

Giving the People ‘a Fighting Chance’: The Discourse and Ideology of Senator Elizabeth Warren

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ABSTRACT

Framed within the perspectives of feminist standpoint theory and Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm, this article offers an analysis of Warren’s autobiography and select public statements. It evaluates the relationship between her personal lived experiences and the public political causes she advocates. The work will demonstrate the importance of autobiographies in explaining an individual’s ideology as well as providing justification for political action. Elizabeth Warren’s autobiography not only underscores an understanding of the link between the personal and political, but it also serves as a clarion call to future generations of women to lead.

INTRODUCTION

Many people have been quick to classify U.S. Senator, Elizabeth Warren. Pundits call her the frontrunner in the Democratic presidential race of 2020; others tag her as a grandma; a news reporter stated she’s one strand of pearls short of a PTA mom, and Donald Trump derisively calls her Pocahontas. As a law professor, Warren focused on bankruptcy law and published more articles on commercial law than any other scholar. Her expertise in the field led to many prominent appointments, including the Oversight Panel that investigated the Troubled Asset Relief Program. It is rare that bankruptcy law professors leap into the limelight, but her appearances on programs like Dr. Phil and The Daily Show, her fiery speech at the Democratic National Convention, and her ability to champion the importance of financial reform, all caused Warren’s fame and popularity to skyrocket. She successfully beat incumbent Scott Brown in the Massachusetts senatorial campaign in 2012, won re-election in 2018, and is frequently mentioned on the “short list” of presidential candidates. No matter what she is called, Elizabeth Warren is undeniably a “leader” in her party and as an advocate for economic reform for the middle class.

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in explaining an individual's ideology as well as providing justification for political action. Elizabeth Warren's autobiography not only underscores an understanding of the link between the personal and political, but it also serves as a clarion call to future generations of women to lead.

The significance of this investigation rests with the appeal autobiographies hold for the public, particularly those works written by notable or famous individuals. These works have the potential to influence readers through their texts. For instance, Martine Brownley and Allison Kimmich suggest that "reading an autobiography is an act of voyeurism: it allows us to look in on the high and low points of another person's life. At the same time," they continue, "reading an autobiography is an act of self-discovery. Learning how others live, think, and feel can teach us about ourselves."¹ Women's autobiographies, in particular, often represent suppressed or seldom-heard voices. Thus, they constitute "a medium of resistance and counter-discourse"² that can "challenge and subvert the dominant discourse."³ Ultimately, these works can craft what may be identified as a "language of empowerment."⁴ This enables the reader to identify with the author and imagine themselves following in her footsteps.⁵

Autobiographies are more than simple or entertaining stories. They constitute "rhetorical acts,"⁶ and are thus persuasive. Autobiographies can serve to persuade readers to speak or to act in a particular way for a specific cause. The author chooses which events in her life to omit and which to emphasize and thus crafts a very precise worldview. This type of writing, offers Ronald Carpenter, can serve to "shape attitudes and actions" of the readers. Quite simply, "history can persuade."⁷ Ultimately, we read autobiography "to find in the narrative guidelines for our own behaviors and beliefs."⁸ Warren's autobiography serves multiple purposes. It first identifies the barriers women who seek political office must overcome and encourages women from all economic classes to run for office. Also, it endeavors to persuade the audience that the financial system of the U.S. is rigged against the middle class and that the public must act—they must elect those who would protect their financial interests. The government, she argues, must strive to help the middle class. As she states in the prologue of *A Fighting Chance*, America has failed working-class families. The optimism that used to define our country has faded. Infrastructure has crumbled, and the promise of a college education for

every child who wants one often goes unfulfilled. “But it doesn’t have to be this way,” she asserts. “I am determined—fiercely determined—to do everything I can to help us once again be the America that creates opportunities for everyone who works hard and plays by the rules....an America where everyone gets what I got: a fighting chance.”⁹ Finally, Warren’s autobiography demonstrates the link between personal experiences and political causes. Women often enter politics because of an event or series of events they experience. They then work to make a difference. Her narrative offers a rationale for change.

Walter Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm is based on the premise that humans are story-telling animals.¹⁰ Story-telling allows people to offer “good reasons” for their actions and the actions of others. Thus, stories comprise a rational system that depends on “probability” and “fidelity” to resonate with an intended audience. These characteristics help assess the degree to which a story fits together, makes sense, and corroborates previously accepted stories.¹¹ Warren weaves threads from her personal experiences as a wife, mom, academic, policy analyst, and finally as a candidate to form a tapestry of arguments that justify her actions as well as to persuade audiences to take action.

