

Creating and Destroying Party Brands

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Abstract

A large literature argues that parties' brands affect congressional elections. Legislators engage in a marketing effort to cultivate their own party's brand and to destroy the other party's reputation. All legislators may benefit from an improved party brand, but legislators have differential incentives to contribute to the brand. We show how the variable incentives cause a distortion in a party's marketing efforts. Using text as data tools and a new collection of legislators' statements, we provide new measures of how legislators engage in party branding. Using these measures, we show extremists disproportionately contribute to the party marketing efforts, particularly when their party does not hold the presidency. This disproportionate contribution matters because extreme legislators offer more hyperbolic criticism of the other party. We show how the partisan marketing effort can shape party brands and illuminate the risks in the marketing effort for a party.

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A party's brand, or reputation, affects congressional elections. Brands affect elections because all members of the party are associated with the brand. The effect of the brand has magnified as elections have nationalized and as individual members have increasingly struggled to define their own, distinctive brands (Jacobson, 2013*b*; Arnold, 2004). A large literature argues that parties bolster their brands with their work in Congress by attempting to enact popular and effective legislation while also exerting negative agenda control to deflect proposals dangerous to the brand (Cox and McCubbins, 1993, 2005; Powell and Butler, 2014). But the work to shape a party's brand continues outside of Congress (Groeling, 2010). Members of both parties engage in a marketing effort to cultivate their own party's brand and to undermine the other party's reputation with constituents. For example, Sellers (2010) noted that legislators use strategic communications to shape news coverage and agendas for policy debates through their public statements. The marketing effort is particularly essential for an out party—a party that lacks the presidency, a majority in Congress, or both in order to expand and socialize the conflict. When parties lack formal institutional power in Washington, public statements are one of the few tools legislators have to shape party brands.

The nature of American political parties implies each party's marketing effort is necessarily decentralized—there is no one legislator or politician able to speak officially and exclusively for a party. Instead, each party's message is the collective result of legislators' public statements, but there is a strong incentive to work together in order to shape the party brand. Party leaders certainly attempt to coordinate the development of the brand (Green, 2015; Harris, 2013), but each member of Congress can make a plausible claim to speak for her party's legislators and to offer official criticism of the other party.

The collective nature of party brands is problematic for parties because of differences in legislators' incentives that lead to differences in who contributes to the collective marketing effort: individual legislators' electoral incentives and ideological differences cause a distortion in the party's marketing effort. Legislators' incentives to contribute to their party's marketing effort depends on the type of district they represent and the ideological positions they adopt. Legislators who are more ideologically extreme tend to have the most strident objections to an opposing party's poli-

cies and tend to represent districts composed of copartisans. This creates ideological and electoral incentives for the most extreme members of a party to dominate policy debates and the messaging that shapes a party's brand. This leads to a problem of appearance, with the messages from each party coming from the most extreme members. It also creates a problem of messaging. We show that extremists tend to use more hyperbolic language—creating a more aggressive, antagonistic, and partisan marketing effort than if the messages were more representative of the party.

We demonstrate the collective action problem in parties' marketing efforts using a new collection of legislators' public statements, statistical models to analyze the large collections of texts, and leveraging the change that occurs in a party's power after it moves into the minority in Congress and loses the presidency. We use both a collection of House press releases from 2005-2010 and a new corpus of House and Senate electronic newsletters, issued from 2008-2012. We use the Structural Topic Model to analyze our collection of texts, using a specification that facilitates an estimation of how legislators divide their attention over a set of topics in each year of our analysis (Grimmer, 2010; Robert, Stewart and Airoldi, 2015). Our collection of statements come from a particularly turbulent period in American politics, ensuring that we observe both parties holding control of the House and presidency as well as periods of divided control.

Using our measures of legislators' expressed priorities, we show extremists dominating the out party's marketing effort—particularly as a party loses power and the ability to construct its own positive brand using institutional power in Washington. We focus on Republican legislators after the 2008 election, who we show drastically altered how they communicate with constituents. Republicans were routed in the election, losing the presidency and even more seats in the House and Senate. As Republicans transitioned to minority status they made a large shift in how they presented their work to constituents: they became more critical of the Obama administration and Democratic policy proposals. Conservative and aligned Republicans drove the change in the party marketing effort, while more moderate and marginal legislators made smaller changes in their rhetorical styles. By focusing on a shift in power after the election we can isolate the change that occurs after moving into the out party and rule out other competing explanations, such as obstinate members of the party being more skeptical in general about policy.

The distortion towards extremist legislators matters because extremists use more antagonistic, partisan, and hyperbolic language when engaging in a marketing effort. We analyze the content of specific policy debates to demonstrate the differences in rhetoric (Hopkins, 2013). When conservative Republicans discuss health care reforms, they allocate a larger share of their press releases to inflammatory rhetoric, such as “government takeover” and allocate less space to describing actual policy implications or alternative proposals. And we show this distortion is not merely a feature of Republican rhetoric attacking Obama policies. Liberal Democrats adopted similarly critical language about the Bush administration’s budget proposals, which were largely connected to funding for the Iraq war in 2005 and 2006.

Our analysis documents the rhetorical origin of party brands and documents challenges for parties in creating those brands. Partisans in Congress fight in public debate to define their own party’s brand and to undermine the other party’s brand. The marketing effort is particularly valuable for the out party, whose members have few institutional mechanisms to affect their own, or the majority party’s reputation. The value of the rhetorical battle makes the potential distortion all the more troublesome for the out party. It can also provide insights into why parties in Congress appear so polarized: the legislators defining the party’s brand are exactly those with the incentives to be most antagonistic.

1 A Decentralized Marketing Effort to Create a Brand

Political parties actively cultivate their brand: a summary of past actions, beliefs, and outcomes about the party in the minds of the voters (Cox and McCubbins, 1993, 2005). Brands matter because voters use it as an initial short-hand cue when evaluating legislators (Powell and Butler, 2014) and the importance of partisanship has increased (Bartels, 2000; Jacobson, 2013*b,a*) in all federal elections during the last two decades. The party brand is valuable to candidates because it helps solve the collective action problem of information for voters (Aldrich, 2011). The brand names are rooted in policy and electoral forces have heightened the tendency for partisans to share policy stances that are broadly similar within the party and divided between the parties (Aldrich, 2011).

Most literature on the construction of party brands focuses on how parties and party leaders influence the legislative process to craft policy beneficial to the broader party. Both Green (2015) and Harris (2013) detail the efforts of party leaders to coordinate party messages and conflict framing. Both discuss the development of partisan theme teams to coordinate one minute speeches on the House floor and on cable news television programs. Others have demonstrated how the ideological extremes dominate speaking on the House floor (Harris, 2005; Morris, 2001).

But work in Washington is only one component of the branding process. This is partly due to constraints on floor time on Capitol Hill. But is also partly because constituents rarely directly observe work in the institution. Constituents simply lack the time and interest to follow legislative developments in Washington. Instead, constituents rely upon reports from the media about new legislation and, critically, statements from political leaders on how and its implications for the public. Politicians choose their statements carefully in anticipation of how the news media will cover them (Sellers, 2010).

