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A New Sheriff in Town?

In 2010, Michele Bachmann was reelected to a second term as the representative for Minnesota's 6th Congressional District. The Fox News Network played a crucial role in raising the conservative firebrand's status from an obscure first-term representative to a regular face on television. A partisan pugilist with a penchant for over-the-top rhetoric and seething criticism for her political opponents, she provided a combative and passionate spark to interviews. In short, she made for good television. Along with Michele Bachmann, dozens of other media-savvy conservative provocateurs were elected to the House of Representatives in 2010, helping flip control of the chamber from the Democratic to the Republican Party and making Ohio Representative John Boehner the Speaker of the House.

In many ways, Boehner was the stylistic opposite of Bachmann. He, too, was committed to the conservative cause, but he chose a less brazen approach. He preferred the proverbial smoke-filled room of the politics of yore to the brash, in-your-face politics of cable news networks. In 2021, Boehner published a memoir in which he recounts a revealing story of Bachmann demanding to be placed on the coveted Ways and Means Committee as a second-term representative. Despite its benign and arcane title, members serving on the Ways and Means Committee are among the most powerful in the U.S. House of Representatives. The members on this committee get to make decisions about any legislation that deals with taxes and several important government programs. Their fingerprints are on the kinds of blockbuster bills that make the headlines, whether they are about raising or cutting taxes, expanding or shrinking Medicare and Social Security – the Ways and Means Committee can stand in the way or

clear the path for a bill to become law. It's the kind of committee on which a representative must earn her place. Members cannot reasonably expect, much less demand, to be appointed to the Ways and Means Committee in their second term.

Or at least those were the old rules. In Boehner's telling of the story, he politely explained to Bachmann that "[t]here was no way she was going to get on Ways and Means, the most prestigious committee in Congress, and jump ahead of everyone else in line." Under the old rules, Bachmann would have slinked back to her office, having learned a lesson about the pecking order. Instead, she fired back, "Well, then I'll just have to go talk to Sean Hannity and everybody at Fox [News]..." The threat worked. Boehner appointed her to the Ways and Means Committee, in front of all the other Republicans who had loyally bided their time. There was a new sheriff in town, and in Boehner's telling, it was he who learned a lesson about the new pecking order: Even though he was the Speaker of the House, he wasn't the one with the power; Fox News was (Boehner, 2021).

As far as anecdotes go, this one is powerful. As the sitting Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Boehner had a front-row seat to policy making. If he saw Fox News as a potent force to be reckoned with on Capitol Hill, it must have been, right? As social scientists, our response is, "Not so fast." Even if it is a powerful anecdote, it is still just an anecdote. It offers a hypothesis about the ascendance of Fox News as a major power player on Capitol Hill, but it is not sufficient evidence for the claim that it was the new sheriff in town. At best, it offers evidence that Fox News influenced John Boehner's behavior, but it cannot tell us anything about whether the news channel influenced the behavior of other representatives. In order to evaluate the hypothesis that the entrance of Fox News on the national scene influenced the behavior of elected representatives, we need to systematically collect data on the behavior of representatives as well as measure Fox News' potential to influence them. And this is exactly what we did, with a little help from chance.

The biggest obstacle to studying the effects of a national television news channel on the behavior of elected representatives is the lack of variation in availability. National news channels – being national – are usually available everywhere in the country and representatives are the kinds of people who voraciously consume news. For this reason, it is difficult to know how much of an effect the news shows on national broadcast news channels, such as ABC or NBC, have on elected representatives. These news shows are equally available to every representative's constituents, and every representative (or at least their staff) keeps tabs on what is airing on these channels. Lucky for us, the Fox News channel was not

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equally available everywhere when it debuted on the scene in the autumn of 1996. Its news programming was national in nature, but its reach was limited. This is a stroke of luck because it gives us the needed variation in whether representatives' constituents and possibly the representatives themselves were exposed to the news channel. More importantly, this variation was exogenous to politics itself, because Fox News was no more likely to appear in conservative areas than liberal ones. As a result, the way in which Fox News rolled out across the United States in the late 1990s and early 2000s created a natural experiment to study its effects.