Feminist standpoint theory, as articulated by Julia T. Wood, advances the following key arguments. First, “society is structured by power relations, which result in unequal social locations for men and women.”¹² In addition, those in subordinate social locations are more likely than those in privileged places to have an accurate or “less false” view of reality. “This is because members of privileged groups have a vested interest in not seeing oppression and inequity....”¹³ If a member of the subordinate class moves to the dominant group, she becomes an “outsider within,” and achieves double consciousness that allows for an understanding of both groups.¹⁴ Fourth, standpoint “refers to . . . a critical understanding of location and experience,”¹⁵ and thus it is an “intellectual achievement that reflects—not necessarily entails—political consciousness.”¹⁶ Finally, Wood suggests, individuals can have multiple standpoints that are shaped by membership in groups defined by a variety of

demographic characteristics.¹⁷

A FIGHTING CHANCE: ELIZABETH WARREN'S NARRATIVE THEMES

Warren begins her story with a vivid recollection of the “day [she] grew up.” Her father had suffered a heart attack and was unable to resume any financially meaningful work. The family sold their car and moved to a small rental home in Oklahoma. One day she found her mother crying. She was trying on a stiff black dress that Warren associated with funerals and graduations. Money was scarce, so her mother was going for a job interview at Sears; she had never worked outside the home. The dress, Warren recalls, was way too tight, but it was the only nice dress in the closet. As Warren’s mother struggled to fit inside the dress, it was then Warren knew, “that was the moment I crossed the threshold. I wasn’t a little girl anymore.”¹⁸

Warren hated high school, claiming that she “wasn’t good” at it.¹⁹ She checked out a book about colleges, and when her mother saw the book she exclaimed, “You aren’t thinking about going away to college, are you.”²⁰ Her mother proclaimed they couldn’t afford to send her, and besides, “it was harder for a woman with a college education to find a husband.”²¹ But Warren persisted. She knew she wasn’t pretty, couldn’t sing, didn’t play sports, but she could “fight” with words.²² She was anchor on the school’s debate team. Warren applied to two colleges with debate programs, and this was when she learned a new financial truth: her family was poor, really poor. She had known they would never be rich, but the financial precariousness she learned of when using their tax returns to fill out forms was surprising. She won a full scholarship to George Washington University and was awarded a federal student loan. Warren was thrilled. Her mother “responded to [my] news with equal parts pride and worry,” Warren remembers.²³ “She would say to friends, ‘Well, she figured out how to go to college for free, so what could I say? But I don’t know if she will ever get married.’”²⁴

In her second year of college, she became reacquainted with a former boyfriend, Jim Warren, a guy who had dumped her in high school. He had graduated from college, was working for IBM, and was ready for marriage. He asked Warren, who remembers she was “amazed—amazed and grateful” that he had chosen her. She gave up her scholarship, dropped out of college, and walked down the aisle of Oklahoma City’s May Avenue Methodist Church. Elizabeth Warren was 19. She went with Jim to Houston and settled down to married life. Her

college loans were staggering, but she surmised that if she finished school, she could get a job teaching then she and her husband would be financially stable. She persuaded her husband that she should return to school, and she did. Soon after she finished college, her husband was transferred to New Jersey. Warren worked as a speech therapist, but by the end of the school year she was obviously pregnant; the school did not rehire her for the following year.²⁵ She gave birth to her first child, a girl she named Amelia.

Domestic life proved unfulfilling for Warren. “For a while,” she writes, “I dedicated myself to making a home,” but she was no good at cooking, setting the kitchen on fire and giving the family food poisoning twice. She reports she felt “numb” and that her “attention often wandered.”²⁶ She felt she was failing her daughter, an adventurous child whom she deeply loved until [her] chest hurt and [her] eyes filled with tears.”²⁷ Warren’s restlessness was due, in part, to the turmoil of the nation:

The women’s movement was exploding around the country, but not in our New Jersey suburb and certainly not in our little family. I wanted to be a good wife and mother, but I wanted to do something more. I felt deeply ashamed that I didn’t want to stay home full-time with my cheerful, adorable daughter.²⁸