To translate the actions in Washington to the public, parties engage in a marketing effort beyond the chamber floor (Grimmer, 2013). Legislators from both parties make public statements that attempt to improve their party's relative reputation. Legislators sometimes make a positive case. They explain that their party has actively engaged in crafting legislation that addresses major problems and therefore elevates their party's brand. Legislators sometimes also make a negative case against the other party. Representatives denigrate the other party's proposals as weak, insufficient, or extreme and, therefore, damaging the other party's brand.

A party's marketing effort is both broad and decentralized. It is broad because it can potentially involve all members of the partisan caucus. There is evidence, however, that party leaders play an important role in trying to find issues where their party is united and the opposition is divided (Sellers, 2010). And it is decentralized because much of the brand building occurs as legislators craft their home styles while explaining their work to constituents (Fenno, 1978). Individual legislators have to decide the extent to which they will participate in the crafting of the brand and if they do decide to contribute to the marketing effort, what they will say to bolster their party's reputation relative to the other party. This decision-making process effectively creates a cost-benefit analysis

for members as they have to decide whether the benefits of participating, especially in terms of receiving news coverage, exceeds the costs of participating (Sellers, 2010). The party leadership, however, often works to create multi-pronged messages about issues making it easier for rank-and-file members to find opportunities to marry the interests of the party with their own reelection interests.

The marketing effort is decentralized for the out party: the party that does not hold the presidency. The out party lacks the prominent leadership of the president, providing it with fewer resources to construct a positive record of policy accomplishments. Without the leadership of the president and the access to media resources that goes with controlling the White House, the out party also lacks an effective party spokesperson to advocate for new policy proposals and to rhetorically define the position of the party. Instead, individual legislators—and other copartisans from outside the Congress—often jostle for the opportunity to craft a vision for their party. Articulating positions and criticizing the president can help out party legislators advance several goals. Participating in a party’s marketing effort can help legislators raise their national profile, helping progressively ambitious legislators build support for future campaigns for higher office.

The struggles of the minority party to articulate a message based on positive legislative accomplishments is especially challenging in the House of Representatives. The dramatic rise of closed rules has limited the ability of the minority to shape legislation substantively because the amendment process on major pieces of legislation is not available (Sinclair, 1995). The central leadership of the majority party uses the Rules Committee to structure choices for rank-and-file members and given the strong party pressures on members to back the party on procedural votes this has proven to be an effective tool for the majority party (Sinclair, 1995). Lacking institutional advantages, the minority party has a very strong incentive to build public support by expanding and socializing the conflict.

Strident criticism of the president is also a way for out party legislators to cultivate support with attentive interest groups and citizens, particularly those who are most opposed to a president’s policy initiatives (Bawn et al., 2012). If the president is the most public face of his party, any policy victories he claims provides a positive boost for the reputation of his party. Drawing on data from

the Senate, Lee (2009) finds the minority party has a very strong incentive to avoid cooperation with the president so even if the minority party cannot bolster their own reputation they can hurt the reputation of the other party. In addition, the conservative group *Club for Growth* encourages Republican legislators to stridently oppose the Obama administration—or face sanction in the form of a *Club for Growth* funded primary challenger. Likewise, Tea Party constituents often chastised their representatives for failing to oppose all facets of Obama administration policies.

When there is a new president, then, we expect that legislators will shift their rhetoric. They will adopt interest group rhetoric to gain their support and secure their attention with hyperbolic criticism. But not all legislators will shift their rhetoric. When legislators advocate for their party, they present themselves as “partisan warriors” to their constituents (Theriault, 2013). While becoming known as a partisan warrior helps legislators advance their own careers and raise their fund raising profiles, its electoral consequences depends on the type of district a legislator represents. Advocating for their party helps legislators who represent homogeneous districts filled with co-partisans bolster support. Aligned legislators can demonstrate to primary voters they advance the party position and can count on those primary voters to be a large share of the general election.

Acting as a partisan warrior is more risky for marginal legislators who represent districts where they need support from other party to win reelection. If a marginal legislator contributes to the party branding effort, she risks alienating opposing partisans. Instead, marginal legislators have incentives to cultivate a “personal vote” (Cain, Fiorina and Ferejohn, 1987; Grimmer, 2013) and avoid partisan issues. Or, when they do speak on issues, they have incentive to emphasize their more moderate positions and there is evidence on this front (Sellers, 2010).

Legislators’ individual incentives, then, contribute to an overall distortion in the party’s marketing effort even if one assumes that party leaders work to build a brand acceptable to the widest possible voting coalition. Aligned and extreme legislators contribute to the marketing effort at a higher rate than more marginal and moderate representatives. The distortion results in more extreme and partisan legislators serving as default party spokespersons. It also causes the party’s marketing effort to be more hyperbolic. The result is that when a minority party criticizes the majority party, their most extreme and hyperbolic legislators lead the criticism. In addition, the

political environment contributes to this process as the Internet has changed some of the dynamics for legislators because of the need for instant communication. Members are now much more likely to engage in strategic communications (i.e. electronic newsletters) and this allows for greater promotion of the party’s message (Sellers, 2010).

2 Measuring the Party Brand and Legislators’ Home Styles

A party’s marketing effort is the product of the messages individual legislators articulate when explaining their work in Washington to their constituents. To systematically characterize this marketing effort we use a diverse collection of statements: a collection of all House press releases from 2005-2010 and all House and Senate electronic newsletters from 2008-2012 (Grimmer, Westwood and Messing, 2014). Press releases are useful for measuring how legislators present their work to the public: they are issued regularly, they are correlated with the content of legislators’ other statements, and are regularly used by newspapers (Grimmer, 2013). The collection of electronic newsletters offers a complement to the press releases. Press releases tend to be written for a broad audience that consumes local newspapers. Electronic newsletters, however, are targeted at constituents who explicitly sign up to receive the messages.¹ The electronic newsletters come from both House and Senate offices, ensuring that our results are not simply the product of looking at only one branch of government. And the collection of newsletters allows us to assess how rhetoric changes as the Republican Party moves into the majority after the 2010 congressional election and Republican freshman join the House who are explicitly aligned with the Tea Party. In total, we analyze 206,976 press releases and newsletters.

We systematically characterize how legislators present their work in both collections using text as data tools. Specifically, we focus on estimating *what* legislators emphasize when communicating with their constituents. To do this, we use the Structural Topic Model (STM), an unsupervised model that estimates the topics of discussion, rather than assume the topics are known beforehand (Robert, Stewart and Airoidi, 2015). To apply the model we first preprocess the texts to turn them into data for quantitative analysis (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013). We discard stop words,

¹To obtain the collection of the newsletters, we manually signed up for all electronic newsletters that were available as emails. Our analysis only focuses on the content of the emails specifically, not following the links provided in the emails.

punctuation, capitalization, and retain the most common words. The result is that each press release and newsletter is represented as a count vector, where each entry counts the number of times each unique feature occurs.

Using this representation of the texts we apply the STM. The model estimates the topics discussed in both press releases and newsletters and the proportion of each press release and newsletter allocated to the topics. Our primary quantity of interest is each legislator’s *expressed priorities* or the proportion of their press release and newsletter allocated to each topic. We use a specification of the STM to model the topic prevalence for each legislator, year, and type of document. For each legislator i , type of document d , and year in the data set t STM estimates

$$\mathbf{priorities}_{idt} = (\text{priority}_{idt1}, \text{priority}_{idt2}, \dots, \text{priority}_{idt52})$$

where $\mathbf{priorities}_{idtk}$ describes the proportion of the document type dedicated to topic k . STM, like many other unsupervised models, requires that we set the number of topics. We set the number of topics at 52, a number that we determined using both quantitative statistics and qualitative evaluations of the content of the press releases (Roberts et al., 2014).

