

NARRATIVES OF CRISES AND CONVERSATIONAL REPERTOIRES: POLITICAL CULTURE IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC¹

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Résumé

L'article décrit les résultats de la recherche conduite sur la manière dont les citoyens appréhendent la politique. Nous avons fait quatre-vingt-dix entretiens autobiographiques avec des citoyens et trente avec des hommes politiques. Nous avons découvert quatre types de récit de crise et quatre répertoires conversationnels de la politique. Le sens des récits de crise dépend de l'emploi d'un répertoire spécifique.

Mots clés:

Culture politique, crises, République tchèque, analyse narrative, analyse qualitative

Abstract

The article describes results of qualitative research of how people relate themselves to politics. We conducted ninety in-depth autobiographical interviews with citizens and thirty with politicians. We have found four types of narratives of crises and four conversational repertoires of politics. The meaning of narratives of crises depends on the use of a concrete conversational repertoire.

Keywords

Political culture, crises, Czech Republic, narrative analysis, qualitative analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary societies with a democratic political regime and capitalist economics are constantly suffering from complex crises, which are publicly discussed. Citizens with the voting right can affect these crises through elections, so they are also responsible for recognizing, entitling, and solving these crises. The relevant crises are those which are as crises identified and framed, thus they are socially constructed by narratives. These narratives can be perceived as a simplification of the whole complexity of crises, in order to orient oneself and act.

Four years ago, we started to research the Czech political culture. It was a time of several corruption scandals and a lingering economic crisis. So, within our research, the narratives of crises emerged as a by-product, which was present in nearly every interview we conducted. Therefore, we started to ask ourselves how the meaning of narratives of crises is constructed. It has turned out that narratives of crises can be seen as a part of the political culture, so we tried to understand this type of narratives in the context of the whole research. Then, we analyzed them with the help of our typology of conversational repertoires of politics. The key thesis of this article says that the overall interpretation of narratives of crises, which are used for the orientation in the political reality, is not determined by their plot, but by the pre-understanding, which can be partially revealed and understood through the use of conversational repertoires. In other words, the same narrative of crisis may have a noticeably different meaning depending on a concrete conversational repertoire used by the storyteller.

Before turning attention to narratives of crisis, we will describe the context of political culture research, methodology of our research and typology of conversational repertoires of politics which is used for analysis of narratives of crisis. All three crisis present in transcriptions of our interviews - the crisis of trust in politics, the economic crisis, and the crisis in the form of rising preferences for the Czech Communist party – were narratively reconstructed by four types of reasoning: 1. narrative of the communist past, 2. narrative of the nature of the Czech people, 3. fatalistic narratives of power and 4. narratives of these days. These will be described and illustrated by fragments of interviews.

POLITICAL CULTURE AND CULTURAL REPERTOIRES

Political culture as a concept for empirical political analysis originates from a famous work *The Civic Culture* (1965) by Almond and Verba, whose aim was to carry out comparable surveys of political attitudes in order to predict the stability of new democratic countries after World War II. They have identified three types of the political culture: parochial, subject, and participant. Their work brought an extensive response within social sciences, however, the concept of political culture was accompanied by several controversies at the theoretical level. The original research by Almond and Verba did not offer a theory in the true sense, it rather operationalized previous theoretical concepts of Weber's theory of legitimization and concepts of behaviorism (Skovajsa 2006; Welch 2005, 2013).

Our approach refers to the criticism formed by Welch (2005, 2013), who claims that in the field of political culture research there is a tendency towards „disciplinary normalisation“, i.e. a tendency to substitute the method of extensive quantitative surveys for theory, and therefore the theory is marginalized in favour of the implementation of major quantitative surveys. As a result, several authors tend to question the usefulness of the theory of political culture (e.g. Lane 1992), because they insist on the cultural contextuality, which is always geographically and historically situated and therefore very fluid. That is why the culture cannot be captured by only one set of abstract concepts.

According to Geertz (2000), the interpretation of cultures is similar to the interpretation of the text, because it applies more cultural sensitivity and insight into ways of dealing with meaning in various cultures. That is why a big theory cannot offer a proper interpretation of culture. In this regard, we agree with Welch that although interpretative analysis does not follow the logic of causality and it rather focuses on analyzing the meaning, if the meaning is perceived as real, the agency will be real in its consequences. Therefore, interpretative works about political culture at least implicitly contain the concept of causality (Welch, 2013). As much the reflection of national cultures and national political representation requires a high level of sensitivity to the context, the general relation between culture and politics is evident across nation states, so a general theory is possible.