Warren wanted to go back to teaching, but she knew her husband wouldn’t allow it. So instead she decided to go to law school because the television lawyers “were always fighting to defend good people who needed help.”²⁹ But telling her mother of her plans to go to law school was “worse than telling her about college. She was sure something was wrong with [her].”³⁰ Warren’s mother told her to stay home, have more kids, and that she should count on her husband to support her. She warned Warren to avoid becoming “one of those crazy ‘women’s libbers’” who weren’t happy and could never be.”³¹ But Warren loved law school, and during her second year interviewed for jobs as an associate. Women lawyers, she reports, were very rare and women with law degrees often ended up as secretaries rather than attorneys. But she persisted and landed a summer job on Wall Street. She lined up ten weeks of childcare from an assortment of acquaintances and earned enough money for the family’s second car and a set of braces on her teeth.³² She felt she might have a chance at becoming an attorney. But by graduation day, she felt her optimism dwindling. She was eight months pregnant, and her subsequent “efforts to find a job with a law firm had been politely but firmly

set aside.”³³ “Everyone smiled,” she states, “but no one invited me for a second interview.”³⁴ Warren set up her own private practice, but she eventually got a teaching job at Rutgers in 1977. On the verge of her husband’s transfer to one of three locations, Warren applied to University of Houston and got a full-time tenure-track job teaching contract law and running the legal writing program.

During that first year, Warren reports that she was mistaken for a law professor’s wife, a secretary, a law student, and a nurse. But she loved the job and recalled it took her breath away. Finding the students’ “ah ha” moment was deeply satisfying. She headed “straight for the money courses” like contract law and business and finance courses. “I figured if I could manage this,” she posits, “no one could question whether a young woman with two little children belonged here, even if I looked like someone’s idea of a school nurse.”³⁵ At the same time, though, “the new job was hard, and at home my world was stretched to the breaking point,” she says. “I could never catch up.”³⁶ She feared that the slightest mishap would cause everything to come crashing down.³⁷ Childcare proved problematic and juggling that, and her job and her domestic duties brought Warren to the breaking point. Her beloved Aunt Bee offered to come to Houston to help. She felt she was finally able to breathe again.

Nevertheless, Warren’s marriage could not be saved. She felt she had failed her husband:

He had married a nineteen-year-old girl, and she hadn’t grown into the woman we had both expected. I was very, very sorry, but couldn’t change what I had become. I was supposed to be the Betty Crocker award winner, but I set things on fire. Was supposed to be 100 percent focused on our home and our children, but I was making a life outside that neither of us expected. I loved every new adventure I took on—and he didn’t.³⁸

She asked him if he wanted a divorce. He said yes. She convinced her parents to move to Houston to help with childcare. During the summer that year, Warren attended a course for law professors seeking to learn more about economics. It was there she met Bruce Mann, who would become her second husband. They both took temporary teaching jobs at the University of Texas in Austin. Warren volunteered to teach a course she’d never taught before: bankruptcy.

The reasons people go bankrupt fascinated and initially eluded Warren. But the impact

was clear: “it is a moment of great defeat and, often, personal shame. For many,” she continues, “it is like going before a judge and declaring to the world that they are losers in the Great American Economic Game.”³⁹ Warren sought to find out who the people were and why their lives had gone so wrong. For Warren, the quest was personal. “My daddy and I were both afraid of being poor, really poor.”⁴⁰ Warren joined forces with two research partners and began studying bankruptcy in earnest: why did people go bankrupt? The people filing for bankruptcy, she and her colleagues discovered, weren’t the stereotypical cheats or deadbeats; the vast majority were in the middle class who had fallen on hard times. “Over time,” she notes, “we learned that nearly 90% were declaring bankruptcy for one of three reasons: a job loss, a medical problem, or a family breakup.”⁴¹ Warren began engaging in public debates and gave speeches to refute the common belief that people declared bankruptcy because they were stupid or deadbeats. While engaging in a heated debate with a bankruptcy judge, she refuted his position that financially troubled business owners should just relinquish their businesses to the bank.⁴² Warren’s public statements and publications landed her an unsolicited interview and subsequent job offer from the University of Pennsylvania. Although she dreaded moving so far away from her brothers, she knew it was a good school. So Warren and the family moved to Philadelphia in 1987. Warren notes that in the early 1990s, more than 700,000 families filed for bankruptcy in a single year.

