record [that everybody] understood that a 60-vote margin would be required” (S6556, King): According to the Democratic supporters of the agreement, “it is the Republican leader who is moving to end debate, [...] not us” (S6544, Reid).

Emplotment

The third dimension of the discursive struggle between the failure and success narratives, finally, relates to the emplotment of the competing stories. This involves four discursive elements which can again be traced in the selected Congressional debates. The emplotment starts out with labelling the agreement as a major foreign policy failure or success that is ‘out of the ordinary’ (E1). Thus, the failure narrative interchangeably constitutes the agreement as a “catastrophically bad” (S6545, Hatch), “disastrous” (S6547, Hatch; H5890, Roskam), “awful” (S6570, Johnson), “terrible” (H5881, Allen) or “extremely dangerous” (S6664, Toomey; H5890 Ros-Lehtinen) deal. It is a “nuclear tripwire” (S6577, Corker) that represents a “grave mistake” (H5877, Dold) and the “biggest miscalculation in modern foreign policy history” (S6548, Graham). On the opposite side of the divide, in turn, the success narrative constructs the nuclear deal as a “good” (H5889, McGovern), “strong” (S6566, Franken), “remarkable” (H5884, Slaughter) and “historic” (S6583, Reid) agreement that promises to become “a historic turning point” (S6570, Whitehouse).

Moreover, the emplotment involves giving reasons for why a foreign policy is labelled as a success or failure. One critical site of contestation, in this regard, is whether or not a policy or decision meets its stated objectives (McConnell, 2016: 669) (E2). Judged against this benchmark, the failure narrative asserts that the nuclear deal “falls real short” (S6561, Grassley):

Clearly, the question is: What did we get from this agreement in terms of what we originally sought? [...] The agreement that has been reached failed to achieve the one thing it set out to achieve – it failed to stop Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons state at a time of its choosing (S6575, Menendez).

Thus, “[t]he President’s agreement does not live up to the administration’s prior statements” (S6587, Capito), “does not measure up to its ultimate goal” (H5872, Fitzpatrick) and “falls woefully short of the international goal to improve global security” (S6545, Cochran). A specific shortcoming of the negotiations which the failure narrative singles out, in particular, is the “inability to achieve anytime, anywhere inspections, which the administration always held out as [one of the] essential elements we would insist on” (S6574, Menendez). “Despite all these assurances” (S6561, Grassley), the deal “is a long way from ‘anywhere, anytime’ the American people were promised” (S6551, Daines).

In contrast, the success narrative insists that the “agreement reached accomplishes the goal of preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon” (H5896, Viclosky). It “blocks [Iran’s] pathways to a bomb” (S6554, Carper; see also: S6578, Mikulski). “[W]e have one goal in mind, shared by many nations around the world: to stop Iran from developing a nuclear

weapon. That is the goal. I believe this agreement comes as close to achieving that as we can hope for at this moment” (S6551, Durbin). Confronting the critique of opponents of the deal, the success narrative explicitly praises the agreement for its “extremely strong” (S6566, Franken) verification measures which amount to “the most invasive, stringent, and technologically innovative verification regime ever negotiated” (S6568, Markey).

A further area of contestation between the competing narratives centred on whether the (anticipated) consequences of the nuclear deal should be seen as negative or positive (E3). The opponents of the agreement set out a range of highly negative consequences for international security, the stability of the Middle East and American interests. In particular, the agreement “accepts and legitimises Iran as a nuclear threshold state” (S6561, Grassley) and “puts [it] on the path to obtaining a nuclear weapon” (S6570, Johnson). This is expected to bolster Iran’s “hegemonic intentions throughout the region” (S6573, Menendez) and make “the ayatollahs [...] even more brazen, fearsome, reckless, and insulated from conventional forms of deterrence and pressure” (S6579, Cotton). In consequence, the deal will “trigger a nuclear arms race” (H5876, McClintock) as well as a “conventional arms race in the Middle East” (S6571, Portman; see also: S6579, Cotton). That would have “disastrous consequences for the Middle East” (S6550, Flake) and “make war more likely” (S6547, Hatch).

What is more, the agreement “will give tens of billions and eventually hundreds of billions of dollars [in sanctions relief] to our enemy, our avowed enemy” (S6570, Johnson), the “terrorist-sponsoring Iranian regime” (S6579, Cotton). This will give the Iranian regime further resources to “support efforts to kill Americans and Western Europeans” (S6561, Grassley) and to “work with other terrorist groups in the region to target American service men and women” (S6580, Rubio). This is all “going to be so damaging to America’s long-term interest” (S6570, Johnson).

On the opposite side, the success narrative spells out the expected positive consequences of the nuclear agreement, but puts at least as much focus on emphasising the negative consequences of rejecting the deal. Thus, for the supporters of the agreement, “the deal represents a significant step forward for [US] national security” (S6567, Franken) by “peacefully and verifiably cutting off Iran’s pathways to a nuclear weapon” (H5883, Slaughter). “Our families are safer today because that agreement was adopted” (H5886, Doggett). At the same time they emphasise the “impact of no agreement” (S6580, Durbin) as highly negative. “Without this agreement Iran could simply return to developing a nuclear weapon” (H5888, McGovern). Turning the deal down would “risk the worst of both worlds”

(S6565, Donnelly). It “will do self-inflicted damage to American global leadership and to the cause of international diplomacy” (S6567, Franken) and means “literally leaving Iran the capacity to build 10 nuclear weapons today” (S6580, Durbin).. By putting the spotlight on the negative consequences of rejecting the nuclear agreement, the supporters of the deal reinforce the setting of the success narrative in which there is no viable alternative to the deal.