In this book, we conduct what to our knowledge is the most comprehensive examination of Fox News' effects on political elites to date. We do so through a series of studies utilizing several methodological approaches, which we describe in more detail in the sections that follow. In those sections we will also describe our findings in more detail. For now, we offer only a brief summary preview of what we find. The advent of Fox News shaped American politics, not simply through effects on regular, everyday viewers but through its effects on elected politicians. These effects were not as uniform or as large as one might expect from John Boehner's anecdote or from reading popular press books that touch on the influence of Fox News on the legislative process (e.g., Brock and Rabin-Havt, 2012; Hacker and Pierson, 2006). These accounts would lead us to believe that we would find that Fox News pulled Republicans, and potentially even some Democrats, in a more conservative direction as well as evidence that Fox News pushed policy outputs in a conservative direction more generally. Yet this is not what we find. Instead, we find that Fox News had more limited effects on the behavior of legislators and public policy, at least in the first 15 years of its existence. The entry of Fox News encouraged strong Republican candidates living in Republican-leaning congressional districts that were represented by Democrats to run for office. Perhaps because of this, Democratic members of Congress representing Republican-leaning districts were slightly more likely to buck their party and side with Republicans on party-line votes if Fox News moved into their district. Nonetheless, we do not find that Fox News gave Republicans an electoral edge over Democrats, nor do we find evidence that Fox News substantially pushed policy in a conservative direction.

1.1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF FOX NEWS

In order to understand why Fox News found a lucrative niche as a conservative national news network, we start our story in the 1950s, well before Fox News was born. From the standpoint of the news media's place in

American politics, the 1950s to the 1970s was an anomaly. Before this period, most Americans got their news from local newspapers, many of which shaded their coverage of politics to fit the ideological predispositions of their readers (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2010; Song, 2021).¹ By the 1950s, more and more Americans were getting news from broadcast television, which offered more balanced, nonpartisan coverage of politics (Prior, 2007; Song, 2021). At the same time, the two main political parties were less polarized along ideological lines (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2006) and politicians were more likely to accept press coverage as factual and impartial (Ladd, 2012). By the mid-1970s, this short-lived era of the national news media as trusted arbiters of facts began to unravel. Democratic and Republican politicians were moving further apart from each other on policy and becoming more ideologically sorted (Levendusky, 2009). In this polarized context, politicians began attacking press coverage as biased (Ladd, 2012).

It may seem ironic that at the height of nonpartisan “objective” journalism, the press would increasingly come under attack for being biased, but ideologically motivated politicians regularly have both strategic and sincere reasons for doing so. The objective-style of reporting attempts to get the facts right. Even if the press was not always successful at doing this, they nonetheless created coverage that cast a negative light on the ideological assumptions and goals of both parties. From a strategic standpoint, if political elites accept this kind of coverage as factually accurate, it would create pressure to admit wrongdoing or error. To avoid facing this dilemma, a shoot-the-messenger strategy allowed politicians to run away from negative press coverage by simply denying it as factually accurate. What’s more, for many politicians it was not just a strategy but a sincere belief. As Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985, 584) explain, “opposing partisans believe, respectively, that the truth is largely ‘black’ or largely ‘white,’ each complain about the fairness and objectivity of mediated accounts that suggest that the truth might be at some particular hue of gray.” Because they believe that their particular view of the world (be it black or white) is obviously correct, they attribute malicious intent to mainstream media for reporting both sides equally.

¹ American journalism shifted toward norms of objectivity following the invention of the mass printing press. With its arrival and the ability to serve much larger audiences, newspapers realized the financial benefits to be gained by appealing to the entire market (Hamilton, 2004).