Warren’s publications attracted the attention of bankers and financial institutions. She received an invitation from an executive at Citibank to attend a day-long seminar focused on the bank’s desire to cut bankruptcy losses. Warren’s solution was simple: stop loaning money to people who are in trouble and can’t take on any more high-interest debt. A bank executive rebuked her, saying that they could make more money by continually charging interest on loans until people filed for bankruptcy.⁴³ The banks followed this by lobbying for limited bankruptcy protection. As she learned more about the banks’ predatory lending, Warren became angrier. Her husband asked a pivotal question: “What are you going to do about it?”⁴⁴ Harvard offered Warren a faculty position; she accepted, knowing that she should shout from the highest mountain she could find.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, she notes, the bankruptcy numbers kept

climbing— “another person declared bankruptcy every twenty-six seconds.”⁴⁶

In 1995, the Clinton administration invited Warren to be a member of a blue-ribbon panel to review bankruptcy laws: the National Bankruptcy Review Commission. She reluctantly agreed but was told that if she came up with three changes in the law that would help people struggling with debt, the Committee Chair would do what he could to see those changes enacted. But the battle proved much bigger and tougher than a simple promise. The Commission made their report to Congress. Warren and another commission member sharply disagreed on the causes and remedies to bankruptcy. Judge Edith Jones maintained that people were at fault for their economic hardships.

Conversely, Warren’s research showed that catastrophic events were the major causes of bankruptcy. The Commission’s report was due to Congress in 1997. In the intervening years, few of the families facing financial hardship showed up at the hearings—they couldn’t afford the travel. Bankers and others from the financial industry showed up in droves. A slim majority of the commissioners eventually voted to keep bankruptcy protections intact. Warren reports that she was “sick of politics” and had “enough of Washington.”⁴⁷

But the battle wasn’t over. The banking industry shopped a new bill around Congress that garnered support. The bill would make it harder for families to get any financial relief. “I couldn’t just walk away,” Warren recalls. “More than a million families were now seeking bankruptcy protection each year. So I stayed in the fight however I could.”⁴⁸ Warren’s speeches caught the ear of Senator Ted Kennedy. She met with him and implored him to take the lead in the fight for financial fairness for the middle class. After an hours-long meeting, he agreed. “We’d been outnumbered for so long, and now we had Ted Kennedy,” Warren stated. “I’d come to his office without political connections of any kind,” but he promised he would help.⁴⁹

Warren began researching and writing a new book with her daughter, *The Two-Income Trap*. During her work, she says she came to a painful conclusion: “America’s middle class was under attack.”⁵⁰ She considered the book an alarm, a “warning that the country was headed in a terrible direction.”⁵¹ The book attracted the attention of television host, Dr. Phil McGraw, who invited the two authors to appear on his show. Dr. Phil interviewed them as

well as some families who had experienced bankruptcy. Warren was pleased that her message was now getting national attention, from people who could benefit. But the banking industry proved formidable and managed to ram some laws through Congress. More and more people went bankrupt. Warren spent years trying to fight back. In 2008, Sen. Harry Reid invited Warren to become a member of a Congressional Oversight Panel to monitor bank bailouts in the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP). The housing market had collapsed, and many banks were in trouble. Warren said yes.

Warren did a series of interviews about the bank bailouts, criticizing them, any chance she got. One night, Larry Summers, the director of the National Economic Council and an advisor to President Obama, told her during an intense dinner, that she had a choice—she could be an insider or an outsider. “Outsiders can say whatever they want. But people on the inside don’t listen to them. Insiders,” he continued, “get lots of access and a chance to push their ideas. People—powerful people—listen to what they have to say. But insiders also understand one unbreakable rule: they don’t criticize other insiders.”⁵²

Shortly after that, a pivotal moment occurred with her interview on *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart. She recalls that the interview went awry, but Stewart gave her one more chance, a minute to articulate one sentence to encapsulate the problem with the financial industry as she saw it. Warren explained that the crisis didn’t have to happen. Stewart praised her and thanked her for clearing up some confusing issues. And so, Warren’s fight continued. Her Commission produced studies, but not much in the financial world changed. Numerous banks received bailouts, but not much was done for working families. Banks were considered “Too Big to Fail.” Banks received billions to stay afloat, Warren snipes, “the CEOs collect millions in bonuses, and [the average American] moves into their car.”⁵³

In the spring of 2010, *Time* magazine approached her about a story they planned called “The New Sheriffs of Wall Street,” which would feature Warren and two other women working on financial reforms. The story raised a question for Warren: “Given that women were so conspicuously absent from the ranks of top executives in finance, how was it that three women ended up in leadership positions when it came time for a badly needed cleanup.”⁵⁴ Warren’s curiosity led her to ponder the scarcity of women in corner offices.