There are two quantitative survey analysis about the political culture in the context of the Czech Republic (Klicperová-Baker et al., 2007; Vajdová, Stachová, 2005). The research team of Klicperová-Baker compared the political culture of four national states in Central and Eastern Europe. The authors extended the typology of political culture and added the fourth type, an “alienated” political culture, which is typical for post-communist societies. According to this research, the Czech political culture of the mid-90’s is comparable with the Italian political culture after World War II (ibid.). Later research, by Vajdová and Stachová, compared political culture of different Czech regions using a similar "disciplinarily normalised" questionnaire. The authors claim that the Czech political culture is comparable with those of the West. Nevertheless, we can observe a decline in confidence of Czech citizens in their own political representation. In the early 90’s, almost 80% of the Czech population trusted the Parliament, whereas in times of the economic crisis around 2009 it was only 10% (Červinka, 2009). The decline of trust is also evident within research of legitimacy of the Czech democratic regime (Linek, 2010). This unfavourable evolution of attitudes about a democratic regime in countries with an authoritarian past is known as the "post-honeymoon stage" (Inglehart, Catterberg, 2002; Catterberg, Moreno, 2005). It means that the initial uncritical enthusiasm about the new regime is later substituted with a stronger disillusionment.

These paradoxes can be explained by the "disciplinary normalization“ of categories of political culture. The categories of traditional quantitative surveys are 1) oriented towards the state as a whole, not to individual entities competing for power, 2) they are static, capturing the characteristics of attitudes but not their source and development, and 3) they conceal their evaluative nature, because participating citizens are considered as the best and the ideal political culture is implicitly attributed to the USA (as an democratic ideal for comparison in Almond and Verba’s work). For these reasons, the classical categories of political culture are

not able to capture the dynamics of specific political situations that occur at the level of nation states. Therefore, we have tried to create a different tool for analysis.

We believe that such an endeavor is not only possible but also necessary. As a basic theoretical and methodological concept we have chosen cultural repertoires (Swidler, 1984), which have been already used for international comparison of different reasoning in everyday life among citizens of the USA and France (Lamont, Thevenot, 2000). Culture in this context is defined as a set of shared repertoires of symbolic tools that are available to interpret and evaluate different events, in our case, political events. These repertoires are reproduced through social interactions. This instrumental approach takes culture as a toolkit from which cultural tools are selected as needed. Another important assumption of this approach is that these tools are not equally accessible, they can be used only by those who have already learned it in the past. The third aspect of the culture repertoires is their tendency to generate a custom, i.e. habitualization of effective problem solution. Since this is a very broad concept and cultural repertoires can be found in any field of symbolically structured activity, we use them in a narrower context of talks about politics. Storytellers who we interviewed used several types of conversational repertoires for interpreting a variety of highly complex crises with different meaning depending on the repertoire used.

METHODOLOGY

The research design was inspired by methodological recommendations by Hajek et al. (2012) whose approach is based on the philosophy of narrative analysis by Paul Ricoeur (2001). In this perspective, every narrative has three interrelated parts, triple *mimésis*. *Mimésis I* indicates a pre-comprehension of the world, i.e. unsaid assumptions of the narrative and implicit cultural content. *Mimésis II* identifies the story, an *emplotment* in which the narrator combines traditional forms of storytelling and their own innovative elements. *Mimésis III* represents a performative level of storytelling, a narrative situation in terms of the relationship of the narrator and the listener. The game of interviewing generates expectations of both sides. Within the analysis of a narrative, a sociologist has to proceed in reverse from *Mimésis III* to *Mimésis II*. Only then can they hope for uncovering a small part of the meanings contained in *Mimésis I*.