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As growing partisan polarization increased the demand for partisan news coverage, a confluence of shifts in the legal framework governing television news and the technology of delivering television into people's homes created opportunities for supply to meet this increased demand for partisan messaging. First, the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 paved the way for news media outlets to offer news coverage that fit viewers' preconceived biases. The doctrine, which was established in 1949, required television and radio broadcasters to offer diverse viewpoints on controversial issues. With its repeal, radio talk shows with a particular political agenda proliferated, and conservative talk shows dominated (Ladd, 2012). Rush Limbaugh was the most popular and successful, using his platform to redefine political issues in ways that fit with a free-market, socially conservative perspective. In doing so, he often used the mainstream media, which he called the "liberal media," as a foil (Carter and Signorino, 2000; Ladd, 2012). Fully consistent with Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985), Limbaugh presented the world as black and white and accused the mainstream media of being biased against and prejudiced toward conservatives.

Second, the 1992 Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act created an opening for ideologically slanted television channels as well. The law required cable companies to compensate the broadcast networks – ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox – for the rights to rebroadcast these extremely popular broadcast channels on their lineups. The broadcast networks saw a golden opportunity. Rather than asking for money, they negotiated a win-win exchange. The cable companies had the capacity to transmit dozens (and then later hundreds) of channels, but they did not have content to put on these possible channels. In contrast, the broadcast networks had lots of potential content – they were in the business of producing it – but only one channel on which to showcase it. The solution was simple and elegant. In return for rebroadcasting the major networks' feed, the cable companies gave them channels on which to showcase niche content, such as cooking shows, sports, old movies, and, yes, slanted news (Arceneaux and Johnson, 2013; Lubinski, 1996). Rupert Murdoch's Fox network led the way by creating the conservative-leaning Fox News that promised to be "fair and balanced." Again, consistent with Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985), Fox News offered conservatives an alternative to the gray colors available on "liberal" mainstream news shows (Groseclose and Milyo, 2005; Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017). Fox News showed them the world as they thought it to be, and in doing so, one that was fair and balanced.

1.2 A “NATURAL” EXPERIMENT

When the Fox News Network was launched in the waning months of 1996, it did not appear simultaneously in all media markets or congressional districts. The 1992 Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act stimulated the broadcast networks, such as Fox, to negotiate with cable providers to provide channels in return for rebroadcasting rights. At the time of writing this book, there are only a handful of large cable providers, but back in the mid-1990s, there were thousands of local and mostly mom-and-pop cable providers that the broadcast networks needed to negotiate with separately. As we explain in greater detail in Chapter 2, this created variation in the availability of Fox News across congressional districts, and this variance, more importantly, was exogenous to political considerations. For our purposes, this variance in access to partisan news coverage created a so-called “natural” experiment where members of Congress and their constituents experienced different levels of Fox News availability. This variation allows us to compare similar districts with different levels of Fox News availability and isolate its effects on the behavior of members.

We are not the first scholars to take advantage of the haphazard roll out of Fox News to study its effects. DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) studied the roll out of Fox News across the largest media markets in the United States and found that the introduction of Fox News into a media market slightly increased support for the Republican candidate in presidential and Senate elections held between 1996 and 2000. Combining DellaVigna and Kaplan’s data on the availability of Fox News with survey data collected in the same subset of media markets, Hopkins and Ladd (2014) found that much of Fox News’ effect on voting behavior is explained by the news channel reinforcing viewers’ preexisting partisan loyalties and mobilizing some of these individuals to vote. Drawing on a canvass of Fox News’ availability in every media market that was compiled by the Nielsen Company, Martin and Yurukoglu (2017) offered evidence that the easy availability of Fox News in a media market, which they measured via the position of the channel in each cable company’s lineup, also increased the ideological distance between Democratic and Republican voters.

In other words, much of the work on the roll out of Fox News has been on the effects of Fox News on ordinary voters and shows that the emergence of Fox News influenced, albeit in a limited way, election outcomes and public opinion. Because the Fox News audience is made up almost entirely of ordinary citizens, it makes sense that researchers would

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focus here. Yet elected representatives are also potentially members of the Fox News audience and, at the very least, interact with constituents who are. As we elaborate later, there are a number of reasons why elected officials may be influenced by news media, and the emergence of Fox News makes it possible to study whether it did. A handful of researchers have used the haphazard roll out of Fox News to study its effects on members of Congress (Arceneaux et al., 2016, 2019; Clinton and Enamorado, 2014). Their research also shows that Fox News has some, albeit limited, impact on the behavior of members of Congress and this book builds upon and extends this research.

