Introduction: Singing from the Same Hymnbook

Party Cohesion in the Media

> Communications is where it's all at. It's not what you're doing but the perceptions that are so important.
>
> – Representative John Boehner (R-OH), speaking on Medicare Reform in 1995[1]

Incumbent Senator Lincoln Chafee (R-RI) entered the 2006 election in a relatively enviable political position. Chafee was the scion of a Rhode Island dynasty that had produced numerous governors and senators, including his father and immediate predecessor in the Senate, John Chafee. After being appointed to complete his deceased father's term in 1999, Chafee captured 57% of the vote in his own right in the 2000 election. Reflecting the same independent streak demonstrated by his father, Chafee repeatedly defied the Republican leadership on key issues, favoring the relatively liberal positions of his constituents over those of the national party.[2] After fending off a right-wing challenger in the 2006 primary election, Chafee seemed well positioned to appeal to moderate voters in his relatively liberal state, with polling showing that more than half of voters thought his positions on the issues were "about right" and nearly two thirds approved of the way he was handling his job as senator.[3]

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[1] Maraniss and Weisskopf (1996, 142).

[2] For example, Chafee broke ranks with his fellow Republicans on Bush's 2001 tax cut, the so-called partial-birth–abortion ban, the Iraq War authorization, a proposed Flag Desecration Amendment, the Medicare prescription-drug benefit, the nomination of Samuel Alito to the U.S. Supreme Court, and other policies.

[3] Of the respondents, 63% approved of Chafee's job performance, 17% believed he was "too liberal," and 25% believed he was "too conservative" (CNN 2006).

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Despite all of those advantages, Chafee lost the election to his Democratic opponent, Sheldon Whitehouse. Chafee's actions in office, as well as his ultimate defeat, present an interesting window into the conduct of modern American politics. In particular, they demonstrate the degree to which partisanship has come to dominate not only the conduct of politics within the legislature in Washington but also the information that the American public uses in evaluating politics – and politicians.

TALKING OUT OF THE SAME SIDES OF THEIR MOUTHS

Although political scientists often dismiss the statements of politicians as "cheap talk," politicians certainly behave as though they believe that "talk matters." In fact, politicians sometimes behave as if talk were *all* that mattered.[4] Even outside of the talk-heavy world of campaigns and elections, modern politicians issue news releases, leak damaging information about enemies, appear in front of network cameras, stage elaborate photogenic events, and conduct the public's business in front of television cameras. They do so not from vanity but rather from strategy: All of these efforts are intended to directly or indirectly influence the public's perception of the politician and his or her party.

Fostering a positive party "brand name" is the chief collective good provided by parties. Parties foster a positive image through coordinating their activities in the legislative process and their communication with voters. Although political scientists generally emphasize the former activity and dismiss the importance of partisan communication, I argue that a party's ability to coordinate communication has important implications for the study of American politics (Chapter 1). In particular, for members of the presidential party, the failure to coordinate messages can significantly damage their leader's standing in public opinion (Chapter 5) and actually undermine the attractiveness and stability of unified government (Chapter 6).

A party's success or failure in collective communication is heavily influenced by the macrolevel institutional setting of that communication.

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[4] Of course, the clearest indication of the value that politicians attach to communication is evident in the tremendous resources devoted to campaign advertising. TNS Media Intelligence, which systematically tracks advertising purchases, estimated that candidates and other political groups spent $1.7 billion on advertising in the 2004 election cycle and between $2.5 billion and $2.7 billion in the 2008 election (Atkinson 2008). The fundraising necessary to support such massive spending, in turn, consumes massive quantities of politicians' time and attention – almost a third of all senators' time, according to one estimate (Hollings 2006).

Specifically, in unified government, the president undermines his party's ability to successfully communicate with voters. Thus, unified government paradoxically presents the greatest challenge for unified collective communication for the president's party and places that party at far greater electoral risk than it faces in divided government. These challenges stem primarily from two sources: the constitutional separation of powers (Chapter 6) and the intervening role of the news media (Chapter 2). In this setting:

- Important internal disputes with the president or within the congressional majority are more likely to arise (Chapter 6).
- These disputes are disproportionately likely to be featured by the news media in stories initiated by the president (Chapter 3) and by Congress (Chapter 4).
- The resulting stories of intraparty strife are among the most credible and damaging types of partisan story, particularly among independent and presidential-party viewers (Chapter 5).

All else being equal, moving to divided government decreases both the likelihood that collective communication in the presidential party will break down and the attractiveness of such stories for the news media. When combined with the postwar surge in influence of nonpartisan broadcast media, this thesis may explain the relative instability of unified government in the modern American context (Chapter 6 and Conclusion). In setting out this argument, the book proceeds as follows.