Narratives which we analyzed were gained from several types of interviews: 90 interviews with lay people (conducted by sociology students with their parents), 30 interviews with Czech politicians and other 30 interviews with journalists, businessmen and political activists.² Several types of interviews allow us to track differences caused by *Mimésis III*. Interviews were taken with a semi-structured script. The narrator was asked to talk about the period of communist normalization (the 70's--80's) and so-called Velvet revolution in 1989. The second part of interviews was focused on the memories of the transformation period in the 90's, and the third part was focused on the present day. The average length of one interview was approximately 90 minutes. The category of "crisis" was not present in the script

² All interviews were recorded and transcribed. We have signed an agreement on data protection with all storytellers, which guarantees their anonymity. Within our analysis we only worked with their gender and category of narrators (lay people/politicians).

of interviews, nevertheless, it occurred in almost every interviews. However the interpretation of the term, therefore, depended only on the storyteller.

Results of the Analysis: Repertoires of Politics

First, we will characterize the conversational repertoires of politics, then we will describe their possible combinations, and finally we will show how these repertoires are used for reasoning of political events which are labelled by the narrator as a crisis.

Interested Repertoire

Narratives that used the interested repertoire converged in several areas. Usually, they thematized the subjective aspect of the narrator's autobiographic experience or referred to it by the use of expressive statements - mostly expressing happiness, fear, pleasure, anger etc. The goal of these statements was to show interest in the narrated. In pre-figuration, we always find an emphasis on the narrator's identity, which allows them to identify with a person or institution (my politician, my party etc.). Our name for this repertoire does not only describe the interest in the narrated, but also reluctance to accept radically different opinions; "interested" means both of these. Metaphorically, politics was described in a similar way to a theatre play, which involved both heroes and villains and which engaged the audience/narrator so much that they felt like part of the plot. A typical narrative starts "I think", "I experienced", or contains distinguishing categories such as "I like/do not like" or "my/their".

Josef: „I have a friend that I play tennis with, he has the same opinions as me, which makes me sure that I'm not crazy. Just like maybe you have quite the same opinions as me, but then there are people who I thought had the same opinions like me, but then they surprised me in that they're not interested at all and never vote, or that they choose a boring, not important topic which they get all focused on, or some surprise me that have absolutely different opinions than me, they're on the other side, but they also have the right for that, I think. It might surprise me and I'm able to accept it. The only thing that I can't accept is when somebody (...) transforms their opinions in some nationalistic rhetoric, that's where I draw the line.“

Objective Repertoire

In this repertoire, we find the narrator giving reasons, considerate, thinking. It is typical for evaluations of the others' behaviour that they precede the idea on which they are based. The value of the statement is derived simply from the persuasiveness of the reasoning, rather than from the expressivity of the statement or the potential of self-identification. Rather than "interest in", the narrators strive to persuade their audience about their "interest about".

This pre-figurative preference leads to emplotments, in which the narrator plays the role of an external observer. The plot is then reconstructed as “it happens that”. The objective repertoire is attributed with a similarly sharp critique as the interested repertoire, but it does not refer to the narrator’s identity. That is why we find categories of evaluation such as “working/not working”, “meaningful/meaningless”. The thematization of one’s emotions is either missing or results in ambivalence. However, we cannot claim that the statements in this repertoire are objective as in unbiased. One’s own opinion is presented from behind a curtain of facts which justify it.

Eva: „It was always supposed to be so that at least one big party is in the opposition and makes sure that there’s no dirt. But after the opposition agreement they divided the areas, I don’t know how, I wasn’t part of either of the scam, but this is how it was and the watchdog of the opposition was gone. And that was a big problem. So in the end I think that that broke ODS’s neck, they lost many voters and they found many affairs against it, and I think the socialists are also guilty like that, but there were not as many affairs against them.“

Evasive Repertoire

Evasive repertoire is characterized by an emphasis on plurality of information and relativity of the truth, an absence of moral judgments, and an absence of verbal expressivity. The aim of the statements was to express disorientation or uninterest in the narrated. The narrators construct plots about political phenomena as “it happens that...” and play the role of a passive viewer, whose life has, however, no intersection with the politics. The following excerpt illustrates the typical narrative well:

Pavla: „Well, everything has its pros and everything has its cons. It happens like that.“

The narrations that express a distance from the politics or misunderstanding of the political events tell us about attempts to avoid holding any clear attitude towards the narrated. This distinguishes this repertoire from the objective repertoire. Narrations in these statements were not missing as such, but they were substituted by big stories about the social structure without any real influence on the narrator’s thinking or experiences. They are stories of two different worlds, whose paths do not meet.