While unsupervised methods require less effort in their initial application, they require more effort to label and interpret the output (Quinn et al., 2010). Table 1 shows the 52 topics the model estimated. Moving from left-to-right in the table it shows: the proportion of newsletters dedicated to the topic, the proportion of press releases, six automatically identified keywords, and finally a hand label for each topic generated after closely reading the documents with a high percentage allocated to each topic.² Table 1 shows that most topics appear in both press releases and newsletters—indicating that the model is capturing a common set of topics across the different ways legislators communicate with their constituents.

To analyze the shift in how members of each party brand themselves, we use two groupings of the topics in Table 1. The first grouping are a set of topics that examine legislators claiming credit

²We extensively validate the topics, demonstrating that they largely capture politically relevant content and that our labels accurately capture the thematic content of the categories.

Table 1: Topics in Press Releases and Newsletters

Newsletter Prop.	Press Release Prop.	Automatic Keywords	Hand Labels
0.11	0.00	link,offic,imag,phone,mail,updat	Newsletter Links
0.06	0.04	peopl,time,make,just,like,want	Personal connection
0.05	0.03	district,offic,counti,meet,town,hall	Constituent Service
0.04	0.04	nation,honor,day,american,famili,serv	Holidays
0.03	0.04	hous,vote,legisl,pass,congress,support	Congressional Action
0.01	0.06	said,releas,today,datelin,fed,congressman	Press Release Header
0.04	0.02	job,busi,small,econom,creat,economi	Small Business
0.04	0.02	budget,spend,cut,debt,fiscal,year	Budget Hawks
0.03	0.02	democrat,american,republi,obama,read,speaker	Presidential Criticism
0.05	0.00	newslett,main,offic,friend,congress,dear	Newsletter greeting
0.02	0.03	letter,secretari,state,concern,depart,propos	Bureaucratic Oversight
0.03	0.02	health,care,insur,reform,cost,coverag	Child Care
0.02	0.03	act,legisl,amend,requir,introduc,protect	Legislative Amendments
0.01	0.04	<i>grant,depart,program,announc,commun,award</i>	<i>Fire Grants</i>
0.02	0.02	tax,increas,percent,famili,american,rate	Tax rate
0.01	0.03	<i>fund,million,program,appropri,provid,billion</i>	<i>Appropriations</i>
0.01	0.03	<i>project,transport,citi,improv,construct,new</i>	<i>Infrastructure</i>
0.03	0.01	email,congressman,gov,hous,list,view	Solicit communication
0.01	0.03	committe,member,hear,hous,chairman,subcommitte	Committee Work
0.01	0.03	<i>water,land,river,protect,lake,nation</i>	<i>Water Grants</i>
0.01	0.03	develop,technolog,univers,commun,region,nation	University Research
0.02	0.02	right,court,elect,rule,law,constitut	Constitutional issues
0.02	0.01	week,visit,discuss,tour,meet,travel	Office news
0.01	0.02	energi,renew,fuel,effici,clea,green	Renewable energy
0.02	0.02	financi,loan,credit,bank,home,market	Financial Crisis
0.02	0.02	veteran,va,servic,militari,benefit,affair	VA Benefits
0.02	0.02	govern,taxpay,feder,money,dollar,account	Government Bailouts
0.02	0.01	servic,inform,site,davi,offic,internet	Public Appearances
0.01	0.02	<i>disast,emerg,assist,flood,hurrican,feder</i>	<i>Homeland security</i>
0.01	0.02	report,inform,use,agenc,studi,number	Oversight
0.01	0.02	iraq,war,troop,afghanistan,iraqi,militari	Iraq War
0.01	0.02	<i>children,program,famili,child,provid,parent</i>	<i>Children Funding</i>
0.01	0.02	defens,militari,forc,air,guard,nation	Armed Services
0.01	0.01	oil,price,energi,drill,increas,product	Oil & Drilling
0.01	0.01	tax,credit,incom,stimulu,relief,packag	Economic Stimulus
0.01	0.02	trade,industri,manufactur,worker,agreement,compani	Workers' Issues
0.01	0.02	educ,student,colleg,school,loan,teacher	Higher Education
0.01	0.02	terrorist,attack,unit,intellig,state,foreign	Domestic Security
0.01	0.02	school,high,art,district,congression,student	Art Contests
0.01	0.01	presid,bush,administr,white,address,congress	Administration Criticism
0.01	0.01	medicar,senior,social,drug,plan,benefit	Senior Issues
0.01	0.01	<i>health,care,medic,center,servic,hospit</i>	<i>Medical Centers</i>
0.01	0.01	senat,immigr,illeg,state,law,reform	Undocumented Immigrants
0.01	0.01	secur,border,homeland,port,nation,mexico	Border Security
0.01	0.01	agricultur,food,farm,farmer,safeti,product	Farming
0.01	0.01	health,prevent,treatment,ill,diseas,mental	Preventative Care
0.01	0.01	law,enforc,crime,polic,justic,offic	Local Police
0.01	0.01	academi,nomin,west,servic,high,school	Service Academy
0.01	0.01	congresswoman,caucu,island,aid,commun,lee	African American Issues
0.01	0.01	women,cancer,equal,pay,men,work	Women Issues
0.00	0.01	violenc,abus,victim,team,young,domest	Domestic Violence
0.00	0.01	research,cell,stem,veto,human,scienc	Science Research

for government spending in the district, which we indicate with *italics*. The second grouping are a set of categories that are intended to directly attack or critique the other party. We identify this set of topics in **bold**. To identify each set of topics we closely read the texts that loaded highly on the topic.

Using the individual topics and the groupings of credit claiming and attacking topics we examine how out parties brand themselves—focusing on the particular case of the Republican Party after Barack Obama was elected in 2008.

3 The Republican Shift towards Attack

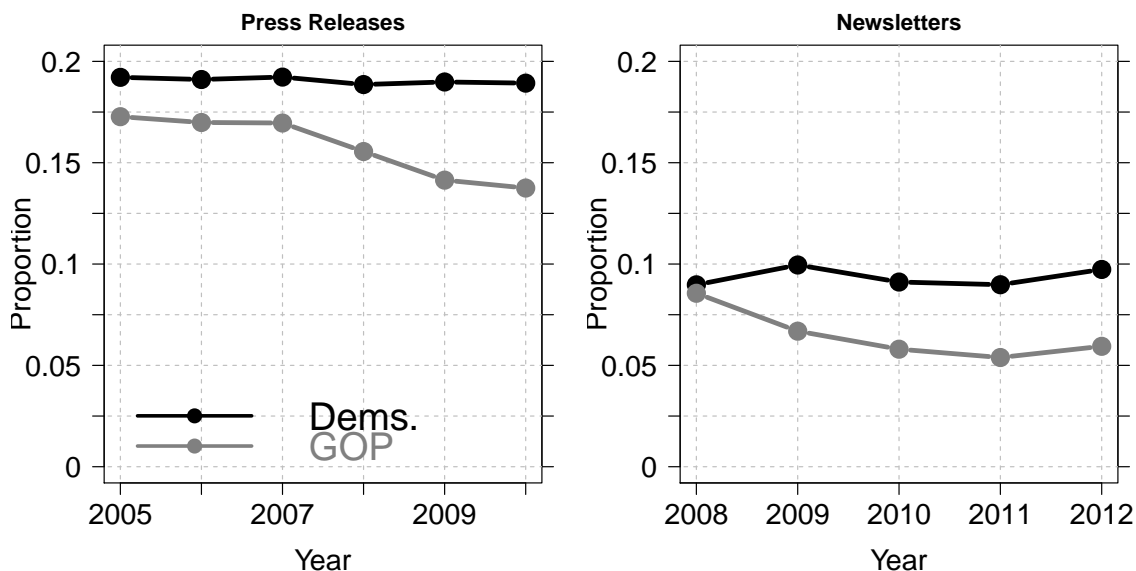
Party branding through rhetoric offers out parties the opportunity to define their work to the public, even though they lack formal control over legislative institutions. And yet, the branding effort for the out parties can also be detrimental, because a specific subset of legislators have the greatest incentive to contribute to the formation of the party brand.