While she couldn't answer that question, she did have an idea about why she ended up in the position of fighting for the common person: "I had never inhabited the cozy world of high finance, never played golf with a foursome of CEOs, never smoked cigars in the club. Some people argue that if you're never in the club, you simply can't understand it. But in this case," she continues, "I think not being in the club means never drinking the club's Kool-Aid. I had studied the banking system from the outside, so none of it was sacred to me."⁵⁵

By 2011, Warren's publications, speeches, and t.v. appearances had all received heightened attention. Suddenly, she found herself in consideration for an open Senate seat in Massachusetts. A number of progressives thought she might make a good senator.⁵⁶ Warren waffled, knowing that this would be the biggest fight of her life. She started meeting with small groups of people and was moved by the stories of financial hardship people shared with her. She made her decision and declared her candidacy: she was going to continue the fight for all the people who had played by the rules but had lost everything. Warren won the primary and took on Republican Scott Brown, an experienced politician.

Early in the race, reporters asked Warren, "What's it like to run as a woman."⁵⁷ She surmises that probably nobody ever asked Scott Walker about running as a man, but Warren figures the subtext meant that big-time politics is a boy's game.⁵⁸ She had spoken to other women in Congress, listing reasons why she thought she shouldn't run. Patty Murray, in particular, told her to stop being ridiculous. No man ever doubted himself that way. She also learned another lesson about sexism in politics. Her media consultant, Mandy Grunwald, told her that "It happens with every woman. People have to talk about how she looks before they can talk about what she says."⁵⁹ She went everywhere in the state, telling the stories of those who had told theirs—the ones who lost their homes, their cars, their savings, and those who couldn't afford a college education. These were the people she was fighting for. But she also shared her own story and found that her working-class family background struck a chord with people—"the daughter of a maintenance man who graduated from a commuter college and ended up as a professor at Harvard."⁶⁰ Her life story as a fighter, encapsulated for stump speeches, led to media endorsements from some of the most prominent Massachusetts newspapers. One source pegged her as "a fearless consumer advocate who has made her life's

work the fight for middle-class families” and “the plainspoken voice of people getting crushed by so many predatory lenders and under-regulated banks.”⁶¹ The Springfield *Republican* opined, “We need a voice for working families in Washington again. Elizabeth Warren will give us that voice”.⁶² The battle lines were drawn. Warren represented the modern-day David fighting the financial industry Goliath.

The “Woman Issue” became one of the most compelling in the campaign. In early 2012 Republicans tried to cut back the Affordable Care Act by allowing a business or insurance company to deny coverage for any medical service it deemed objectionable on “moral grounds.” This was followed by Republican Richard Mourdock stating that no woman got pregnant from legitimate rape. “Suddenly,” Warren recalls, “people were talking about women’s issues with a new kind of intensity. The gains that so many of us had taken for granted no longer seemed so secure.”⁶³ As an increasing number of women entered politics or attended rallies, and campaigned for Warren, the question then often posed to Warren became, “what’s up with you women.”⁶⁴ “Simple,” she says. “Women are fired up.”⁶⁵ As she campaigned, Warren also issued a clarion call for more women to enter politics. “Whenever I met a little girl on the campaign trail, I would bend down, take her hand, and tell her quietly, ‘I’m Elizabeth Warren and I’m running for Senate because that’s what girls do.’”⁶⁶

Ultimately, Warren won by a 54-46 margin. She credits her victory to the thousands of volunteers, vets, women, students, scientists, Teamsters, and activists of every ethnic background— “That when fight we can win.”⁶⁷ “This victory belongs to all the families who have been chipped away at, squeezed, and hammered. This time they fought together and won. And now they were sending me to Washington to fight for them and every hard-working family who just wants a fighting chance to live the American dream.”⁶⁸

PERSONAL LIFE, POLITICAL STANDPOINTS

Elizabeth Warren’s autobiography details her rise from an Oklahoma school girl to a U.S. Senator who is often mentioned as a possible presidential contender. Her story resonates with the public, for she had an unremarkable childhood that was fraught with the same types of experiences and concerns the average American lives with. She mentions her failures with equal frequency as her successes. She was a disaster at domestic affairs, struggled to secure child care, failed at her first

marriage, and had difficulty balancing the multiple tasks of being a wife, mom, and holding down a job she loved. She frequently fears she lets her children down. It is only through hard work, dedication, years of schooling, research, and public advocacy that she moved up the academic and political ladders, often entering all-male bastions of finance, law, and politics. She reports the same hopes and fears most working families' experience: financial security and a better life for their children. Her identity is not that much different than that of her readers'. They can connect with and relate to her narrative, and thus her story has achieved narrative fidelity.