1.3 WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW ABOUT THE INFLUENCE OF NEWS MEDIA ON ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

Before we offer our explanation for why Fox News – or any national news media coverage for that matter – might influence the behavior of members of Congress, it is necessary to set the stage as it was before we entered the scene. It would be more accurate to speak of two separate stages in different theaters. On one stage is a rich research tradition studying the effects of news media on the mass public. This research tradition largely ignores media influence on politicians. While this scholarship certainly does not exclude the possibility that the national news media may also influence the attitudes and behaviors of elites (e.g., see Zaller, 1992, last chapter), it either places that question outside of the scope of its study or it makes the implicit assumption that the news media influence politicians via its direct effects on the mass public. For instance, research on persuasion starts with the premise that political elites shape media content as they craft messages to convince the public to support their particular policy goals (e.g., Chong and Druckman, 2007; Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000; Ladd and Lenz, 2009) or to vote for them in an upcoming election (e.g., Coppock, Hill, and Vavreck, 2020; Farnsworth, 2015; Vavreck, 2009).

In this research stream, politicians are conceptualized as being causally prior to the question of media effects. They use (or try to use) the news media as a tool to inform and influence the mass public as opposed to being subject to the influence of news media themselves (e.g., Arceneaux and Johnson, 2013; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Zaller, 1996). By contrast, much of research on *partisan* news media in the United States makes the implicit assumption that the causal chain starts with partisan news media, which polarize the public, which in turn polarizes partisan elites (e.g., Cassino, 2016; Levendusky, 2013; Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017; Stroud, 2011).

On the other stage is an equally rich research tradition that treats members of Congress as self-interested, rational actors who are interested in one, and pretty much only one, thing: getting and then keeping their jobs (e.g., Cox and McCubbins, 1993; Fiorina, 1974; Mayhew, 1974; Shepsle and Weingast, 1981; Weingast and Marshall, 1988). The news media play a minor role on this stage. They are either a tool of potential influence – something to groom in an effort to control – or a nuisance on which members must keep their eyes (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1981; Arnold, 2004). A significant amount of the work following in this tradition has been dedicated to understanding how legislators arrive at the decisions they do, and much of this work understandably considers constituents (or a subset thereof) to be the central driving force in shaping member behavior. After all, they hold the electoral keys to the kingdom.

Importantly, most models of legislative decision-making assume either explicitly or implicitly that members operate with complete information regarding the preferences of their constituents (e.g., Brandice Canes-Wrone and Cogan, 2002; Carson et al., 2010; Jones and McDermott, 2010; Lindstädt and Vander Wielen, 2014; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson, 1995). However, we know that this assumption is not an accurate description. Legislators are often uninformed or ill-informed about what their constituents want (Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenerger, and Stokes, 2019). So, how do members go about knowing constituent preferences? This is an important question because even the most well-intentioned member cannot carry out the wishes of her constituents if her information is faulty or biased. Here, the literature on legislative decision-making offers little guidance regarding how members acquire the information needed to be responsive to their constituents. While much of this research goes to great pains to account for public opinion and policy outputs, only a small subset of this work touches on what role the news media play in informing politicians about what their constituents want (e.g., Kingdon, 1989; Herbst, 1998).

This book attempts to combine these two stages into one. Even though a few early and important works on congressional behavior suggested the relevance of media attention for the ability of members of Congress to faithfully and effectively serve their constituents, it remains rare to see legislative studies directly theorize about (much less measure) media influence of any kind. Moreover, important changes to the media landscape have occurred in recent decades that have resulted in the steady erosion of local coverage and concurrent rise in national coverage, warranting further investigation.