To examine the biased contributions across the ideological spectrum to the party brand, we first examine how Republican legislators shifted their emphases after the 2008 election, when the party lost the White House and became an even smaller minority in the House and Senate. When moving into the out party, legislators increasingly have fewer incentives and opportunities to highlight the positive work their party has done in Washington. Worse, the majority will exhibit negative agenda control to prevent the minority from participating in the legislative process (Cox and McCubbins, 2005). Lacking opportunities to build their own positive record of accomplishment, the minority party seeks to undermine the in-party’s record of accomplishment. One way legislators might convey their work to constituents is as a non-partisan advocate for the district. Figure 1 shows the average rate of credit claiming—creating an impression the legislator is responsible for securing money for the district—for Republican (grey lines) and Democrats (black lines) in press releases (left-hand plot) and newsletters (right-hand plot).³

Figure 1 shows that as Republican legislators become an out party—after they lose the presidency—they allocate less attention to credit claiming in both their press releases and their newsletters. For

³Figure 1 shows the relationship for the aggregated credit claiming category. In the Appendix we show that the disaggregated category follows a similar trend.

Figure 1: Decline in Credit Claiming

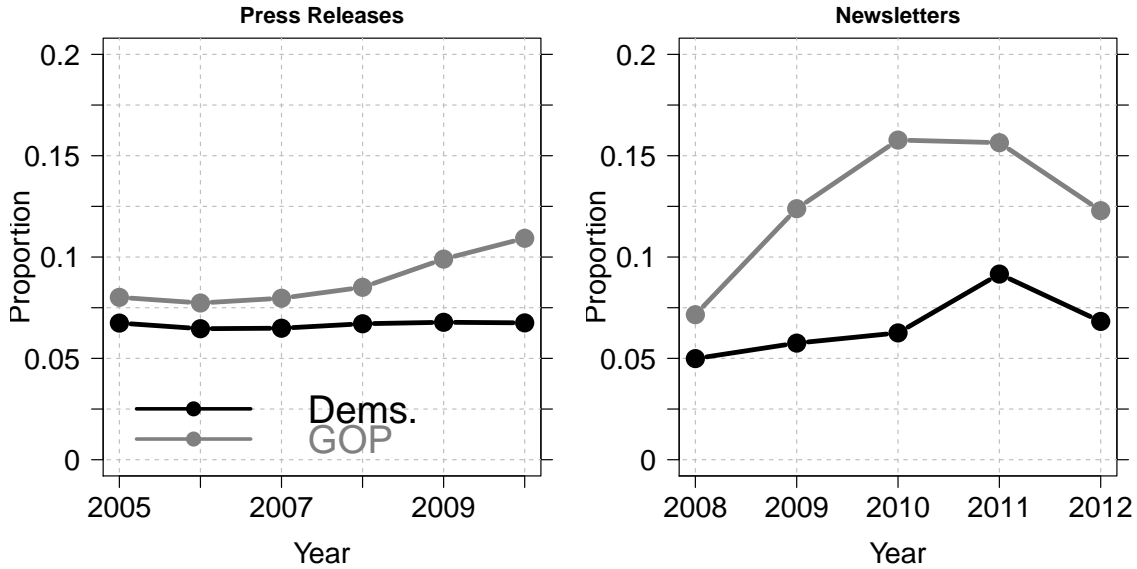


Republican members of Congress decrease the share of their press releases (left-plot) and newsletters (right-plot) dedicated to credit claiming.

example in 2005 Democratic legislators allocated 19.2% of their press releases to credit claiming, while Republicans allocated 17.3% of their press releases to credit claiming—a 1.9 percentage point difference. By 2010 Republicans allocate 13.8% of their press releases to credit claiming, compared to 18.9% of Democratic press releases—a 5.1 percentage point difference. The right plot shows a similar difference between the credit claiming rate for Republicans and Democrats in their newsletters. While Democrats and Republicans allocate nearly identical space to credit claiming in newsletters in 2008, by 2011 Democrats allocate 3.8 percentage points more of their newsletters to claiming credit than Republicans.

As Republicans lost the White House and became the out party, they moved away from claiming credit for spending in their district. Figure 2 shows that in its place Republicans became increasingly critical of the Democratic Party and the Obama administration. By 2010 Republicans allocated 10.9% of their press releases to criticism of Democrats. The right-hand plot shows that the increase in attack rhetoric is even sharper among Republican legislators in their newsletters. At the peak of the attacks, Republican legislators allocate 15.7% percent of their newsletters to attacking the Democratic Party—an over three-fold increase from 2008, when Republicans held the White House.

Figure 2: Rise in Critiques on Democratic Party and Policy



Republican Members of Congress increase the share of their press releases (left-plot) and newsletters (right-plot) dedicated to critiquing the Democratic Party.

After losing the 2008 presidential election and becoming an out-party Republican legislators increasingly attempted to undermine the Democratic Party’s brand to bolster the Republican Party’s brand. The Republican brand became defined in its opposition to the Democratic Party’s policies and legislative accomplishments. A major tenet of the Tea Party movement was an aversion to government spending, with political activists on the right increasingly skeptical of particularistic spending in districts (Skocpol and Williamson, 2011; Draper, 2012). Beyond the aversion to money, Figure 2 is consistent with media depictions of Republicans who were portrayed as increasingly obstructionist and defined by their opposition to Obama presidency. The Tea Party was also often labeled as the product of a new movement—with new types of candidates joining the Republican Party.

In spite of the focus on the Tea Party legislators in the media, these new legislators were not responsible for the adversarial shift in the Republican Party’s brand. Instead, many of the Republicans who were elected in the Tea Party revolution were *less* adversarial than the Republicans returning to Congress. The new Republican legislators in 2011 allocated 2.6 percentage points *less* of their newsletters to attacks on Democrats than Republican legislators who were returning to

the House and Senate (95 percent confidence interval [-0.045, -0.01]). Republicans elected in 2010 do credit claim at a slightly lower rate than other Republicans in their newsletters (0.8 percentage points less often), but the difference is small enough that we fail to reject the null of no difference (95 percent confidence interval, [-0.02, 0.006]). There are similarly small differences between House Republicans elected in 2008 and the returning Republicans in the attack (95 percent confidence interval [-0.02, 0.03]) and credit claiming (95 percent confidence interval [-0.04, 0.04]) rates in press releases.

