

# Disunity in the Ranks: Ideological Extremism and Out-Party Status in Congressional Rhetoric

Rachel Blum\*    Craig Goodman†    Justin Grimmer‡    David C.W. Parker§  
Frances Zlotnick¶

July 17, 2018

## Abstract

High levels of partisan polarization are a defining feature of contemporary Congressional Parties. Much of the existing literature treats polarization as a dynamic between the two parties, relying on evidence such as the distance between the two parties' median roll call votes. A more comprehensive examination of polarization that includes other forms of legislative behavior, in particular elite statements, reveals how *intra*-party factionalism drives divisions between political parties. In this paper, we use text as data tools to analyze a new collection of legislators' press releases and newsletters from one of the most polarized era in Congressional history, the years spanning 2005 through 2012.<sup>1</sup> We find that polarized rhetoric, understood as hyperbolic criticism of the other party, is driven by factions of more ideologically extreme legislators. While the parties become more critical generally when the president is from the other party, this does not change the source of the polarized rhetoric. These findings suggest that polarization cannot be adequately understood without examining dynamics both within and between parties.

---

\*Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Miami University of Ohio, 218 Harrison Hall, Oxford, OH 45056

†Assistant Professor, School of Arts and Sciences, University of Houston-Victoria, 3007 North Ben Wilson, Victoria, TX, 77901

‡Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Stanford University, Encina Hall West 616 Serra St., Stanford, CA, 94305

§Associate Professor of Political Science, Montana State University, 2-139 Wilson Hall, Bozeman, MT, 59717

¶Senior Research Analyst, GitHub

<sup>1</sup>Data from 2013-2018 coming soon.

# 1 Introduction

On June 22, 2018, Republican President Donald Trump tweeted: “Republicans should stop wasting their time on Immigration until after we elect more Senators and Congressmen/women in November. Dems are just playing games, have no intention of doing anything to solves this decades old problem. We can pass great legislation after the Red Wave!” Out of context, this could seem like the tweet of a President who was frustrated because the Democrats, who controlled both chambers of Congress, refused to pass his legislative agenda. Yet it was Trump’s own party—the Republicans—who held majorities in both the House and the Senate. The failure of a Republican Congress to pass the Republican president’s agenda had less to do with garden-variety partisan gridlock, and more to do with a lack of consensus within the Republican Party.

The story of disunity within a party that not only holds a majority of seats in Congress but also controls the presidency does not square with the prevailing narrative of American politics as characterized by high degrees of partisan polarization. After all, the past several decades have been indisputably marked by an increase in the distance between the two parties, especially among party elites (Fiorina and Abrams, 2008; Abramowitz, 2010; Davidson and Oleszek, 2006). This dramatic increase in polarization was accompanied by a reinvigoration of the two parties. Scholars documented increased party dominance in everything from presidential nomination contests (Cohen et al., 2008) to setting the legislative agenda (see Aldrich and Rohde) to the creation of party brands (Cox and McCubbins, 1993, 2005). Legislative behavior in particular has been re-conceived as a response to strong Congressional parties, as scholars documented the sizable influence party leaders have exerted over both the legislative agenda and the voting behavior of their partisans (Ansolabehere, Snyder, Stewart, 2001; Snyder and Groseclose, 2000; Cox and Poole, 2002). The connection between party strength and polarization seemed all too obvious.

The 2016 nomination and election of Donald Trump dealt a crippling blow to this narrative of strong parties driving polarization. Not only was Trump decidedly *not* the choice of the Republican Party, but the party was unable to effectively intervene. Once elected, the Trump administration experienced significant difficulties implementing its agenda, even in its ‘honeymoon phase’, and despite Republicans controlling both chambers of Congress. To complicate matters further, this

disunity within the Republican Party did not correspond with any decrease in the polarization between the two parties, especially in Congress.

In this paper, we address the seeming incongruity between internal party disunity and partisan polarization. We suggest that a focus on the relationship between strong parties and polarization has obscured the ability of party factions to simultaneously weaken a party while pushing it to further ideologically extremes. To examine the internal dynamics of parties, we analyze the language used by members of the House of Representatives in their constituent-facing communications (press releases and newsletters) from 2005-2012.<sup>2</sup> Through use of the Structural Topic Model (STM), we are able to evaluate what drives rhetorical differences among co-partisans as well as between opposite partisans over each year of our analysis (Grimmer, 2010; Robert, Stewart and Airoidi, 2015). With data spanning two presidential administrations and four sessions of Congress, we are able to consider the relationship between representatives' rhetoric and changes in parties' power (as control of the House and the presidency shifts), polarization, and unity (through roll call votes), while accounting for the individual-level characteristics of members.