Finally, the last element in the emplotment of failure and success narratives is the allocation of responsibility (E4). While narratives of foreign policy failure will involve the attribution of blame, success narratives will attempt to claim the credit for the policy in question. Specifically, the opponents of the deal put the blame squarely on President Obama and his Democratic supporters in Congress. “President Obama [...] has negotiated this agreement” (S6570, Johnson), it is “the President’s agreement” (S6587, Capito). “Mr. Speaker, President Obama has sold our nation’s security for some magic beans” (H5890, Westmoreland). The deal is described as “a metaphor for all of the mistakes this President has made” (S6584, McConnell) and part of “the President’s legacy of failed policies of weakness” (H5878, Wilson) in the Middle East. More broadly, the failure narrative also makes the Congressional Democrats accountable for the consequences of the deal if they choose not to block it. “To my Democratic friends: You own this. [...] You own everything that is to follow and it is going to be holy hell” (S6549, Graham). History will judge the proponents of the agreement and “condemn us for not doing what was needed to be done in the world’s history” (S6580, Rubio).

While the Democratic supporters of the nuclear agreement used this narrative element less often than their Republican opponents (see Figure 1), they still tried to claim credit for the deal. “And we were successful. We were successful” (H5889, McGovern). “The Senate has spoken with a clarion voice and declared that this historic agreement [...] will stand” (S6583, Reid). This is “a proud moment for this institution” (S6581, Durbin) that “will show the world [that] the United States has the will and sense of responsibility to help stabilise the Middle East” (H5900, Pelosi).

Conclusion

The story we told in this article has argued that the interpretation of foreign policy as success or failure is down to a contest of narratives. It has outlined a method of narrative analysis which emphasises the narrative dimensions of setting, characterization and emplotment.

Empirically the article examined Congressional debates on the ‘Iran nuclear deal’ and showed how narratives of success and failure were both structured along similar lines.

The article also contributes to the debate on why some narratives become dominant in political discourse and others not. From the perspective of conventional actor-centred and resource-based understandings of discursive power, the plausibility and reception of a story would critically depend on the role and power of the narrator. Here, the capacity of political actors to shape media and public narratives according to their goals depends on their control over and diligent use of relevant material and immaterial resources such as PR budgets, specialized expertise, skills, and strategies as well as their authority and credibility as narrators (Aronczyk, 2008; Hülse, 2009). The latter aspect is stressed by a variety of studies which consider the personal credibility and reliability of the narrator as important for the credibility of a story (Booth, 1983; Sharman, 2007). In the case of narratives of success and failure of the ‘Iran nuclear deal’, however, such explanations seem largely unconvincing as the more powerful side of the debate in form of the administration and president is not the dominant narrative. As Krebs (2015a: 31) puts it: ‘Dominant narratives are not the straightforward product [...] of the desires of powerful interests and individuals’.

An audience based approach, in turn, would hold that the dominance or marginality of narratives can be understood with reference to the presence of pre-existing culturally embedded narratives among the audience. While some refer to this phenomenon as the ‘verisimilitude’ of the stories being told and argue that success and failure of narratives are down to an audience’s preconceptions of the given actor, others have argued that the dominance of certain narratives is grounded in inter-subjective understandings of the audience (Van Ham, 2002: 262). In other words, narratives have to conform to cultural expectations not only in their organisational form but in their canonicity. In the case of the narrative struggle over the ‘Iran nuclear deal’ this explanation also remains unconvincing as it would lead one to expect that the failure narrative dominates due to the pre-existing culturally embedded negative view of the Iranian regime in the US.

As an alternative explanation for narrative dominance or marginality the article has suggested the significance of the structure and content of the narratives themselves.⁹ As our analysis shows, the absence of a clear winner in the narrative struggle over success and failure of the ‘Iran nuclear deal’ corresponds to the similar narrative structure equally used on both sides of

⁹ It should be noted that we are not making a causal claim in the Humean sense. Rather, we hold that certain narrative structures are constitutive of (more or less) powerful narratives of success or failure.

the debate in the US Congress. It is important to note, moreover, that judgments of success and failure as well as the prevalence of the respective narratives have a temporal dimension. Just as evaluations of policy can change over time (Bovens and 't Hart, 1996: 22-27), so can relations of narrative dominance and marginality. While the future trajectory of the contest between success and failure narratives on the 'Iran nuclear deal' will undoubtedly be shaped by how its implementation turns out in practice, the upshot of our 'middle ground' perspective which rejects both 'objectivist' and purely 'relativist' accounts of success and failure is that how the agreement works 'on the ground' will not speak for itself. Rather, the content and structure of the failure and success narratives that have been reconstructed in this article can be expected to continue to influence interpretations of future developments, and the longer-term prospects of the two competing narratives will in part depend on how well they can incorporate such developments into their structure. We hope that our exploratory study can be a first step into further needed research into the importance of narrative structures in the explanation of narrative dominance and marginality.

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