Iveta: „My personal life is narrowly connected with the events and politics was something aside, right. In the end, they say that politics is something that the citizen lives in their personal lives. As Čapek says: Do you want to do politics? Go and weed the backyard. You’ll see how much work it is and infinite. That is the politics of every citizen in their lives. Simple people. (listener: Hmm) And this is just marginal, what the politicians do. We can all live without it, just complain what they’re doing there. But it wouldn’t have any direct influence.“

Alienated Repertoire

The alienated repertoire was not specific with its uninterest, but with its active and expressive resignation. Instead of an absence of clear orienting meanings against politics, this repertoire showed a complete denouncement of politics as such. The political was perceived as dirty, repulsive, smudging, potentially dangerous, lying and immoral. The basic characteristics of the alienated repertoire in pre-figuration of the narrated was fatalism and judging or denouncement of the protagonists of the story. In some cases, the use of the alienated repertoire looked like a strategic reaction to disappointment that the respondents experienced after they ventured to invest emotionally in the political events. The nature of this repertoire is paradoxical, because the narrators manifest their resignation in politics, which, however, highly engages them emotionally. This is apparent in a high level of verbal expressiveness:

Interviewer: „And disappointment?“

Tomáš: „Klaus’s amnesty.“

Interviewer: „And why?“

Tomáš: „Because it reversed all morals, or destroyed it. Because the amnesty also showed that in this society, it is normal to steal.“

At the individual level, we find a paradox in transcripts of interviews of our research. Some narrators are not very politically informed people who declare "participatory" approach, while some narrators expressing alienated attitudes are, however, well informed, and their alienation from politics occurred as a result of their efforts to engage that ended in disappointment.

The following chart summarizes found repertoires and characterizes their typical aspects.

Types of CRP	Narrative Focus	Relation to conversational topic	Typical Expressions
1. Interested	struggle of social and political identities	having an interest in	<i>I have experienced, I think that, I did</i>
2. Objective	flow of external causal facts	curiosity	<i>it happened, he/she did</i>
3. Evasive	opposition of contradictory facts	desorientation	<i>I don't know I'm not sure</i>
4. Alienated	cycle of trust and disappointment	contempt	<i>I refuse to accept I don't trust I'm not naive</i>

Combination of Repertoires

Conversational repertoires do not always appear in clean forms, when the whole statement belongs to one repertoire. The narrators combine them just like we use different tools in repairing a machine. Most often, they combine two, only the most confused statements combine all repertoires. Usually, the narrator uses one or two repertoires much more frequently than the others. For instance, our political narrators are masters of the interested repertoire, while journalists tend to prefer the objective repertoire.

Let's illustrate the principle of combination in case of interested repertoire. The interested repertoire might be supported by the objective repertoire to gain supporting arguments, or to show that the narrator understands "the other side", partial negatives of the object of their "interest in". This interest adds to the usual performativity of the narration a distance full of humbleness. The interested repertoire supported by the evasive repertoire provides a distance much bigger in a way that the narrator can hold a careful position and express that they are not, regardless of the experience of "interest in", able to influence the political events which are too far from the problems of their lived world. The most interesting combination is the interested repertoire together with the alienated repertoire. Those are stories of hope and self-identification with a political institution or actor, which end with disappointment, feelings of betrayal, and despair. The alienated repertoire enables denouncement and disgrace of the others, the others than the narrators. Therefore, it shows that the interest in politics has its risks and the feelings of alienation are its natural complement, especially in critical situations.

NARRATIVES OF CRISES

The following table presents four types of lay theories of justification of the current "state of crisis" within the society. For clarity, it should be mentioned that our interviewees were not instructed to ask about particular crises, and the word "crisis" was not a part of the script. The thematisation of crises was therefore purely on behalf of narrators as well as their definitions. There were stories about three concrete crises: the crisis of trust in politics, the economic crisis, and the crisis in the form of rising preferences for the Czech Communist party. These concrete crises were told in four different types of narrative plots: 1. narrative of the communist past, 2. narrative of the nature of the Czech people, 3. fatalistic narratives of power, 4. narratives of these days. We will describe these four types of narratives of crisis and their sub-groups. Further, we will show how conversational repertoires are able to transform the meaning of a concrete narrative.