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Chapter 1: "McParty": Cohesion and the Party "Brand Name"

Although considerable ink has been spilled examining individual politicians' efforts to use publicity or media campaigns to serve their political ends, far less is known about how the political parties collectively establish their reputations and images with the public. Whenever individuals collectively pool their efforts to produce a good, they face myriad potential collective-action problems, such as costs associated with coordination, conformity, and/or "free riding" (Olson 1965; Ostrom 1990). Scholars including Cox and McCubbins (1993), Kiewiet and McCubbins (1991), Rohde (1991), and Rohde, Aldrich, and Tofias (2007) explain how and why parties organize to reduce the costs of collective action as they pass legislation. Yet, we still have little understanding of the parties' efforts to foster a valuable party image through their collective communication

with voters, especially across branches of government. As mentioned previously, scholars often dismiss such rhetoric as cheap talk that is unlikely to be seen or believed by voters. This perception persists despite substantial evidence that the parties take collective communication very seriously.

Some scholars argue that one party or the other has an institutional advantage in such efforts. For example, Entman (2005) concluded that the "fundamental ideological, organizational, behavioral, and financial differences between the Democrats and Republicans [make] only the latter a consistent, full-fledged partisan force in American national politics," whereas Taylor (2005) argued that Republicans enjoy a consistent "edge" in American politics because of factors such as their disproportionate electoral advantages in smaller states and areas with a growing population, superior party organizing, campaign fundraising, issue ownership of key policy areas, and message support by right-leaning think tanks and news outlets.[5] Others contend that emotional or conceptual strengths of appeals packaged by Republican candidates systematically give them the advantage in elections against more cerebral arguments from Democrats.[6]

Although I accept that various factors might converge to give one party substantial or even dominant advantages in the short term, I view the American parties as malleable entities. Each party recently has become far more ideologically cohesive and disciplined as New England and the South have realigned, and congressional districts have become more gerrymandered (Jacobson 2005). Moreover, each party can observe the strategies and techniques used by the other and try to adapt. For example, despite the assumed Republican Party advantage in campaign finance, Barack Obama's fundraising in 2008 crushed that of his Republican rival, bringing in more than *twice* as much money as the George W. Bush and Al Gore campaigns in 2000 – *combined* (Salant 2008). Republicans learned from Gore's surprisingly effective "get-out-the-vote" effort in 2000

[5] However, consistent with my subsequent argument, Taylor (2005, 245) explicitly argued that the Republicans would be unable to translate these conditions into a durable electoral majority, in part because of the adaptability of the Democratic Party, which allows that party to "transform itself to meet the wants of the electorate."

[6] For example, in his 1996 book, *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know That Liberals Don't*, George Lakoff argued that part of the reason why Republicans enjoyed electoral success was because they had a better understanding of how to relate politics to key metaphors or concepts held by voters. Similarly, Drew Westin argued in his 2007 book, *Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation*, that since at least the 1980s, Republicans have better understood and used emotional appeals than Democrats in pursuing their policy and electoral goals.

and then exceeded that effort in 2004 – only to see their efforts swamped by the Obama campaign's massive 2008 effort. In the 2004 election, Democrats had an early lead in 527-group support, which was later matched by Republicans in the same cycle.

More directly related to this study (see Chapter 1), the Republicans' apparently dominant advantage in message and branding cited by the authors mentioned herein was the result of conscious development and considerable effort by Newt Gingrich and his allies. In turn, the Democrats' recent success in this area was – at least, in part – the consequence of a deliberate and well-funded effort by liberal activists and fundraisers to create liberal think tanks, media centers, and "training camps for young progressives" (see Nichols 2005 for a discussion of the origins of the "Phoenix Group," which spearheaded this effort). Similarly, the Bush Administration's famous "message discipline" was consciously and successfully emulated by the Obama campaign. Of course, the fact that each party achieved unified control of government in the last decade is the most obvious sign that neither has a permanent hold on the reins of power.

However, while the parties exhibit an ability to mimic successful strategies and tactics, their innovations are bounded by the institutional context of American politics. In Chapter 1, I use the metaphor of parties as franchises not only to identify the incentives to brand parties collectively (which apply to all electoral parties) but also to emphasize that both American parties are exceptionally weak in their formal powers to control franchisees compared to business franchises or parties in other countries.

Understanding how and why franchises cooperate to foster their brand names enables me to trace how parties attempt to accomplish those same goals. I will also examine the corresponding difficulties that franchise operations encounter in those efforts and the institutions they have created to address these problems. The franchise problems and solutions are particularly instructive as I examine the relatively limited powers that parties possess in the United States to force members to "toe the party line."

To refine and illustrate this larger point, I provide a short case study of the 1994 Republican "Contract with America," as well as two similar Republican Party initiatives in 1980 and 1992 and a Democratic Party effort in 2006. These cases reinforce the conclusion that parties – not only individual politicians – are important units of analysis when studying modern political communication.