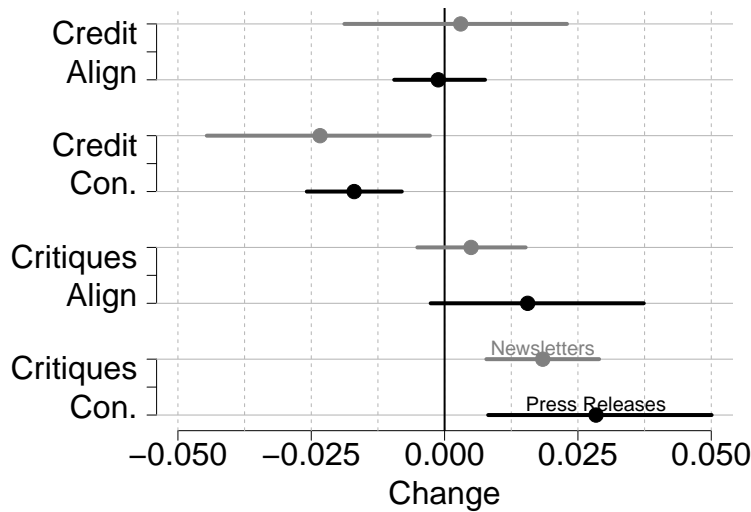
The change is also only partially the result of some legislators leaving the Congress: compositional changes of who is in the Republican Party explains only a small share of the change. Republicans who left in 2010 tended to claim credit for spending at only slightly higher rates in their press releases (0.3 percentage points more, 95 percent confidence interval [-0.04, 0.04]) and newsletters (0.9 percentage points more, 95 percent confidence interval [-0.016, 0.04]), while also attacking the Democratic Party at lower rates than their Republican colleagues who remained in Congress (1.6 percentage points less in press releases, 95 percent confidence interval [-0.03, 0.003]; 1.4 percentage points less in newsletters, 95 percent confidence intervals [-0.04, 0.01]).

Rather than occurring due to replacement, the shift in the Republican communication is primarily due to Republican legislators changing their emphases in communication with constituents. Republicans who served in Congress in both the 110th and 112th Congress allocated 8.6 percentage points more of their newsletters to attacking Democrats in 2011 than they did in 2008 (95 percent confidence interval [0.07, 0.10]). The same Republicans also decrease their credit claiming rate in newsletters 2.8 percentage points (95 percent confidence interval [-0.04, -0.02]).

The change in Republican emphasis toward attacking is strongest among legislators who have an electoral incentive to establish themselves as opponents of the administration and as skeptical of government spending: conservative Republicans and (to a lesser extent) Republicans who represent districts with a large concentration of copartisans. Figure 3 shows how conservatives and aligned legislators altered how they presented their work. Consider the second point estimate from the bottom, which provides an estimate of the additional increase of critiques in conservative Republicans' newsletters in 2011. To assess this change we focused on Republicans who served in the House

and Senate throughout this time. Specifically, we regressed the share of Republicans’ newsletters dedicated to Democratic critiques on the share of newsletters dedicated to critiques in 2008, the legislator’s DW-NOMINATE score, and the vote share for the Democratic Party candidate in the district. The point estimate represents the increased emphasis on critiques associated with a shift from the 25th to the 75th percentile of legislator’s conservatism.

Figure 3: Conservative and Aligned Republicans Drive Shift to Adversarial Brand



This figure shows that conservative Republicans and those who represent districts with a large share of copartisans drove the Republican shift towards a more adversarial brand.

Figure 3 shows that conservative legislators allocated a larger share of their communication to adversarial communication—critiquing the Democratic Party—while the third and fourth point estimates from the top show that the same conservative had a sharper decrease in the space allocated to credit claiming than their more moderate colleagues. A similar, though more muted, pattern is found for Republicans who are more aligned with their district. The third and fourth point estimates from the bottom of Figure 3 show that aligned Republicans allocated more space in their newsletters and press releases to critiques of the Democratic Party.

The pattern Figure 3 illuminates one feature of the collective action problem in shaping a party’s brand marketing strategy. The shift of individual members toward an adversarial style in the Republican Party was not a uniform one, nor was it necessarily one that required the coordination

of all the party’s members. Rather, the most conservative Republicans and the Republicans from the districts where Obama performed the worst in the polls drove the change. Media searching for conflict can exacerbate this pattern. If news media are particularly likely to print the most controversial statements (Capella and Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993), then this will further amplify the voice of the most extreme elements of the party. The result is a further distortion of the party’s brand.

4 Not Just What they Say, But How They Say It

A minority party can use an adversarial presentational style to undermine the majority party’s brand. The previous section showed that—at least for Republicans after Obama was elected president—the criticism emerged because the most conservative legislators altered how they present their work to constituents. Conservative Republicans allocated an increasingly sizable share of their constituent communication to criticizing the Obama administration and Democrats more generally. Taken together, the sharp increase in criticism from the most conservative Republicans resulted in the party’s overall communication becoming more adversarial—even if the rank-and-file members were more reluctant to engage in the criticism.

The conservative-driven shift in Republican content creates a problem of appearance for the more moderate members of the party. These moderates are immediately affiliated with legislators who represent the more extreme wing of their party—partisans who are less popular with the more heterogeneous constituents that moderates tend to represent. The adversarial push from conservatives also creates a problem of content for the party brands: conservative Republicans are more confrontational when engaging in critiques of the Democratic party than their more moderate colleagues. This, of course, creates problems for more centrist members who often cite their ability to work across party lines as central to their own individual brands.⁴

We examine the difference between how conservative and more moderate Republicans discuss the same topic with a quantitative case study, focusing on press releases about the Affordable Care Act and health care reform more generally.⁵ Given the collection of press releases, we then apply

⁴Montana Senator Jon Tester is one such example. See (Parker, 2015).

⁵We identify the healthcare press releases using a classification scheme developed in another project (Grimmer, Westwood and Messing, 2014)

vanilla Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to the collection of press releases, setting the number of topics to 10 (Blei, Ng and Jordan, 2003).⁶

Table 2 displays the ten topics we estimate after applying LDA to our collection of press releases. Among the most prominent topics is a discussion of a *government takeover* of the health care system. For example, Connie Mack (R-FL) issued a press releases where he declared that he was “was shocked to hear that White House officials are ignoring the Constitution” but that “The Obama Administration’s blatant disregard for the Constitution is nothing new. This is the same Administration that believes that the federal government...is the end-all solution to our problems” (Mack, 2009). Similarly, Pete Sessions (R-TX) issued a press release where he declared that “House Democrats have announced that the voice of the American people doesn’t matter...the Democrat Majority behind closed doors has written a government-run health care scheme that will increase health care costs, drive our nation deeper into debt, and raise taxes at a time when small businesses and families can least afford it” (Sessions, 2009).