Types of narratives	Sub-groups	Repertoires changing meaning
<i>1. Narratives of the communist past</i>	1. continuity of political elites	interested or objective or alienated
	2. continuity of economic elites	interested or alienated
	3. continuity in the way of thinking	objective or alienated
<i>2. Narratives of the nature of the Czech people</i>	1. skeptical	objective or alienated
<i>3. Fatalistic narratives of power</i>	1. popular	alienated
	2. reflexive	objective or evasive
<i>4. Narratives of these days</i>	1. times of bad relations among people	objective or evasive
	2. times of great social differences	objective or evasive or alienated
	3. times of a frustration from freedom	interested or evasive
	4. times of a global economic dependency	interested or objective or alienated

The most common sub-group of narratives of the communist past was a narrative about the questioning of the moral consistence of political elites ("playing dress coats" after 1989, that is why former communists are now in each parliamentary political party). We call this sub-group the narrative of the continuity of political elites. The narrative about the continuity of economic elites is based on the recognition that the former communist leaders were inacted as CEOs among the most successful post-revolutionary private companies and entrepreneurs (Anderle, 1999). The narrative about continuity in the way of thinking is usually connected with condemnation of selfishness and callousness that are supposed to be present in both communist past and nowadays.

The object of the second type of narratives is the nation. These narratives are characterized by a desire to take distance and to seek continuity of a collective action within a larger historical context (in terms of the Nazi and/or the communist regime). This constructed behaviour is criticized and experienced as alienated. The presence of such manner of thinking was described by Holý in his book *The Little Czech and Great Czech Nation* (2001). The name of the book reacts to the paradox that the Czechs are very proud of their nation as a whole, but in the same time criticize a majority of their individual fellow citizens and take distance from their behaviours.

By the label "fatalistic narratives of power" we mean a belief in the inevitability of deformation of the human character in case when a person gains access to political power. In the folk form, it is just a simple denouncement of the politics as such, in which each politician has a spoilt character. In the reflexive form, the historical conscience plays a role, when the narrations come close to Machiavelli's theory of power. The hard fight for the power is perceived as natural, not unwanted.

The evasive repertoire dominates the theories of these days. Their basis is a simple construction: crises appear because the contemporary time has a critical characteristic. These theories avoid finding the culprit, do not work with personal responsibility for the crisis. Thus, the rise of the Communist party in regional elections is perceived as a result of rising social differences, the political crisis is then perceived just as a reflection of decaying interpersonal relationships in the whole society, or the voters' ignorance is connected to the frustration of freedom, especially of the overwhelming negative information from the media. This is how the economic crisis was perceived. We expect that this is how the refugee crisis will be perceived in new interviews.

To illustrate the role which conversational repertoires play for these narratives, we give two examples. The first one belongs in the subcategory of the theory of continuity of political elites. The following excerpt is in the objective repertoire:

Renata: „No, nobody of our family was in the [communist] party. (pause) Only then, when my daughter got married, I mean [the daughter's first name], your mum, her husband. But he had a lot of profit from that... And still does because he was a communist and today he's doing well and as a member of ODS – I don't know what he's a member of now, but surely some right-wing party – he's doing well because he's being promoted from director to director and higher... Which is probably a normal way of life of former communists.“

Interviewer: „And do you think that the former regime helped the attitude “go where the wind blows”, more than today, or not?“

Renata: „No, I think it's more like that today.“

Let us compare it with excerpt belonging to alienated repertoire:

Jiří: Well, (...) perhaps the progress is good, why not. But it could be better (...) could be better.

Interviewer: In what?

Jiří: Well that the laws of a democracy would be followed, people wouldn't steal so much, cheat so much.

Interviewer: So that's what you see as the biggest problem?

Jiří: Well that the villains wouldn't have the power.

Interviewer: And do you think that those villains are here because there were communists before?

Jiří: Absolutely, because the society was deformed. And it still is.

Interviewer: You mean morally?

Jiří: Yes. Otherwise Fischer or Zeman would not be able to become presidential candidates.

Interviewer: And how was it deformed? Why do you think?

Jiří: Well, almost everybody was in the [communist] party, almost everybody was an informer [of the secret police] (...) and nobody cares about this. Nobody cares about lies that are told in public. Nobody cares about public robberies.