We present several findings. First, we find that more ideologically extreme legislators disproportionately use hostile rhetoric towards the other party, especially when their party does not control the presidency, thus contributing an out-size amount to polarization. Second, this pattern is not consistent between parties, occurring with greater magnitude among Republican legislators, even when they controlled the House and presidency. Finally, we discover that divisions map onto known factions (like the Tea Party).

## 2 Modifying the narrative of polarization

Partisan polarization can be understood generally as the distance between the two parties expanding. There are many variants on this definition, especially regarding what parties are more distant about. Similarly, polarization can take forms at different political levels—perhaps expressing in less bi-partisan cooperation in Congress, and as social cleavages in the electorate (see Mason, 2018). In this article, we focus on the polarization of Congressional parties during the last three presidencies,

---

<sup>2</sup>Additional data from 2013-2018 will be incorporated as well, to span three presidential administrations and over six sessions of Congress.

an era known for its hyper-partisanship (cite).

Evidence of the polarization of Congressional parties can be detected from many angles. The most common approach is to make the parties the unit of analysis, focusing on the distance between them rather than distance within them. Although establishing the reality of this increasing distance between parties is not especially difficult, pinpointing the factors that have contributed to it is far more difficult. This article takes the ideological distance between the two parties as a given, instead seeking to understand whether there are any patterns in the dynamics *within* parties that might give us a more well-rounded picture of Congressional polarization.

We use hostile rhetoric by legislators about the opposing party as a proxy for polarization. This allows us to isolate whether certain factions within parties have been consistently advancing a polarized narrative about the other party, effectively pushing their party to the extremes as well. This section draws out the theoretical differences between the conventional focus on the distance between Congressional parties and our focus on the internal dynamics that could be contributing to this distance. We then distill this into a few expectations for what we will find in our data.

## **Polarization and the distance between parties**

The familiar story of partisan polarization reminds that stark differences between the two parties are a fairly recent development. Mid-century, the two parties were so difficult to distinguish from one another that the American Political Science Association issued a report calling for a more “responsible” two-party system, marked by clear ideological differences between the two parties (APSA, 1950). The Democratic and Republican parties in Congress so rife with internal factions based on regional and sectional differences that party labels mattered little. A successful member of Congress could be a conservative Democrat or a liberal Republican so long as they maintained a solid reelection constituency. Scholars of Congress thus focused primarily on the relationship between legislators and their constituents, and in particular on how representatives built relationships with and advertised their accomplishments to their constituents (Mayhew, 1974; Fenno, 1978).

By the 1980s, however, U.S. parties had become strong, ideologically distinct entities, with the Republican coalition increasingly overlapping with conservatism, and the Democratic coalition with liberalism (Noel, 2013). Congressional parties were no exception, growing more disciplined

throughout the 1990s. The focus shifted from constituent-facing behavior to the prevalence of partisan polarization, as partisan identity became more entrenched and the ideological distance between the two parties increased, both among elites and members of the voting public (Mason, 2018).

In the study of Congress, these divisions are typically evaluated by looking at one of the most public and traceable actions a Congressperson can take: roll-call voting. Since the 1980s, DW-Nominate scores have provided a useful method of scaling voting patterns along a latent dimension (often referred to as ‘ideological’), allowing us to assess how much members’ voting patterns deviate from the chamber median (Poole and Rosenthal, 1997; Poole and Rosenthal, 2000; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2001).