**Chapter 2: Man Bites President: The Mediation
of Partisan Communication**

Even in this era of technological and communication revolutions, very lit-
tle of the communication by politicians and parties is directly consumed
by the citizenry; instead, most of it is delivered to voters as a condensed,
highly edited package called "news."[7] Some authors argue that reporters'
preferences, organizational needs, or efforts determine the news (Abram-
son 1990; Althaus 2003; Arterton 1984; Cater 1959; Cronkite 1998;
Donohew 1965; Gans 1979; Gieber 1956, 1960; Janowitz 1975; Katz
and Lazarsfeld 1955; Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter 1986; Linsky 1986;
Page 1996; Patterson 1996; Schramm 1949; Singer 1997; Smoller 1990;
Snider 1967; Weaver et al. 1981; Westley and MacLean 1957; White
1950; Wolfsfeld 1991). Others argue that the news media are passive
conduits for information chosen by politicians (Bennett, Lawrence, and
Livingston 2006; Cohen 1963; Entman and Page 1994; Hallin 1986;
Kingdon 1989; Lasorsa and Reese 1990; Sigal 1973; Westlye 1991; Zaller
and Chiu 2000).

In Chapter 2, I argue that politicians can exercise some control over the
news-making process by carefully choosing their words; however, if they
hope to hear those words on the news, they also must anticipate and adapt
to the preferences and routines of journalists, who have traditionally
stood between them and their public.[8]

I construct a model of the communication process that provides insight
into how politicians and journalists interact to produce political news. In
building this model, several well-established axioms of newsworthiness
are presented that I argue encapsulate journalists' preferences over a vari-
ety of political-news content. I then build on the Chapter 1 discussion
of party-message discipline to construct a typology of partisan messages.
Finally, I construct a two-factor model of news outcomes based on the
probabilities of politicians making particular statements and journalists
broadcasting those statements. This model allows predictions to be made

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[7] Even in the heat of the 2008 presidential primary contest, a Pew (2008b) study showed
that only 14% of Americans received e-mail messages from political groups or organiza-
tions about the campaign, and only 8% reported visiting candidate websites. In contrast,
40% reported "regularly" learning something about the campaign from local TV news
and 38% from cable news programs.
[8] As discussed in the book's Conclusion, however, new media are increasingly eroding the
relatively monolithic control of the "mainstream media" on mass communication. It is
interesting that this transition apparently has been accompanied by greater partisanship
in both professional and amateur news.

regarding which stories are most or least likely to appear in a variety of media and institutional contexts.

Based on this analysis, I contend that even ideologically "balanced" journalists can have a predictable and significant influence on the partisan composition of political news. In particular, the model predicts that:

- The news media undermine the presidential party's ability to support its chief executive.
- Conflicts or disagreements between the president and his congressional party are extremely likely to be broadcast if available to the media.
- The nonpresidential party has equivalent "message success" regardless of the content of its statement and is only slightly less newsworthy when moving to minority-party status in unified government.

Chapter 3: Breaking the "Eleventh Commandment": Party Cohesion in Presidential News

In what was called his "eleventh commandment," Ronald Reagan famously warned his fellow Republicans, "Thou shall not speak ill of a fellow Republican."[9] Chapter 3 tests the Chapter 2 predictions by examining network evening news broadcasts and other data. The two main data sources for this analysis provide content analyses of the evening news, spanning thousands of individual broadcasts and statements.

To test the predictions of the model, I first determine the frequency with which the president, his party, and the nonpresidential party support or criticize one another in the news. The results confirm that parties repeatedly have broken Reagan's eleventh commandment. Although both parties predictably attack one another, the content analyses highlight remarkable public discord within the presidential party across several presidencies, with negative evaluations comprising about two thirds of all broadcast presidential evaluations by members of his own party. The preponderance of negative evaluations is difficult to explain as a "fair" sample by journalists unless the presidential party actually disagrees twice as often as it agrees with the president.

However, evaluating the theory using only news-content analysis is difficult because the analyses can only measure stories that actually appear

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[9] Although the term has become closely identified with Reagan, in his autobiography, Reagan actually gave credit for the prohibition to Gaylord Parkinson, Chair of the California Republican Party, who invoked it during the contentious 1966 Republican gubernatorial primary (Reagan 1990, 150).

on the news. As such, it is difficult to distinguish cases in which parties chose not to make a statement from those in which a statement was made but was rejected by the news media. To address this concern, three methods are used to investigate the news media's independent influence. In the first method, I use *Congressional Quarterly*'s presidential-support scores as a proxy to measure congressional support of the president (as opposed to support as shown in the media). In the second method, I use presidential approval ratings as a proxy for the presidential party's willingness to criticize the president. Finally, I conduct a case study of coverage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) ratification debate, in which news media expectations regarding support and opposition from the presidential party may have shifted. All three methods support the notion that the media typically appear to over-represent criticism and under-represent praise of the president by his congressional party.