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Of the congressional literature that more seriously engages the role of the media, much of it looks at how members (strategically) interact with the media (e.g., how they want to be portrayed). This work demonstrates, for example, that local newspapers serve members as a valuable conduit for credit claiming. For House members, in particular, reelection time is always near, and therefore so is the need to draw public attention to the casework and other good deeds they have performed for their district (Fenno, 1978). The public scrutiny (for both good deeds and bad) afforded by news media is critical for holding members of Congress accountable to their constituents. Local newspapers typically provide a significant majority of the coverage of House races (Hayes and Lawless, 2018; Vinson, 2003), and chronicle the most day-to-day information about House member behavior while in office (Arnold, 2004). All in all, we know that House members pay attention to when and how they are covered in the news (Cook, 1989, 75). Whether for good or for ill (from the district's perception), members of Congress attempt to behave in ways that will attract favorable media attention.

While much of this work centers on local newspapers as the media outlets with the most sway over House members' behavior (e.g., Hayes and Lawless, 2018; Vinson, 2003), these studies tell us little about what we might expect when it comes to influence from a national outlet like Fox News. However, some of the more recent research on legislative behavior is addressing this gap. Anderson, Butler, and Harbridge-Yong (2020) demonstrate the influence of major partisan media outlets, like Fox News, over members' willingness to engage in partisan behaviors. Because they perceive these outlets to be the main news sources for primary voters, in particular, members are more inclined to avoid bipartisan compromise for fear that it will be portrayed by these networks in a negative light. Moreover, other recent work suggests that mediated forms of congressional accountability may have started to shift away from local to national media with the gradual expansion of the media environment (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway, 2018; Trussler, 2022). These studies essentially argue that as the public's focus on politics shifts to the national level via national media, so too will that of legislators. Instead of looking to local newspapers to infer (or shape) public opinion, legislators will now turn to major national news outlets. In line with these works, a contribution of this book is to provide a counterpoint to the thesis that all congressional politics is local.

We suggest that a more comprehensive understanding of legislative behavior requires us to bring the (national) news media into the story.

There are two routes through which news media attention may influence legislative behavior. First, the news media inform members about constituency preferences. Monitoring and informing leaders about public opinion is one of the major functions of the press (Dunaway and Graber, 2022). Higher levels of media attention can yield more accurate perceptions about constituents' preferences on high-salience issues. Second, they invite public scrutiny. As part of their so-called watchdog function, the news media bring visibility to the actions of elected officials, in turn raising the public's awareness about those actions. It is, therefore, no surprise that members endeavor to have a better sense of constituency preferences – and to follow them – in issue areas to which media are paying attention, because those are the issues that are most likely to affect their electoral fortunes (Arnold, 2004; Hutchings, 2001). According to R. Douglas Arnold (2004, 1), “a regular flow of information about governmental decision-making helps keep officials on their toes when they first make decisions. Officials who expect their actions to be featured on the evening news and on the front pages of newspapers may make decisions different from officials who expect their decisions to remain forever hidden from public scrutiny.” We say more about why we think national news media may shape the behavior of members of Congress next.

1.4 NOT ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL: THE CONTINGENT EFFECTS OF THE NATIONAL NEWS MEDIA ON MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

Tip O'Neill served as the Speaker of the House of Representatives from 1977–1987. In trying to understand his one and only electoral defeat early in his career, he became well known for the dictum, “all politics is local.” It became a guiding principle in his political career as he kept local political interests in mind, including the need to cultivate ties and pay attention to local media (O'Neill and Hymel, 1994). Pundits and scholars of elections have, for generations, used this bit of folksy wisdom to explain why successful members of Congress approach politics by carefully curating their representational styles and heeding the local dynamics of their constituency (e.g., Fenno, 1978; Parker and Goodman, 2009). If this dictum is true, then why would we expect the introduction of a national news channel into congressional districts to affect the behavior of elected representatives?

Richard Fenno's path-breaking book *Homestyle* offers some of the most compelling evidence that members of Congress fashion electoral