Notable exceptions have existed, of course. Some have focused on co-sponsorships as another area of legislative behavior, detailing the use of cosponsorships as a signaling advice to constituents, but uncovering similar partisan patterns to roll call votes (Koger 2003; Kessler and Krehbiel 1996; Krutz 2005; Wilson and Young 1997; Woon 2008; Fowler 2006). Others have looked at factors that might mediate polarization, from constituency-level characteristics (Lebo, McGlynn, and Koger, 2007) to caucus membership among co-partisans (Victor, 2018). Finally, a group of scholars have drawn attention to the asymmetry with which the parties have been moving further apart. In short, Democrats both in Congress and the mass public have grown more ideologically extreme, but by far less than their Republican counterparts (cite asymmetry stuff; Mason, 2018). A final piece points out the problems presented by treating all roll call votes as of equal importance. Jessee and Theriault noted that different types of votes—procedural, amendment, and final passage—reflect different stages in the legislative process, as well as divergent amounts of pressure from party leadership (2004; see also Rohde, 2008).

These studies have illuminated important trends in the external relationship between the two parties in Congress, as well as establishing that evidence of heightened polarization can come from a variety of types of Congressional behavior. We allow these insights to inform our understanding of the intra-party Congressional landscape, while telling a different story about what might be driving this polarization, and how it can be detected.

## **Polarization and the divisions within parties**

This paper makes at least two contributions to the narrative on polarization: First, we illuminate the relationship between internal factions and external polarization. We do so by shifting the focus to the factional dynamics within parties, and in particular the impact extremist factions can have on polarization. Second, we draw evidence from an arena where legislators have a high degree of choice in how they present their views: constituent-facing press releases. This allows for the detection of in-party differences to a larger extent than roll call votes or other commonly-used measures.

### **The importance of party factions**

Factions have been present in Congressional parties during many formative times in American politics. Not infrequently, their presence has coincided with the development of significant changes in these parties, or in the relationship between the parties. A party faction in Congress can take many forms, of course, but they can most basically be understood as an organized group within a party that wants to change its party's reputation. A few examples from past Congressional experiences with factions will underscore why their presence cannot be ignored.

We can take the Dixiecrats as an example. In the late 1940s-1950s, Southern Democrats were a strong contingent within the Democrat Party, in Congress as well as in the electorate. Following Harry Truman's support of Civil Rights legislation in 1948, the Dixiecrats attempted to take matters into their own hands, running their own candidates throughout the South, and creating sharp divisions within their party's Congressional caucus. Although the Dixiecrats are often remembered for their failed electoral efforts (re: the presidency), their real significance lay in providing an organizational and ideological framework from which to push a different vision of the Democratic Party, eventually forcing a realignment (see DiSalvo, 2012; Frederickson, 2001).

The 1980s and 1990s, known as the era when Congressional parties began growing more powerful and more polarized, also experienced significant pressure from party factions. The Republicans had to grapple with the New Right and its Republican Study Committee. The continual pressure from New Right leaders, from Newt Gingrich to James McClure, forced the Republican Party to move

towards the policy positions of the faction, becoming more extreme in the process (see DiSalvo, 2012; Rubin, 2017; Shickler, 2015).

As many have observed, the Democratic Party did not move as much ideologically, nor as quickly, as the Republican Party did in recent years. This could again be explained by the presence of a party faction: the New Democrats, a centrist group of Democrats in Congress that overlapped with membership of the Democratic Leadership Council and the Blue Dog Democratic caucus. The New Democrats consistently focused on pushing their party's issue positions to the center, creating a different set of internal cleavages within the party, which could be interpreted as having a moderating effect on Democratic caucus's ideological position as a whole.

Not surprisingly, the last decade of Congressional politics, one of the most polarized in history, was also marked by the existence of a prominent intra-party faction: the Tea Party. With a strong activist base and a presence that evolved through multiple caucuses (Tea Party Caucus, Liberty Caucus, and Freedom Caucus), the Tea Party came to generally stand for a Republican insurgency that sought to push its party towards more extreme policy goals, which often did not dovetail with mainstream conservatism. Beyond causing difficulties for their party's leadership in Congress (think John Boehner's resignation), they also made legislators continually aware of the threat of a primary challenger from the right (think David Brat), resulting in a party that had to continually cater to its demands to maintain power.

The impact of these factions on their parties would, of course, be missed by only looking at distance between the ideological medians of the two parties. By looking at differences within the parties, however, we can gain a clearer sense of what has been pushing the medians further apart, and why it seems to be happening more rapidly in one party than the other. It also fits with a more realistic definition of political parties. Parties are never monolithic entities, but are instead coalitions of various interests that work together to achieve a shared goal (see Aldrich, 1995; Bawn et al., 2012). The question of which faction is dominant in a party at a given time is thus a question about the power dynamics in that party's coalition.

