

Problems - Symbols

Introduction

A symbol can be anything that stands for something else. What a symbol means depends on the audience, on interpretation.

Key Concepts

Narrative stories - A story has a beginning, middle, and end and involves some change or transformation. Stories usually have heroes, villains, and victims and suggest a struggle of good against evil. Stories embedded in policies provide an explanation of how the world works. Their power comes in the promise of a resolution, of closure, for difficult and frightening problems. There are **two** general types of stories in politics.

Stories of decline - "In the beginning, things were good. But now they're bad. There will soon be a crisis. But if we do X, Y, and Z, we'll be able to survive." These stories usually begin with a recitation of statistics "proving" how things have gotten worse. These stories generally generate despair or anxiety.

Variation: Stymied progress story - Things were bad, then good thanks to a certain someone, but now because of regulation, progress has slowed, stopped, or reversed

Variation: Change-is-an-illusion story - You thought things were good (or bad), but the reality is the opposite.

Stories of control - "Things are bad and we thought we were helpless. But now we see that we can change things." Stories that move us from the realm of fate, to one of control are inherently hopeful.

Variation: Conspiracy story - We can control things. But things have been controlled in nefarious ways. We must take control back from these hidden powers."

Variation: Blame-the-victim story - People control their fate and if people suffer or are poor they brought it on themselves. People must clean up their act."

Synecdoche - This is a figure of speech in which a part is used to represent a whole. An example would be the stereotype of the "welfare queen" that came to represent the entire debate about "welfare." Horror stories qualify as synecdoches if they mobilize lawmakers to take action. They are important in politics because we often base policies on examples we believe encapsulate the entirety of a complex situation.

Metaphors - These assert a likeness between two things and imply a larger story. In politics, metaphors are essential to classification and counting. They suggest if *A* is like *B*. The way to solve *A* is to do what you do with *B*. Here are some sample metaphors and their implied solutions:

Organisms - To say that something has a life cycle or a life of its own, is to imply it's like an organism, that it's natural, and that the government should just leave it alone. Often this metaphor justifies inequality. It's story of one of how something is beyond human control.

Machines - The idea of government as a machine that requires balance and periodic "tune-ups" underlies our constitution. This metaphor implies something is needed to restore an original balance to a situation.

Wedges and inclines - This is the idea of getting a "foot in the door" with a policy that will gradually grow larger. When you hear about a "slippery slope," you are talking about inclines. These metaphors serve to block change through fear of opening a "can of worms," which is another metaphor.

Containers - The "can of worms" suggests the container metaphor. When you hear about immigrants "spilling over" our border or a "power vacuum" or "building pressure" or "outlets" or cities "exploding" you are suggesting policy solutions that involve adjustments of levels.

Disease - Look for words such as "infect" or "epidemics" or "breeding grounds." This implies a story of decline and a need to isolate the pathogen and "wipe out" the people who are the problem.

War - This metaphor comes to life when we talk about "invasions" of privacy or a "campaign" against a problem. We have the "war on" terror, drugs, or poverty. This suggest that social survival is at stake and justifies the government taking extraordinary (and sometimes extralegal) measures.

Use of these metaphors, is always strategic. They define a problem in a way to give one group an advantage over another within the polis.

Ambiguity - This is the capacity of symbols to have multiple meanings. While we often try to get rid of ambiguity, politicians use this uncertainty to create compromise and claim a win for their side. Here are some examples of ambiguity in political discourse:

"Religious freedom" to some means being able to pray in school while to others it means not having to even think about religion while on school grounds.

"Defending American interests" is a wonderfully vague phrase that allows lawmakers to justify passing a law while disagreeing on what American interests actually are.

Most people want to "cut welfare" but spend more to reduce "child poverty"

Summary

Stories and symbols are strategic tools for politicians and interest groups. They aren't about truth. Policy makers create stories to justify what they want to do and give value to their particular interests, position, and skills.