The second aspect of the narrative paradigm, probability, addresses the logic and coherence of the story. This concept asks whether the story "makes sense" to the reader. Warren presents her story in chronological order, and in it, she meticulously details every single battle she fought, from convincing her mom that college would make a difference in her life to her successful battle for a Senate seat. In between, she lists and describes each academic, political, or government position to which she ascends, each one garnering a bit more power or providing her with additional insight. Intermixed with these dates are birthdays, graduations, deaths, kitchen fires, veterinarian visits, and television appearances. Never losing sight of her true focus, Warren's descriptions of her encounters with struggling working-class families, in tandem with her own personal details, provide a story that rings true with the audience and readers. She appears as a real person, with the same hopes, dreams, successes, and failures as her readers.

When seen through the lens of feminist standpoint theory, Warren's autobiography takes on additional meaning. Throughout her life, Warren observes the unequal power structures in society. They are gendered, and they are financial. Girls like her weren't supposed to go to college; marriage was their expected and acceptable goal. Once she completed law school, she experienced first-hand the gender barriers in the working world. Law firms refused to hire her, and a school declined to rehire her, all because of pregnancy. She received polite smiles but few job offers. Once she was employed as an attorney or a law professor, she was mistaken for a secretary, a faculty wife, or a school nurse. Men would experience none of these. Because of gendered expectations, she struggled to be a good wife and mother, struggled to find child care, and struggled to make her husband happy, even as

he glanced at his watch when he considered dinner late. She became aware of the inequities to which the social system subjected women. When her Aunt Bee arrives to help with the children and household chores, Warren considers herself lucky. She recognizes that not all women have families they can turn to.

Her family's hardships, as well as Warren's own precarious financial status while a student and early professional provide Warren with a more accurate view of how society functions. As her family's financial woes grew, and her own economic independence as a wife and mother proved precarious, Warren gained an understanding of the marginalized. Nobody was speaking for women and the poor. Members of marginalized groups often recognize the barriers they face. Conversely, "privileged groups "have a vested interest in not seeing oppression and inequity that accompany and, indeed, makes possible their privilege."⁶⁹ This often results in members of the marginalized group seeking to explore "political analyses of oppression."⁷⁰ Throughout the book, Warren explains her increasing confidence in speaking up about the financial plight of the working class. Each time she does a bankruptcy study, writes a book, testifies before Congress, or appears on a t.v. show, Warren articulates what those dominant within the power refuse to acknowledge or address.

Third, an outsider who moves to the "inside" attains double consciousness, which subsequently allows for an understanding of that group. Elizabeth Warren broke into the male-dominated structure of Congress and Wall Street and notes that they both function to perpetuate themselves. From her position as "outsider within," she realized that Wall Street wasn't interested in "family issues" or helping people achieve the American Dream and that they would do anything to advance profits over people. Warren notes the disconnect people in politics perpetuate when classifying or arguing about issues. As her campaign against Scott Brown intensified, the media paid more attention to what they called "women's issues," because of Warren's gender. She reports, "Yes, I was a woman candidate. (Well duh.) And yes, I am all-the-way committed to reproductive freedom, equal pay for equal work, and equal opportunities. But I had focused my campaign on middle-class economic security. . . . These are issues that profoundly (and sometimes disproportionately) affect women, but no one calls

them “women’s issues.”⁷¹

Fourth, standpoint theory highlights a critical understanding of location as experience.⁷² This is inextricably linked to and shaped by discourse. Warren derived her initial understanding of “place” from the gendered expectations of youth and early married life. Her family’s financial situation, her struggles balancing her personal and professional lives, her fights to become a player in the financial world all caused her to pause and consider her goals and values. These experiences and relationships, and the discourse used to maintain or change them, informed Warren’s decisions and actions.

Finally, any “individual can have multiple standpoints that are shaped by membership in groups defined by sex, race-ethnicity, sexual orientation, economic class, etc.”⁷³ Warren looks at economic issues as a wife, a mom, a professional, and as a successful candidate. She discovered and fought gendered and economic barriers throughout her budding career as a soon-to-be-elected politician. Although it can be argued that her status as a law professor and later a member of blue-ribbon panels place her in a privileged position, she understood and embraced the importance of multiple standpoints. None of what she observed, experienced, or reported can be decoupled from politics. This places *A Fighting Chance* squarely in the realm of political autobiography, where “the presentation usually aims to enhance the role of the author in the politics of his or her day.”⁷⁴ An extension of this concept comes from Gerda Lerner who writes that “thinking, the solving of problems of mental constructs, can be valid only if validated by experience, by the application of thought in public life. And that’s politics.”⁷⁵ Warren entered the academic and political worlds to make a difference—to give everyone a fighting chance. Based on her experiences and her studies she knew she needed to work to make a change. As she worked her way through commissions and blue-ribbon economic panels she learned first-hand of the gendered and economic barriers that existed. She represents the living embodiment of the adage, “the personal is political.”