## **Why constituency-facing rhetoric is key**

To detect the dynamics within parties, we need a catalogue of legislative action that is as independent of agenda control and minority status as possible. Roll call votes, floor speeches, and so forth are all somewhat biased in favor of party unity. In a majoritarian institution like the House of Representatives, what roll call votes and even who gets to speak on the floor during votes are subject to agenda control by the majority party, the Speaker of which is incentivized to preserve party unity at all cost.

Due to the absolute power of the majority in the House, reliance on measures that are correlated with agenda control means that we will also underrepresent the viewpoints of minority legislators. 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).

Thankfully, data on Congressional action is not limited to this final stage of the legislative process. Earlier work on cosponsorships (see Fowler, 2008), and more recent work on “Dear Colleague” letters (Craig, Box-Steffensmeier, and Christenson, 2018), and one-minute floor speeches (Shoub, 2018) remind that much of the important activity in Congress occurs prior to or apart from final passage votes. These data sources pick up on some important intra-party dynamics, especially in terms of cooperation, but they cannot tell us much about how individual legislators express polarized sentiment towards the other party, or whether such sentiment is coming from certain factions within parties over others.

To understand which legislators communicate polarized sentiments towards the other party, and how they do so, 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

These constituent-facing forms of communication are produced by all members, regardless of minority party status, and can be on any topic. In short, these communications represent an arena in which members have the most autonomy from party leadership. Their words are chosen to signal something about them as legislators back to to their constituents (Grimmer, 2013; Sellers, 2010). At times, this could take the tried-and-true form of claiming credit for district benefits. 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. But it is also where legislators could perpetrate polarized sentiment through hostile rhetoric towards the other party.

In addition, the constituency-facing element of press releases is key to the understanding of polarization because it illuminates an area that is notoriously difficult to study: the link between elite and mass polarization. Press releases provide a unique opportunity to understand what kind of polarized rhetoric is being communicated to constituents, and by whom (see Hopkins, 2017, for an example). In an era where the concern is increasingly about partisan hostility based on social identity and tribalism (Mason, 2018), research on constituency-facing communication is key to a better understanding of political behavior as well (see Druckman, Peterson, and Slothfus, 2013).

---

<sup>3</sup>To 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.

## Expectations

We evaluate the frames used in these press releases over time along with the ideology of individual members, district-level characteristics, and changes over time in out-party status (both in terms of Congress and the presidency). This will allow us not only to show changes in rhetoric, but also who is driving these changes (extremist factions, party leaders, or someone else), and whether this differs between the two parties. There are several expectations for our data:

1. Minority party hostility: Lacking institutional advantages, the minority party has a very strong incentive to build public support by expanding and socializing the conflict. It is thus possible that we would observe more hostile rhetoric from the minority party.
2. Presidential change effect: When there is a new president we could expect that legislators to shift their rhetoric, with the out-party becoming more hostile (even if they control the chamber), and the in-party becoming less polarized advocates for their party (i.e. “partisan warriors,” see Theriault, 2013).
3. Ideological extremism: ideologically extreme legislators will use more hostile rhetoric regardless of which party is in control of Congress or the White House. There are two corollary expectations:
  - Extremist factions: this extremism will not be isolated to a few individuals, but will come instead from factions of extremist legislators. We would expect these to overlap with known factions in this era, such as the Tea Party.
  - Asymmetric hostility: in keeping with findings on asymmetric polarization, we might expect higher levels of hostility from Republicans than from Democrats, regardless of external changes.

## 3 Methods: evaluating attacks

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, 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.<sup>4</sup> Table 1 shows that most topics appear in both press releases

---

<sup>4</sup>We extensively validate the topics, demonstrating that they largely capture politically relevant content and that our labels accurately capture the thematic content of the categories.

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 discuss issues, we use two groupings of the topics in Table 1. The first grouping are a set of topics that examine legislators claiming credit 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 what leads some partisans to attack more than others.

## 4 Results

We find that press releases and newsletters focused on attack are driven asymmetrically by Republican legislators, and explode in frequency after Obama’s 2008 election. In particular, these seem to be driven by a faction within the Republican Party that later became the Tea Party. Although some hostility is driven by minority status in general or presidential party change, ideological extremism and factionalism have a much higher impact on hostility. In this version of the paper, with data that only extends to 2012, we focus on the Republican shift towards attack. Future versions will extend these analyses throughout Obama’s second term, and into the Trump administration.