The crisis is constructed the same way in both excerpts - the crisis appears because people with a communist past and dubious character use politics for their own enrichment. While the objective repertoire states the facts and describes a concrete story, the alienated repertoire explicitly denounces, expressively provokes. While the objective excerpt aims at an individual strategy, the alienated repertoire engages the idea of a complex social deformation and collective guilt of the communists.

The second example will show the difference between folk and reflexive forms of fatalistic theories of power. The folk theory was only found in the alienated repertoire:

Marta: „Whatever political party, in the end it's Florida or wherever, Miami, lots of houses and... They rent them, or go there for holidays, recreation and nothing else. The leading political party changes and it's the same thing again. Again, they have real... houses somewhere else. It's about nothing else than filling their pockets. (...) One slowly loses the trust then.“

This is how a fatalistic theory of power in its reflexive form might look like, as told by one of the most influential journalists of today:

Pavel: ... the politics is a human activity, even democratic politics, when a person that enters it, and proportionally to the position where they want to work, please, it might not work like this on lower positions (A: Yeah, I understand), but the higher, the more it works, this rule that I'll talk about. So again, it's a rule, the bigger power one wants to gain in democratic politics, it means more voters to address, a bigger political body to be part of, but the political body which so gains power, works with big numbers of people, with a mass... (omitted) But this mass will contain a bigger part of society and the majority of society is deep under the level of decency, intellectual maturity, human behaviour and humanity in general. Thus, and I know it from a thousand examples, even the best politician in this position and this situation must, must and must focus their behaviour on the most primitive member of the electorate, which happens each and every day and later it terribly deforms the politicians.

If we omit the fact that both excerpts emphasize a different form of how spoiled politicians are, we can see that both assume politicians to be morally corrupt. But their impression is reverse. While the first excerpt uses the politicians' moral corruption as the reason for loss of trust, the second one sees this corruption as something natural which should be more or less tolerated exactly because it is inevitable.

DISCUSSION

According to our analysis, four conversational repertoires of politics can be distinguished and used to analyze the ongoing political events and processes, in our case, crises. We believe that the results have fulfilled our ambitions. In contrast with the classical typology of political culture by Almond and Verba, our typology: 1) allows the researcher to focus on the attitudes not only towards the state as a whole but also towards individual political actors, 2) it is dynamic in the sense that narrators can justify the used conversational repertoire and combine repertoires creatively, if necessary, and 3) it is not a typology with an implicit evaluation of concrete types.

But what are the weaknesses of our work? The main limitation lies in the fact that we investigated only discursive practices, not political agency. For this reason, we are not able to say clearly how adopting these repertoires systematically affects narrators' behaviour as political actors. For example, the theory of political culture by Stephen Welch (2013) insists on the resolution and skeptical comparison of discourse and practice. That our narrative research is not able to carry out.

Another weakness of the research is the question of the general validity of the results. Here presented categories were saturated, which means that we are sure they really exist, because they were sufficiently repeated in narratives. But it is very possible that there are other narratives of crises. Finally, it is not entirely clear whether our results can be applied in quantitative research. When such an issue arrives, it will be necessary to prepare a separate study of validity and reliability.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we introduced four types of conversational repertoire of politics – interested, objective, rvasive and alienated - that were used to analyze the narratives of crises, which narrators spontaneously mentioned. We have observed that various forms of crises (economic crisis, political crisis, and crisis of trust in politics) share similar types of reasoning and their interpretations depend on concrete conversational repertoire of politics.

Our research testifies that postmodern citizens need a high level of creativity to make sense of current crises and to orient themselves in them. We have found four types of reasoning used to narratively reconstruct a crisis: 1. narrative of the communist past, 2. narrative of the nature of the Czech people, 3. fatalistic narratives of power, 4. narratives of these days. Sub-groups of these types of narrative reconstructions have been identified.

Analysis of variations of meanings shows that conversational repertoires of politics may serve as useful qualitative analytic tool.

The stories we heard and read are even more simplified in comparison with the narratives in the media. That is why our typology allows "thick description" of perceptions of the media content by viewers. However, it is about representations of reality, not the reality of crises itself. These representations only constitute discursive components of the political culture and they are shared by conversations and stories about politics.

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