ELIZABETH WARREN: AN IDEOLOGICAL ICON

A Fighting Chance presents the dominant theme that the financial system is “rigged” against the middle class. Warren continues to advance this notion as a Senator and presidential contender. As noted earlier, the public and pundits view her as a progressive who is reshaping the Democratic

Party. Warren casts herself as a warrior of the people and argues that the Party must do the same. The fight will prove difficult, for it is a David and Goliath battle where the playing fields are not level. It is a historic battle of good vs. evil, right vs. wrong, and Lilliputian vs. giant. Warren routinely critiques virtually everyone in politics—democrats, moderates, independents—nobody is safe from her observations and evaluations. Not only does Warren highlight these battles in her autobiography, but she also does so in many of her speeches and public statements as well, as the following examples illustrate.

While running for Senate, for instance, Warren spoke at a house party in Andover, MA. It was supposed to be a house party, but it ballooned into a gathering of close to 100 people. Somebody videotaped Warren's comments about the choices government makes, choices that privilege the wealthy at the expense of all others. This speech garnered national attention. "There is nobody in this country who got rich on his own," Warren states. "Nobody. You built a factory out there? Good for you. But I want to be clear," she continues. "You moved your goods to market on the roads the rest of us paid for. You hired workers the rest of us paid to educate"⁷⁶. . . . "Now look," she concludes, "you built a factory and it turned into something terrific, or a great idea? God bless. Keep a big hunk of it. But part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along."⁷⁷ The speech attracted more than one million views on YouTube and led The Street to exclaim that Warren "was able to communicate in a few words—what the Democratic Party has been unable to communicate for years."⁷⁸

Warren was a featured speaker at the Democratic National Convention of 2012. She continued her populist warrior rhetoric in her address, saying that "the game is rigged" against hard-working people.⁷⁹ She argues that "Americans are fighters. We are tough, resourceful, and creative. If we have the chance to fight on a level playing field—where everyone pays a fair share, and everyone has a real shot—then no one can stop us."⁸⁰ She praises President Obama, who is seeking re-election, by saying, "he's spent his life fighting for the middle class. And now he's fighting to level that playing field—because we know that the economy doesn't grow from the top down, but from the middle class out and the bottom up. That's how we create jobs and reduce the debt."⁸¹ She exhorts the audience to join her, join President Obama,

in the fight against bankers and lobbyists. “So let me ask you—let me ask you, America: are you ready to answer this call? Are you ready to fight for good jobs and a strong middle class? Are you ready to prove to another generation of Americans that we can build a better country and a newer world. . . You’re ready? America’s ready. God bless America.”⁸²

Soon after Donald Trump’s election as U.S. President, Warren delivered a speech to the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations Executive Council) in Washington, D.C. Her address both serves as an analysis of “what happened” as well as a rallying cry for progressives to continue the fight. For instance, she posits that “if we learned nothing from the past two years of electioneering, we should hear the message loud and clear that the American people want Washington to change.” Americans,” she continues, “are angry about a federal government that works for the rich and powerful and that leaves everyone else in the dirt.”⁸³ She adds, “The people are right to be angry.”⁸⁴ Warren elaborates that Americans are “angry that while Washington dithers and spins and does the backstroke in an ocean of money, while the American Dream moves further and further out of reach for too many families. Angry that working people are in debt. Angry that seniors can’t stretch a Social Security check to cover the basics.”⁸⁵

Warren continues to highlight the populist theme in the speech when she states, “Economic reform requires political reform. Why has the federal government worked so long only for those at the top? The answer,” she offers, “is money.”⁸⁶ “The American people are sick of politicians wallowing in the campaign contributions and dark money. They are revolted by influence peddling by wealthy people and giant corporations.”⁸⁷ Warren underscores the populist battle theme when she declares, “As the loyal opposition we will fight harder, we will fight longer, and we will fight more passionately than ever for the rights of every human being in this country to be treated with respect and dignity. We will fight for economic opportunity, not just for some of our children, but for all our children. . . . and we will keep fighting--each day, every day, we will fight for the people of this country.”⁸⁸

The 2016 presidential election exposed a growing fissure in the Democratic Party, a fissure that was at least partly responsible for the election of Donald Trump. The Democratic primary was a hot and vicious battle between mainstream, establishment Hillary Clinton and

her progressive rival, Bernie Sanders. Although Sanders eventually withdrew from the race, he had galvanized supporters who weren't interested in supporting Clinton, who many people felt was "too close to Wall Street" and didn't represent the average American's needs or interests. Thus, began a debate in the party about which path to choose: the traditional path or the more progressive, populist path. Warren refutes the efficacy of the first and champions the fight of the second, as her August 13, 2017 speech to the Netroots Nation conference underscores.