### 4.1 Establishing a Baseline

Before examining what and who drives hostile rhetoric, and we first need to gain a sense of the baseline style of communications by both Republican and Democratic legislators across the period we consider, in which both parties spent time both in the Congressional minority and with a president from the other party. This should allow us to evaluate how the data square with our first two expectations, which are that the minority party will be more hostile, and that changes in the presidency will create more hostility among the out-party and less among the in-party.

To establish this baseline, we examine how many press releases (2005-2010), and newsletters (2008-2012), both Republicans and Democrats devote to an activity that is shared by members of both parties, regardless of who controls Congress or the presidency: credit claiming. One way

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	<b>budget,spend,cut,debt,fiscal,year</b>	<b>Budget Hawks</b>
0.03	0.02	<b>democrat,american,republi,obama,read,speaker</b>	<b>Presidential Criticism</b>
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	<b>tax,increas,percent,famili,american,rate</b>	<b>Tax rate</b>
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	<b>presid,bush,administr,white,address,congress</b>	<b>Administration Criticism</b>
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

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).<sup>5</sup>

The results diverge sharply between the two parties. Democrats consistently devoted more of their communications to credit claiming, staying steady or even increasing the amount near the end of Obama’s second term, and even when Democrats were the minority party in Congress. Republicans began with a lower baseline of credit claiming communications, but their focus on credit claiming continued to decline after the 2008 election, when the party lost the White House and became an even smaller minority in the House and Senate. As Republicans won control of the House back in 2010, the proportion of attention they devoted to credit claiming (in newsletters) steadied, but did not generally increase.

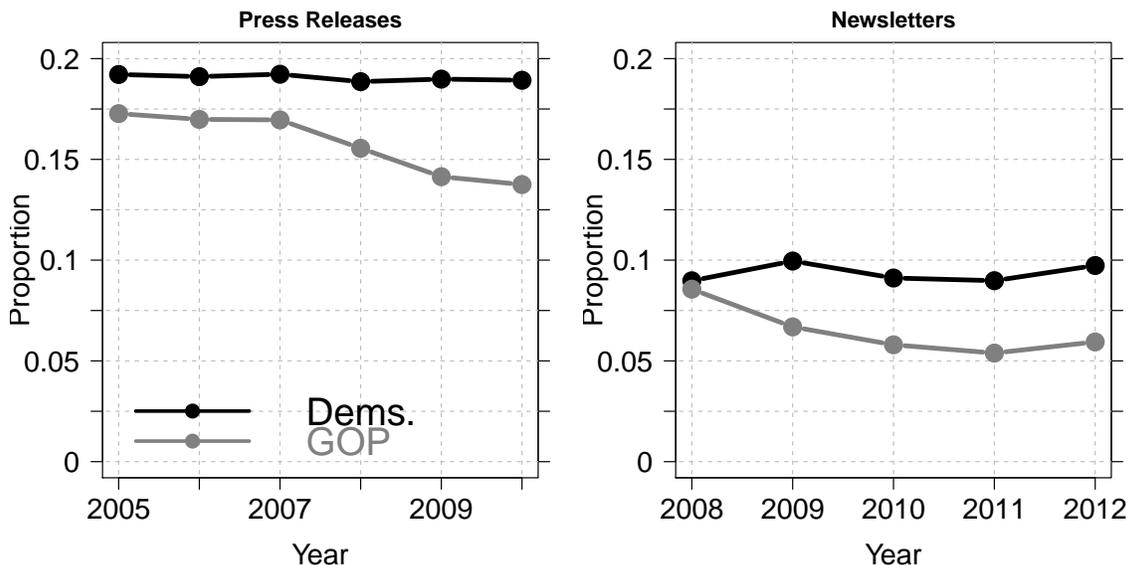
In other words, as Republican legislators became an out party—after they lost the presidency—they allocated less attention to credit claiming in both their press releases and their newsletters. For example in 2005 Democratic legislators allocated 19.2% of their press releases to credit claiming, while Republicans allocated 17.3% of their press releases to credit claiming—a 1.9 percentage point difference. By 2010 Republicans allocated 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 allocated 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.