Table 2: Health Care Topics in Press Releases

0.047	insurance,health,companies,industry,public,option	Public Option
0.11	health,insurance,coverage,care,tax,costs	Small Business
0.06	care,long,term,home,women,national	Medicaid Poor
0.183	health,care,reform,president,house,americans	Obama Speech
0.078	care,health,medical,patients,medicare,quality	Medicare Costs/Medical Access
0.103	health,insurance,care,coverage,affordable,reform	Preexisting Conditions
0.073	health,care,reform,town,hall,congressman	Town Hall
0.105	care,health,house,senate,people,speaker	Negotiations
0.055	health,amendment,federal,care,law,committee	Abortion
0.186	health,care,government,plan,democrats,americans	Government Takeover

Other topics are less focused on criticizing the Obama administration and on the policy provisions of reforming the health care system. This is evident in the topic labeled *Medicare Costs/Medical Access*. For example, Charles Dent (R-PA) a Republican moderate issued a press release that allocates a large share of its content to this topic on April 24, 2009—during a period of heated debate around the ACA. In the press release he announced a bill to address the “growing shortage of physicians and specialists willing to work in emergency rooms as hospital staff or as on-call providers”

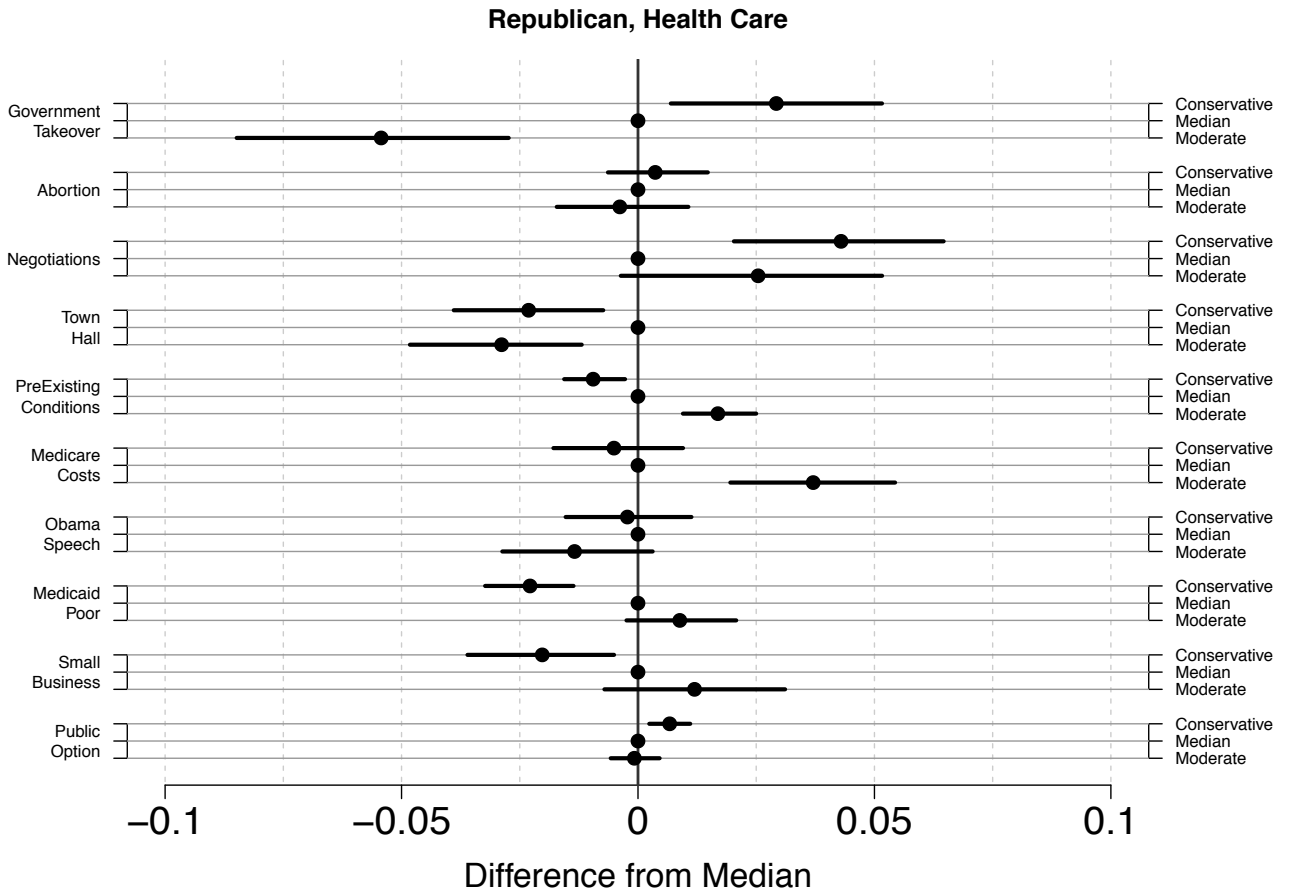
⁶The number of topics was determined using a qualitative search from 5 - 40. Ten topics balanced the granularity from more topics while avoiding redundant topics. We used the implementation in the *Mallet* software package.

(Dent, 2009). And in the summer after the ACA was passed another more centrist Republican, Steven LaTourette (R-OH), issued a joint press release with Lois Capps (D-CA) to announce they have “have introduced legislation that will improve patient care and support nurses in health care facilities” (LaTourette, 2009). Other topics discuss the possibility of a *public option*, comments on an *Obama Speech*, or discusses specific aspects of necessary reform—such as the need to offer health insurance to individuals with *Preexisting Conditions*.

Figure 4 shows that conservative Republicans discuss health care reform using systematically different messages than moderate Republicans. For each topic, Figure 4 shows how attention to topics differs across the ideological spectrum of the Republican Party. We divided Republicans into three groups using the Republicans’ DW-NOMINATE score (Poole and Rosenthal, 1997)—a group of moderates (up to the 20th percentile of Republican conservatives), median Republicans (those from the 20th to 80th percentile of conservatives), and conservatives (those at the 80th percentile of conservatism and higher). For each topic we then took the difference between the Conservative Republicans and the median Republicans and the moderate Republicans and the median Republicans. The bars are 95 percent confidence intervals for the difference.

Making the comparisons reveals that conservative Republicans are more adversarial than their centrist colleagues, who allocate more space to pragmatic issues in their press releases. The top-three lines in Figure 4 show that conservative Republicans allocate 8.4 percentage points more of their health care press releases to discussion of a government takeover of health care than centrist Republicans (95 percent confidence interval [0.06, 0.11]) and the most conservative Republicans allocate 2.9 percentage points more than the group of median Republicans (95 percent confidence interval [0.01, 0.05]). Centrists substitute discussions of a government takeover of the health care system with more pragmatic discussion of reform of the health care system. Centrist Republicans allocate 3.7 percentage points more to discussing how to lower Medicare costs and increase medical access than median Republicans (95 percent confidence interval [0.02, 0.05]) and 4.2 percentage points more than conservative Republicans (95 percent confidence interval [0.03, 0.06]). Similarly, centrist Republicans allocate more discussion of health care reform to addressing plans to cover individuals with preexisting conditions (4.0 percentage points more, 95 percent confidence interval

Figure 4: Conservative Republicans Are More Adversarial When Discussing Health Reform



Conservative Republicans emphasize direct attacks on the Obama administration, while moderates discuss ways to make the policy better.

[0.03, 0.05]).⁷

Our analysis has focused on how Republican Party legislators altered their party’s brand after Obama’s election in 2008, but our argument—that extremists distort an out party’s branding effort—covers more than this one instance. To demonstrate this generality, we also analyze how Democratic House members discuss budget criticism during the Bush administration. We first identify all instances of press releases that discuss issues related to the federal budget. We then apply LDA using ten topics, which we display in Table 3. This reveals adversarial topics—such as criticism of the Bush budget, criticisms of the Obama budget, and alternative proposals from Blue

⁷We show a similar distortion among Democrats and their discussion of health care in the Appendix.