Warren wastes no time in attacking the mainstream Democrats. She angrily refutes a New York Times editorial by a Democratic strategist, titled "Back to the Center, Democrats." She describes the article by saying, "It was all about how we have to stop caring about, quote, 'identity politics' and stop waging, quote, 'class warfare.' Apparently," she says sarcastically, "the path forward is to go back to locking up non-violent drug offenders and ripping more holes in our economic safety net."⁸⁹ Warren spends the next several minutes explaining her attempts at getting the Democratic Party to listen to the people it represents. "We wanted a party led by people who weren't afraid to call themselves progressives. We wanted a party that would defend progressive values. We wanted a chance to fight for progressive solutions to our nation's challenges."⁹⁰ She casts the members of the audience as part of the solution: "We are not the gate crashers of today's Democratic Party. We are not a wing of today's Democratic Party. We are the heart and soul of today's Democratic Party."⁹¹

The rigged system next receives Warren's ire. She attacks the nature of an economic system where the wealthy can get and do anything while the rest of the people continue to struggle. "The concentration of power strikes at the heart of our democracy," she states. "Our government is supposed to be the one place where everybody gets the same fair shot, no matter how powerful or powerless they might be. But thanks to the revolving door between Capitol Hill, K Street, and Wall Street, powerful people have more and more influence in Congress. . . . Yes, the system is rigged."⁹² The speech builds to a crescendo when Warren states, "We don't have to fear the wrath of the powerful, because when we're bold enough to stand for our values, when we are bold enough to stand up for our fellow Americans, that's when we ARE powerful. . . . This fight is our fight. This fight is my fight. This fight is your fight. So

let's go win it.”⁹³

Over the years, Warren has gained the reputation of an activist who will take the fight to the opponents; she is someone who will never back down. A pivotal and much-publicized event in 2017 illustrates her tenacity—and her political savvy. On the Senate floor, Warren gave a lengthy speech criticizing attorney general nominee Jeff Sessions. In the middle of her reading of a passage from a letter by Coretta Scott King, Republican and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell attempted to silence her by invoking a seldom-used and little-known rule of Congress. Later, in attempting to justify his actions, McConnell stated, “She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted.”⁹⁴ Although Warren had to finish her speech outside the chamber, she won the battle. Her speech garnered more than 4.5 million views on Facebook and “Nevertheless, she persisted” gave Warren and her supporters a new battle cry.⁹⁵

By examining Warren’s autobiography and speeches, one can glean significant information about her life and ideology. “Warren’s writings are critical for teasing out the current balance between the citizen and the collective, the consumer and the economy.”⁹⁶ When considered together, the works reveal a profound knowledge of the financial system and the inequity of both gendered and economic status; Warren’s acquired understanding of these is based on years of experience and research. Her personal, professional, and political personae are all inextricably linked, and they justify her actions, as well as a justification for a systemic change of financial practices. Her ability to encapsulate what she has seen and experienced has led to her popularity. The Democratic presidential primary of 2016 pitted Hillary Clinton against Bernie Sanders, liberal feminism vs. progressive populism. Warren’s effectiveness and popularity “surged, in part, because she has found a way to merge them both. She is a candidate who “would leave nothing out and nobody behind.”⁹⁷ Her concern for and advocacy of women, families, and the struggling middle class has some considering her approach to be “pocketbook populism.”⁹⁸ At the risk of diminishing her impact or accomplishments, it is important to note that to some, Warren “remains a folk hero in the progressive community,”⁹⁹ but more importantly, chants of “Warren 2020” often break out

whenever she is speaking.¹⁰⁰

On December 31, 2018, Elizabeth Warren announced her 2020 presidential bid, ending months of speculation.¹⁰¹ Her popularity and name recognition will provide her with a credible start to her campaign. This study has demonstrated the link between the personal and political in Warren's life thus far. It traced the underpinnings of her ideology to lived experiences, first as a wife, mom, and academic to her later roles in policy-making and as a candidate. The narrative of her autobiography underscores Warren's knowledge of and ability to move between and within the gendered and economic boundaries of insider vs. outsider. Her continued metaphor of "fighting" in speeches and public statements continues the David v. Goliath theme she set up in her books. At the very least, one thing is certain: she will persist.

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