What might explain these between-party differences in baseline? One explanation has to do with minority party status, either in terms of Congress or the presidency. 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,

---

<sup>5</sup>Figure 1 shows the relationship for the aggregated credit claiming category.

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.

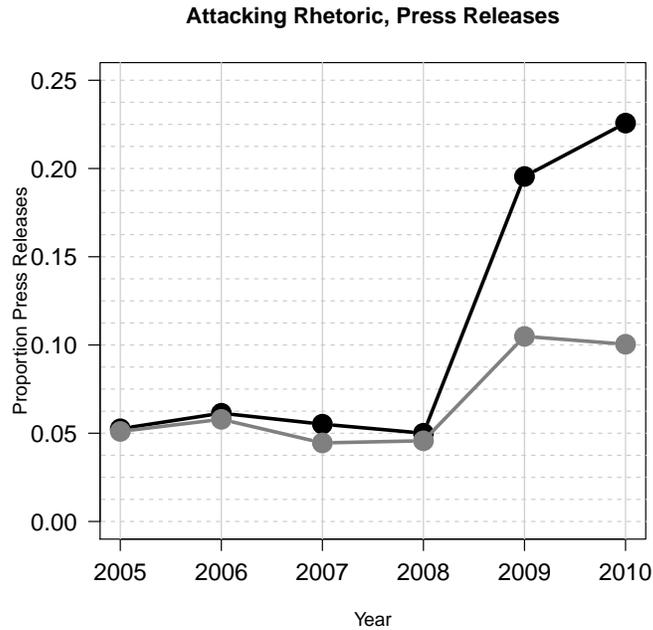
2005). Lacking opportunities to build their own positive record of accomplishment, the minority party could be constrained to devote more press releases to undermine the in-party’s record of accomplishment.

There is only one problem with this explanation, however: both Republicans and Democrats gained and lost power between 2005-2012, in terms of the presidency and which party controlled Congress, yet Democrats did not seem to respond to this trend in the same way. Although the only perfect parallel will involve examining Democratic press releases and newsletters following Trump’s 2016 election, for the time being we can focus on disentangling the forces within the Republican Party to see if a certain faction of legislators were driving these differences, or if they existed at the party-level.

#### 4.2 The Republican Shift towards Attack

To see the asymmetric pattern in attacks (which we spell out in our third expectation), we look at the proportion of all press releases coming from both Democrats and Republicans that could be classified as attacking. As noted earlier, this means that these press releases were classified as in some way seeking to undermine the legitimacy of certain actions of the other party, from spending

Figure 2: Shift in attacks



---

Republican Members of Congress increase the share of their press releases dedicated to critiquing the Democratic Party.

to policy, rather than credit claiming for the district.

As shown in Figure 2, Republicans and Democrats devoted a similar amount of press releases to attacking the other party until Obama’s election, after which Republicans began attacking the Democratic Party at seismically higher rates. Between 2008 and 2009, Republicans went from allocating 5% to 19% of their press releases to criticism of Democrats, and between 2009 and 2010 this jumped more—to 22%. By 2010, then, Republican legislators allocated almost five-times more of their press releases to attacks than they did in 2008, when Republicans held the White House.

These findings do square with our second expectation about change in presidency status (and somewhat with our first as well). After losing the 2008 presidential election and becoming an out-party, Republican legislators increasingly attempted to undermine the Democratic Party, communicating in a manner that could easily be described as polarized. This opposition to the Democratic Party could simply be a natural reaction by Republicans to losing. A reasonable question, of course, is about which Republicans drove this change. Because these numbers are proportions,

it could just be that the Republican baseline was changing.

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 co-partisans. Figure 3 shows how conservatives and aligned legislators altered how they presented their work.