Dog Democrats—who are self-labeled centrists.

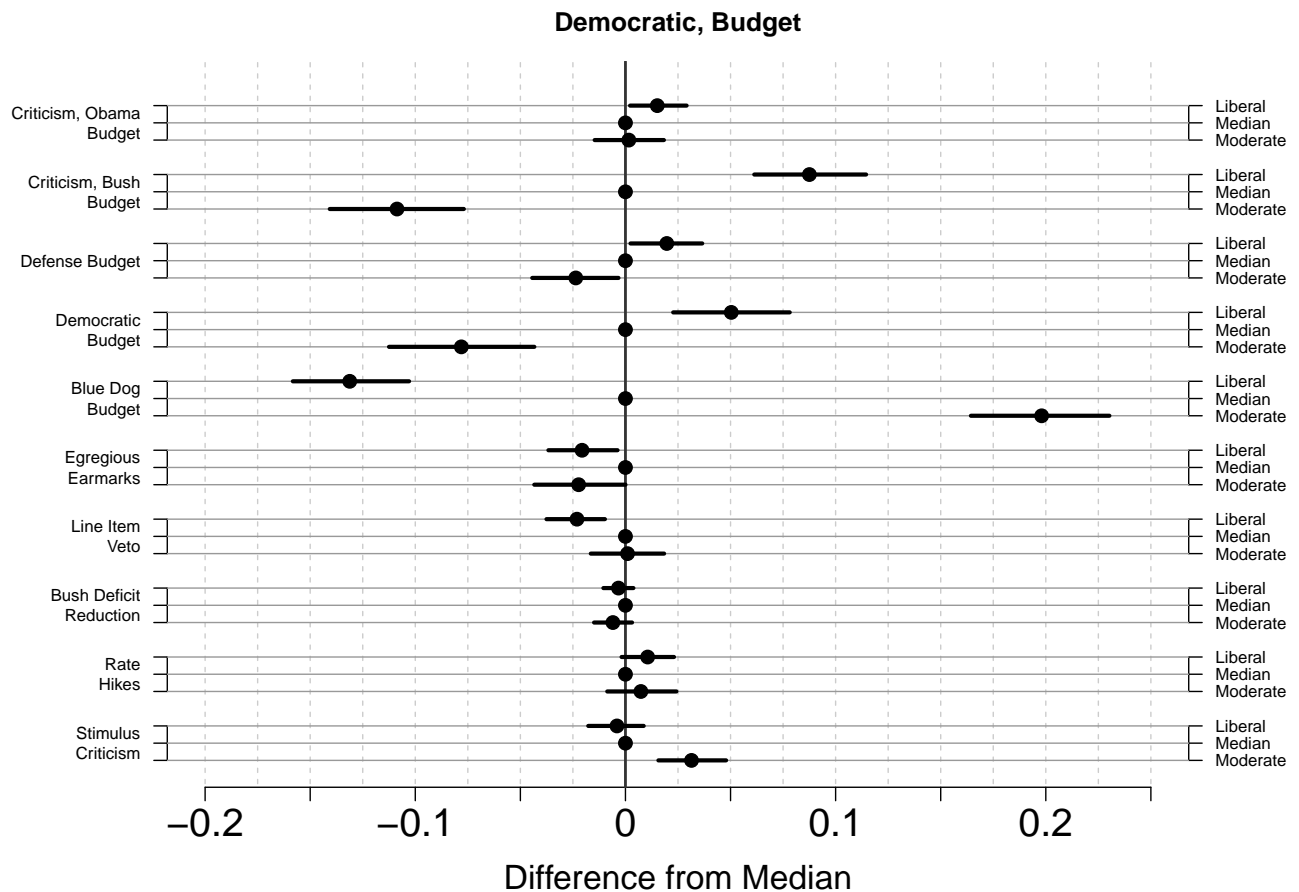
Table 3: Budget Topics in Press Releases

0.15	spending,debt,budget,trillion,president,government	Stimulus Criticism
0.074	federal,congress,government,people,administration,financial	Rate Hikes
0.088	budget,spending,deficit,billion,tax,federal	Bush Deficit Reduction
0.085	spending,federal,congress,government,president,act	Line Item Veto
0.128	earmarks,earmark,appropriations,house,reform,process	Egregious Earmarks
0.082	fiscal,budget,congress,blue,pay,spending	Blue Dog Budget
0.096	budget,president,health,tax,fiscal,house	Democratic Budget
0.063	budget,funding,year,president,million,defense	Defense Budget
0.089	budget,cuts,president,billion,programs,health	Criticism, Bush Budget
0.145	house,spending,budget,democrats,congress,american	Criticism, Obama Budget

Figure 5 shows that there are similar rhetorical differences across the ideological spectrum when Democrats discuss the federal budget. For example, the most liberal Democrats (the most liberal 20% of Democrats) allocate 8.8 percentage points of their budget press releases to criticizing the Bush administration (95-percent confidence interval [0.06, 0.12]) and 19.7 percentage points more than centrist Democrats (95-percent confidence interval, [0.17, 0.23]). The liberal Democrats also allocated more space to proposing their own, more liberal, budget (7.9 percentage points more than median Democrats [0.04, 0.11]; 12.8 percentage points more than centrist Democrats, [0.10, 0.16]). Rather than focus on criticizing the Bush administration, centrist Democrats tend to offer their own *Blue Dog* budget proposals. Centrist Democrats allocate 22.2 percentage points more of their budget press releases to the moderate blue dog proposals than median Democrats ([0.20, 0.24]) and 31.2 percentage points more than liberal Democrats ([0.30, 0.33]).

The systematic distortion in party brands towards the extremes of each party matters both because of who is talking and what they say. Conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats are systematically more adversarial than their more centrist colleagues. And because these are the partisans who tend to dominate policy discussion, the party as a whole tends to be labeled as adversarial, even though some of its more centrist members are less confrontational and emphasize problem-solving.

Figure 5: Liberal Democrats are More Adversarial When Discussing the Bush Administration Budget



Liberal Democrats tend to critique the Bush administration budget, while centrist Democrats tend to offer their own more moderate Budget proposals.

5 Conclusion

Party brands are central in political representation and American political institutions. While the literature has primarily examined how majority party legislators construct brands in the institution, we show how parties use marketing efforts to construct their brand outside of Congress. This attention is particularly crucial given the increasing difficulties of establishing a positive record of accomplishment with divided government and ever-increasing ideological polarization of the parties. The marketing effort not only provides parties the opportunity to create their brand even when

they lack institutional power in Washington, it also gives the party the opportunity to undermine the other party's brand—to destroy the brand.

Focusing on the Republican Party after the 2008 election, we demonstrate that after a change in power an out party engages in a systematic shift in how they present their work to constituents—moving away from claiming credit for spending towards a brand defined in opposition to Democrats and the Obama administration's policies. The change was not uniform across Republicans. Rather, the most extreme members of the party drove the change in rhetoric. The result is that a party's brand when discussing issues becomes conflated with what the most extreme members of the party say about the issue.

