Tarring Opponents as Extremists Really Can Work

EMILY BADGER

Emily Badger grew up in Chicago where, as she writes, she "first learned to think about architecture, inequality and the value of public transit." After earning a bachelor's degree in journalism from Northwestern University, she earned a master's degree in nonfiction writing from Johns Hopkins University. Previously a staff writer for *Atlantic CityLab*, the *Atlantic*'s Web site devoted to original reporting on urban life, she now covers urban policy at the *Washington Post*.

As her Web site explains, although "she writes frequently about urban planning, housing, transportation, poverty and inequality—and why we can't talk about any of these topics without mentioning the others as well," the essay included here discusses how "extremist" language is used as a political tactic to manipulate readers and voters when two sides are in conflict over an issue. The essay was first published in *Pacific Standard* magazine in 2011.

WRITING TO DISCOVER: *Has anyone ever characterized you using a term you were surprised to hear, or one that assumed you were part of a group with which you don't identify? What do you think was the person's intent in using the term? How did you react?*

Back in 2002, when the male-only, members-only Augusta National golf club was picked to host the Masters Tournament, advocates of equality for women were taken aback. They wanted the tournament moved or the storied golf club opened to women. And their cause resonated with many Americans in an age when the public supports little outright gender discrimination.

The campaign ran into a hitch, though: for many people, it became synonymous with Martha Burk, a feminist leader whose name frequently appeared in the national press alongside words like "radical," "extreme," and "dogmatic."

That story is a classic example of a tactic prevalent in politics. Tar a policy's proponents as "extreme," and maybe the policy will start to look that way, too. Political strategists clearly bank on this idea. And new political science research reveals that it works on many of us.[1]

Researchers Thomas Nelson, Gregory Gwiasda, and Joseph Lyons studied the strategy in a paper published in the journal *Political Psychology*.

1. Thomas E. Nelson, Gregory Gwiasda, and Joseph Lyons, "Vilification and Values," *Political Psychology* 32, no. 5 (2011): 813–835.

To understand their findings, it's helpful to view political disputes—even the Augusta National story—as a clash of conflicting values, in this case gender equality and the rights of private organizations to determine their own rules.

Most values are generally thought to be positive, although people may rank them with different priorities. Most of us are on the same page about freedom, security, equality, and even the environment. No one *dislikes* those things. 5

"We think of [values] as kind of rules that can never be violated, sacred rules that must be protected," Nelson said. "The problem, of course, is you can't have everything. Sooner or later those things are going to come into conflict. This happens in our everyday lives."

And it happens constantly in politics.

When two of these values come into conflict—in, say, a policy question pitting national security against personal liberties—strategists must figure out how to advocate one at the expense of the other. No one wants to go on record attacking the value of security, or liberty. But you can do the next best thing: attack the people standing near it.

Nelson offers this example: "Everybody loves national parks, everybody loves the environment, nobody wants to be perceived as anti-environment. So if you are, say, the snowmobile manufacturer, and you want to push for greater access to public land for snowmobiles, you can't say, 'Well, the environment is stupid, nobody cares about the environment. The only thing that's important is riding a snowmobile.'"

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You could, however, say, "Sporting outdoorsmen may not get to enjoy our national parks this winter because radical environmentalists care more about owls than the local economy." 10

Such rhetoric helps ambivalent voters find their way out of a conflict between competing values.

In their study, the researchers had undergraduate students read and respond to an account of the Augusta National dispute with three small changes: one referred to critics of the policy as "people" and "citizens"; another as "radical feminists," "militant feminists" and "extremists"; and the third with extended descriptions of the type of world such radical feminists advocate (one with co-ed locker rooms!). The policy itself remained constant as these descriptions changed. As a result, the students exposed to the extremist language were less likely to support moving the tournament or welcoming female members to the club—even though a self-assessment of their values would suggest that they might.

The researchers performed similar experiments with opinion pieces and blog posts about environmental issues and immigration.

Most surprising to them was their discovery that sometimes the label itself is enough. Sometimes, simply calling advocates "feminists" or "environmentalists" is sufficient to tap into extremist associations people already have about those groups (perhaps the same negative associations that underlie the odd phenomenon that many people who care about the environment and gender equality don't want to be called "environmentalists" or "feminists"). Other times, it's apparently necessary to dress up that label, maybe "wild-eyed radical feminists," or even "extreme feminists who would go so far as to advocate unisex toilets."

The authors don't know where that line is drawn. They also don't 15
know what distinguishes the people unfazed by this trick from those who are persuaded by it. In their studies, only some of the students were lulled by extremist labels into opposing policies that otherwise align with their values.

Perhaps other voters know the tactic when they see it, or they've seen it so many times that extremist labels themselves become off-putting (Nelson calls this the "tactic tactic," calling out an opponent for using just such a tactic).

"For a lot of people, that does raise a red flag. This looks like a last desperate measure of somebody who doesn't have anything better to say," he said. "But what distinguishes those people from others who are susceptible to it?"

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE READING

1. What types of words were used to describe feminist activist Martha Burk? How did researchers test the effects of such words on reception of the Augusta National story? What were the results?
2. How do Nelson and his co-researchers, whom Badger cites, suggest "extremist" branding works (12)? Why do they argue that it works in this way?
3. How does the essay define "values"? What are some of the values named in the essay? How is the language of values related to the language of extremes?
4. What does Badger mean by a "conflict between competing values" (11)? What example does the text offer? How can this kind of conflict escalate?
5. What is meant by the term "tactic tactic" (16)? What does it accomplish? Why might some people be unaffected by extremist rhetoric?

LANGUAGE IN ACTION

In her essay "Bad Feminist," from the book of the same name, writer Roxane Gay admits the following:

> I sometimes cringe when someone refers to me as a feminist, as if I should be ashamed of my feminism or as if the word *feminist* is an insult. The label is rarely offered in kindness. I am generally called a feminist when I have the nerve to suggest that the misogyny deeply embedded in our culture is a real problem, requiring relentless vigilance. . . .
>
> I'm not the only outspoken woman who shies away from the feminist label, who fears the consequences of accepting the label.

What do you think are some of the consequences of accepting labels like the one Gay describes here—or like the ones Badger lists in her essay? Are such labels ever "offered in kindness"? Can they be used to empower individuals or groups instead of tearing them down?

WRITING SUGGESTIONS

1. Online satirical news sites like *Clickhole* and *The Onion* successfully use extremist language to render mundane topics comically absurd. Do you think the effectiveness of satire in American culture depends on an understanding of the "tactic tactic" Badger discusses? Why or why not? Visit a satirical news site and read some of the articles to get a sense of how the rhetoric of extremism operates. Then find a local mundane report—minor road construction, a change in cafeteria offerings, a shift in library hours—to render as a similar satire for your campus newspaper. Be sure to use the language of extremes to color your outrage at the mundane occurrence you've chosen.
2. Badger suggests that to "tar a policy's proponents as 'extreme'" in order to make the "policy . . . look that way, too" (3) is rather an old tactic and one that has long worked in American politics. Select a contemporary controversial political issue to research, and compare coverage of that issue. It will be most be useful to consider how one specific incident is reported across several sources rather than how a broader topic is discussed. Look at local and national coverage in newspapers whose bias tends toward both conservatism and liberalism. Does one side seem to use extreme language more than the other? Do particular media sources tend toward extreme language more than the other? How are values addressed in this coverage? What sites and genres seem to be the most guilty of using the language of extremes to discuss this issue? Why? After narrowing your selection of coverage to five or six sources reporting on the same incident, write a research essay that analyzes the media's use of extreme language about your topic.