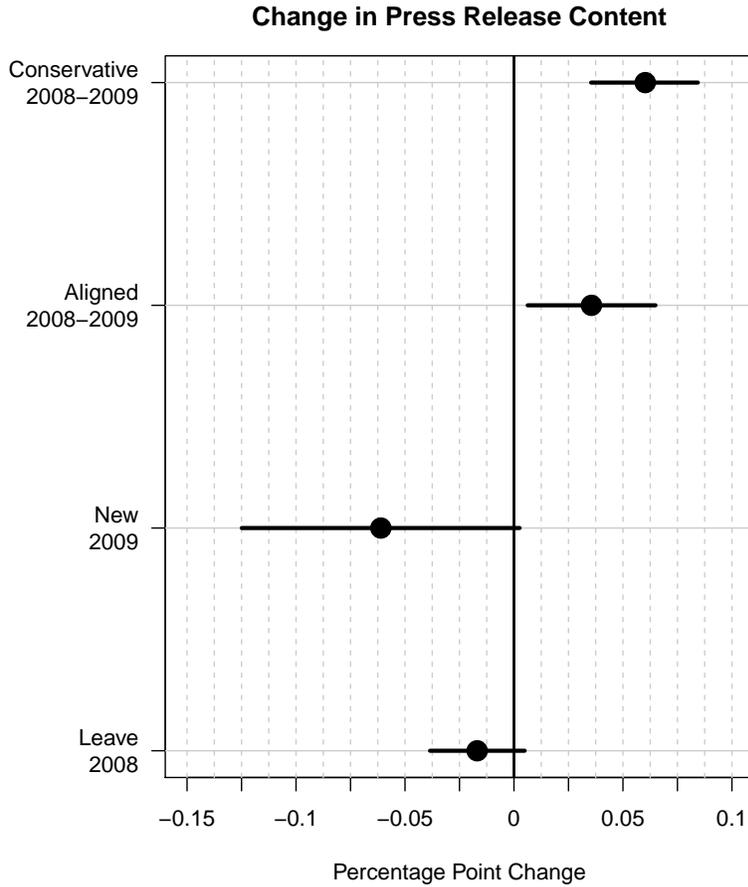
Consider the top line in the figure, which provides the percentage point change (increase) of critiques in conservative Republicans' press releases between 2008 and 2009. Conservative Republicans (distinguished by a higher DW-Nominate score) had a much sharper increase in attacks. The second line shows a similar, though more muted, pattern for Republicans who were more aligned with their district.

It is possible, however, that this change could be driven by replacement—i.e. by less hostile legislators leaving Congress in 2008, to be replaced by those who had a greater propensity to attack. The third and fourth lines actually show the opposite. New legislators were somewhat *less* likely to focus on attacks than those whom they replaced. Rather than occurring due to replacement, then, the shift in the Republican communication was primarily due to Republican legislators changing their emphases in communication with constituents.

The press releases analyzed in this iteration of the paper, however, do not take us forward into the Tea Party era. Sweeping into Congress in 2010 (see Bailey, Mummolo, and Noel 2012), 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 this aversion to government spending, the Tea Party was associated with increasing obstructionism and opposition to the Obama presidency. If we wish to find a potential example of a Congressional faction in the last decade, the Tea Party is the best candidate.

To sidestep the 2010 press release cut-off in our data, we incorporate newsletter data ranging from 2007 to 2012. We are then able to separately examine the proportion of adversarial rhetoric used in the newsletters of those members who later became associated with the Tea Party movement.

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 co-partisans drove the Republican shift towards a more adversarial brand.

This allows us to evaluate whether a proto-Tea Party faction existed among certain legislators even before the higher-profile days of the House Freedom Caucus.