The lack of control over the party's brand creates a distortion that can be problematic for centrist members of a party. The legislators often represent districts that more heterogeneous than their more extreme colleagues. The appearance of extremity can undermine support for the individual legislator. And the adversarial style can also contribute to a recalcitrant reputation for a party among constituents. Out parties, such as the Republicans under the Obama administration, may then appear to be obstinate obstructors in the media because its loudest members are the ones leading the obstruction. Those extremists benefit from the party's reputation, while undermining their centrist colleagues.

Collective action problems that legislative institutions might easily resolve inside Congress are not so easily solved outside Congress. And the result is a distortion that may harm the overall health of the party, to benefit the extremists. The decentralized nature of American elections gives extremist legislators an incentive to highlight their adversarial efforts, but those efforts can simultaneously harm the electoral prospects of more moderate members who are associated with the party brand. Many of the closely contested House and Senate battlegrounds are framed around whether each of the candidates is too liberal or too conservative.

The collective action problem bedeviling party messaging activities also directly damages the collective reputation of Congress the institution in two important ways. First, the dominance of brand creation and destruction by the ideological extreme no doubt hurts the public's image of Congress as demonstrated by the exceptionally low regard with which the public holds Congress

the institution. Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein lay the blame on the increasing attention paid to partisan warfare at the expense of institutional maintenance (Mann and Ornstein, 2008, 2012), but the truth is members of Congress have long preferred attacking Congress as a means to get to Congress (Fenno, 1978).

Perhaps more problematic is the apparent doublespeak resulting from the decentralized nature of partisan messaging activities. Members of Congress may die with their ideological boots on, but the explanation of their voting behavior is not a constant (Poole and Rosenthal, 2007). Consider our findings that where one sits ideologically dictates how Republican members spoke about healthcare both before and after the debate over the ACA. Every House Republican voted against the ACA. Yet, how moderates and conservatives discussed healthcare differed substantively. To the outside observer, this careful rhetorical dance appears contrived and manipulative, further fueling the distrust Americans feel toward politicians generally and legislators specifically. Although political scientists and the general public agree that members of Congress generally pursue their governing and brand building activities with the central goal of reelection in mind, that motive is viewed substantively differently. Political scientists see this as central to a healthy representational relationship: members of Congress should cater to the electorate in a representative democracy. The public sees the reelection motive as further evidence of members of Congress out for themselves at the expense of the public and institutional good. The disparate needs of minority members as they pursue majority status, ironically, may ultimately make governing more challenging and less rewarding both collectively and individually.

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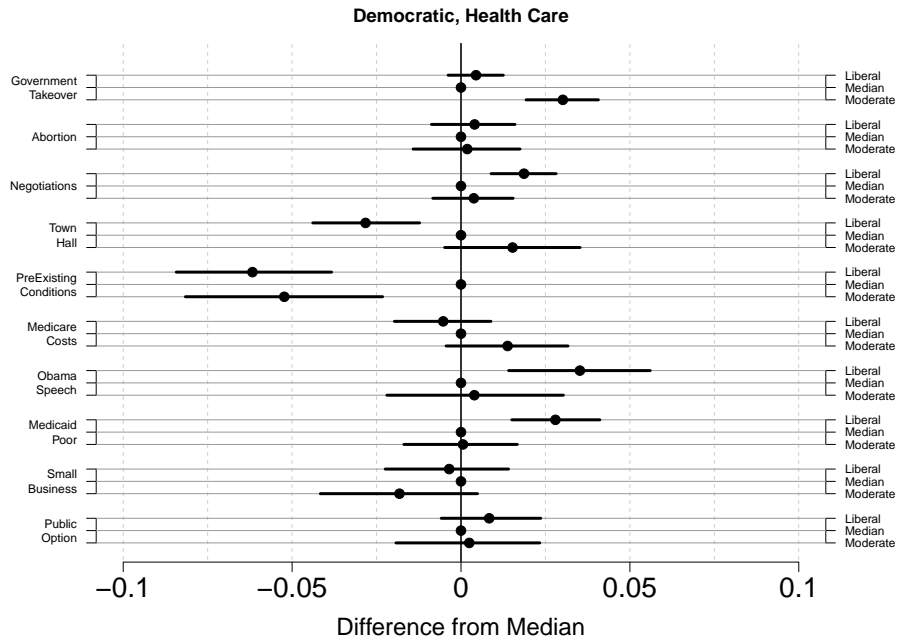
A Democratic Health Care, Republican Budget Distortions

In Section 4 we examine how Republicans discuss the Affordable Care Act and how Democratic representatives discuss the Bush administration's budgets in press releases. In this section of the Appendix we show that differences in emphases are found when Democrats discuss the Affordable Care Act and when Republicans discuss the Bush administration budget, though those differences are more muted.

Figure 6 shows what members of the Democratic party discussed when they issued press releases about health care. Liberal Democrats were systematically more likely to discuss Obama's speeches, while more moderate members emphasized a government take over.

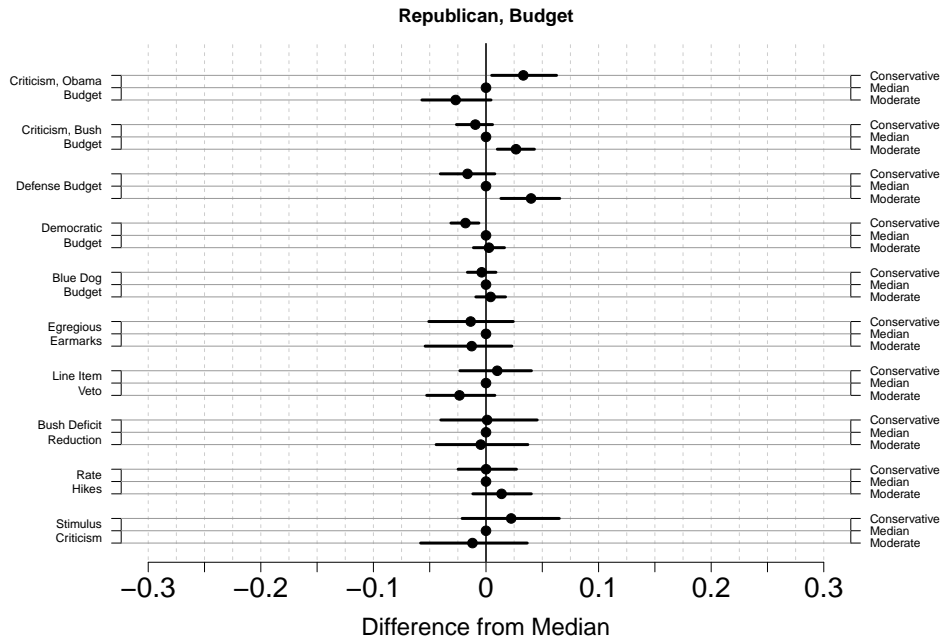
Figure 7 shows that there is similar systematic variation in how Republicans discuss budgets. Conservative Republicans are systematically more likely to criticize Obama administration budgets, while moderate Republicans were systematically more likely to criticize the Bush administration.

Figure 6: Ideological Differences in How Democrats Discuss Health Care



This figure shows that Democrats also have systematic ideological variation in how they discuss health care.

Figure 7: Ideological Differences in How Republicans Discuss Administration Budgets



This figure shows that Republicans also have systematic ideological variation in how they discuss administration budgets.