Overall, the patterns of intraparty evaluations discussed here correspond well to the needs of the news media, which typically have the final say over which party messages are transmitted to the public. Members of the presidential party appear to have extremely limited capacity to praise the president in the news media, even when they control the legislature. Conversely, when they are willing to criticize the president, they find journalists an eager conduit for their words.

Chapter 4: Life in the Shadows: The President's Legislative Party as Newsmaker

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the difficulties that the parties face in controlling their communication through the news media. Specifically, those chapters highlight the obstacles faced by members of the presidential party in Congress as they attempt to praise their chief executive. In Chapter 4, I turn to stories on Congress's home turf.

The chapter begins by situating this inquiry in the broader research on congressional news. Next, the conditions that might be expected to enhance rhetorical unity within the congressional parties are examined, including ideological and pragmatic connections between partisans and the presence of party-communication institutions. This is followed by an examination of how institutional control of Congress and the presidency can influence a legislative party's ability to communicate unified messages to the public. I argue that although a congressional party should receive greater coverage when it is in the majority (i.e., the Majority Hypothesis), the president harms his congressional comrades by supplanting them as

the party's principal spokesperson in the news media and by increasing the stature and newsworthiness of the nonpresidential party (i.e., the Presidential Substitution Hypothesis).

To test these hypotheses, I examine news messages by and about members of Congress. By examining evening news coverage of the congressional parties, I find that the nonpresidential party appears to receive a substantial bonus in its volume of coverage beyond what might have been predicted by its majority or minority status. Also consistent with my predictions, the presidential party has great difficulty gaining coverage of self-praise when faced with an opposing majority and a president of its own party. In contrast, the majority party in divided government faces an ideal environment for self-promotion. Consistent with both hypotheses, the presidential party's gain from its majority status in unified government is largely offset by its association with the president, leading to near-parity with the nonpresidential party.

I find that although members of the presidential party apparently treat one another slightly better than they treat their president in their aggregate presentation in the news, they still fail to present consistent and favorable messages to the public. Conversely, the nonpresidential party actually benefits from the presence of a "hostile" president, even when it is in the minority.

Chapter 5: When Politicians Attack: The Political Implications of Partisan Conflict in the Media

Previous chapters determined that partisans often face great difficulty in getting the media to report them as supporting their comrades, while internal disputes – especially those erupting within the governing party – generally receive prominent coverage. Chapter 5 moves beyond the examination of how such messages are selected by politicians and the media and instead focuses on the effects of those messages on public opinion. Although prior research provided basic insights about the potential effects of different types of elite messages, this chapter examines exactly when and how partisan conflict in the media affects public opinion about the president.

I begin by developing a typology of partisan messages in the media, determining the likely effects of those messages based on their general content and the credibility of the speaker. Specifically, I argue that partisan messages are more credible to a viewer when (1) the speaker shares the viewer's party affiliation; and (2) the message imposes some cost on

the speaker. I then derive several testable hypotheses regarding the likely credibility of different types of partisan messages for different viewers, followed by a test of those predictions using the massive collection of content analysis data first explored in Chapter 2, data on presidential approval, and the results of two experiments. Consistent with my predictions, I find that:

- Presidential-party criticism of the president is exceptionally damaging to his standing, particularly among his fellow partisans in the electorate and independents.
- Praise from the opposing party should be the most beneficial type of message for the president among members of the nonpresidential party and independents.

Finally, these findings are linked explicitly to each party's seemingly paradoxical convention-speaker choices in 2004 and 2008, as well as liberal activists' subsequent efforts to defeat former Democratic vice-presidential candidate Senator Joe Lieberman (I-CT) in his reelection bid.

Chapter 6: With Enemies Like These: The Silver Lining of Divided Government

Among many influential scholars of American politics, the Constitution's system of competing institutions often has been viewed as a debilitating sickness, with unified party government prescribed as a cure. For example, Woodrow Wilson observed that to achieve "harmonious, consistent, and responsible party government" one needed to connect the president as closely as possible with his party in Congress.[10]

A central point of this book is that unified government presents its own severe challenges for the governing party. In fact, a party controlling the presidency might communicate a consistent brand name as well or even better if its members were relegated to the minority in Congress.[11] In addition, as discussed previously regarding the case of Lincoln Chafee, there are situations in which there are intense pressures for elements of the party to "go it alone" and distance themselves from their peers. Although such incentives have been observed at the individual level in cases such as

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[10] Wilson, quoted in Ranney (1954).
[11] An important caveat to this statement is the assumption that achieving – and maintaining – unified government with a supermajority in the Senate is exceptionally challenging in current American politics.