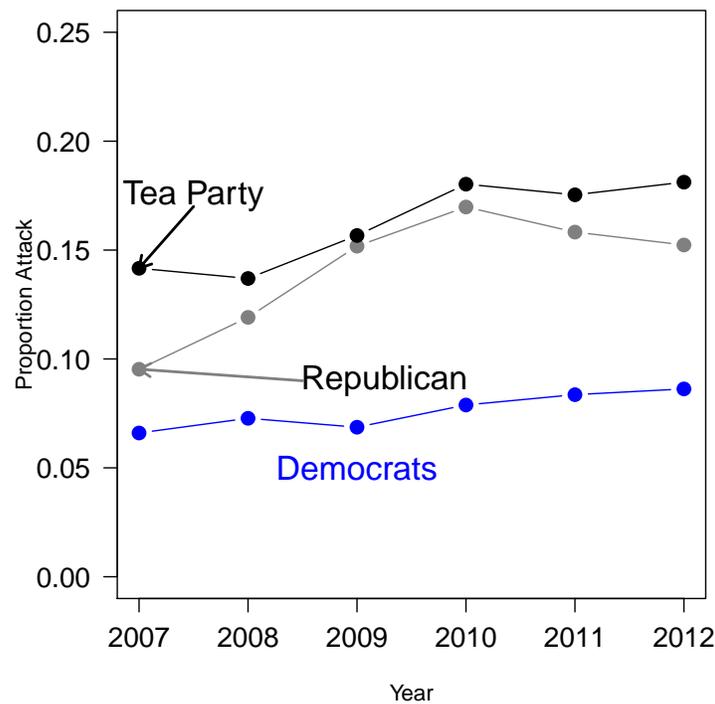
For membership in the Tea Party, we used a combined list from Blum (2018; see also Theriault, 2013) of the three caucuses that were associated with the Tea Party in Congress: the Tea Party caucus (membership peaked at 53 in 2012), the Liberty Caucus (41 members in 2014), and the House Freedom Caucus (43 members in 2015). This is as comprehensive and plausible an approximation of the Tea Party in the House as one can hope to find. To be included in this list, a representative had to not only affiliate themselves with the Tea Party, but also publicly distinguish themselves from the Republican Party. The final list of Congressional Tea Partiers contains 160 members who

were in one of these caucuses and the House between 2010 and 2014.

Figure ?? shows clear evidence of a Tea Party faction driving this adversarial trend in the Republican Party. The eventual Tea Party (black line) is distinguished from Republican legislators (grey line) and Democrats (blue line). They tracked with the Republican Party's general trend toward attack in the first few years of the Obama administration, as we might expect from a party in Congressional and presidential minority status.

The shift occurs, however, in 2010, after the Republicans won back control of the house. Most Republicans responded to this shift as one might expect, by becoming less adversarial (because they could control the House agenda). The Tea Party did not. Despite their party controlling the House, the Tea Party was not content to focus on credit claiming, but persisted, increasingly so, in attacking the Democrats.

Figure 4: Tea Party Faction Drives Republican Party's Shift



---

This figure shows that Tea Party Republicans drove the Republican shift towards a more adversarial brand in newsletters.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

In this version of the paper, we have been able to establish a few things. First, rhetoric matters, and members of Congress signal their priorities, whether credit claiming for the district or attacking the other party, in important ways through their constituent-facing communications.

Second, legislators' priorities in these communications change in keeping with whether their party controls the White House and/or Congress in predictable ways: out-party legislators have less to claim credit about to the district, and are more likely to attack. The difference is, however, not consistent across parties. Especially since Obama's election, Congressional Republicans trended asymmetrically towards attack. In the next version of the paper, aided by data that extends through 2018, we hope to confirm whether this asymmetry is an accident of the era, or is in fact a persistent trend.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we found evidence of a strident faction within the Republican Party pushing the party towards an attacking, polarized posture. Even with a truncated set of data (ending in 2012), we were able to distinguish a difference between Tea Partiers and other Republicans. While most partisans began moving back towards credit claiming once they regained control of Congress, Tea Partiers maintained a posture of attack, signaling that divisions within parties are integral to understanding the behavior of parties towards one another.

## References

- Capella, Joseph N. and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. 1997. *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good*. Oxford University Press.
- Cox, Gary and Mathew McCubbins. 2005. *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the US House of Representatives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Draper, Robert. 2012. *Do Not Ask What Good We Do*. Free Press.
- Grimmer, Justin and Brandon M. Stewart. 2013. "Text as Data: The Promise and Pitfalls of Automatic Content Analysis Methods for Political Texts." *Political Analysis* 21(3):267–297.

- Patterson, Thomas E. 1993. *Out of Order: An Incisive and Boldly Original Critique of the News Media's Domination of America's Political Process*. Vintage.
- Quinn, Kevin et al. 2010. "How to Analyze Political Attention with Minimal Assumptions and Costs." *American Journal of Political Science* 54(1).
- Robert, Molly, Brandon Stewart and Edoardo Airoidi. 2015. "A Model for Text Experimentation in the Social Sciences." Harvard University Mimeo. Available at <http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/bstewart/files/stm.pdf>.
- Roberts, Molly et al. 2014. "Structural Topic Models for Open-Ended Survey Responses." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(4):1064–1082.
- Skocpol, Theda and Vanessa Williamson. 2011. *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*. Oxford University Press.