# One Brand, Multiple Preferences:

## Messaging and District Competitiveness during the 2013 Government Shutdown.

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**Abstract**

The 1995 shutdown did not turn well for congressional Republicans because they did not achieve any of their policy demands, and their public approval drastically declined. Why did Republicans use the same strategy again in October 2013? Drawing on party branding theory, I argue that this is partially the result of the decreasing number of competitive electoral districts. Whereas members from competitive districts are interested in relating the party brand to reputation (efficiency and reliability), members from electorally safe and ideologically extreme districts prefer a strong ideological brand. Although congressional leaders are interested in protecting weaker electoral members in order to have an electoral majority, they also have to appease a sufficient number of party members in order to have a legislative majority in the future. Due to the increasing number of non-competitive electoral districts, a larger number of members of Congress are interested in creating opportunities for ideological party branding, which makes episodes such as the government shutdown more likely to happen. I use Twitter messages sent by Republican members during the shutdown to study their communication strategy. The findings show that members from safe and ideologically extreme districts were more likely to focus their communication strategy around policy positions, congressional leaders were more likely to use reputation cues in their messages, and members from competitive districts were less likely to use ideological statements.

## Introduction

By most measures, the 1995-96 government shutdown hurt congressional Republicans more than it hurt President Clinton and the minority Democrats. Surveys found that many more respondents blamed Republicans than Democrats (46% versus 26%) and, a year later, President Clinton's job approval rose from 42% to 60%.[1] Fast forwarding to 2013, Republicans ignored warnings that they were about to repeat history and refused to hold a vote to keep the government funded. After nearly a month of bad press and unfavorable polls, they held the vote to end the shutdown without achieving any of their initial policy demands.

House Speaker John Boehner called the shutdown a "predictable disaster" shortly afterward, yet Boehner could have scheduled a vote and avoided the shutdown by relying on Democrats to provide the needed votes. His decision begs the question - what were the Republicans' intentions? Although there are many possible explanations, I consider this case in the light of partisan and party-branding theories. Partisan theory presents the party brand as the party reputation resulting from legislative productivity (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005). However, as others have noted (*i.e.* Butler and Power 2014; Burkhalter 2014), partisan theory could be more clear about how a party's reputation is built outside of the legislative arena. Moreover, instead of reputation, other scholars understand the party brand as being composed of policy positions (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, Groeling 2010). These two party branding approaches are significantly distinct. Although at certain point the two approaches may overlap, perceptions of competence should benefit all party members equally whereas policy positions should have differing effects depending on the constituencies party members represent. This is why I argue that Republicans running in very conservative and electorally safe districts aim for a party brand built around policy positions, but that members from competitive districts are interested in a more reputation-related brand.

In the aftermath of the government shutdown, some ideologically extreme and electorally safe members wanted to shutdown the government to create an opportunity to strengthen the ideological component of the party brand. However, other members from more competitive districts were strongly opposed to the idea. As an example, in opposition to the shutdown front led by senator Ted Cruz (TX), senator Richard Burr (NC) stated that shutting down the government was "the dumbest idea I have ever heard of."[2] Building on Cox (2009), I assert that congressional leaders are not only interested in having the majority in both chambers but also in having a strong legislative majority to pass legislation in the future. For this reason, I portray the crisis as a communication event where the GOP leadership allowed the shutdown to happened in order to appease a majority of party members but, at the same time, they focused their communication strategy on strengthening the party's reputation in order to protect the electorally weaker members.

To study the communication strategy of members of Congress, I use the Twitter messages that members sent right before and during the shutdown. I find that members from ideologically extreme and electorally safe districts were indeed interested in constructing a party brand around ideology and that members from competitive districts preferred a brand built on reputation. Moreover, I also find that congressional leaders in Congress wanted both groups to fulfill their needs in order to achieve a future electoral but also legislative majority. I find

[1] Sources: Gallup: Congressional Job Approval Ratings; Presidential Approval Ratings.

[2] https://soundcloud.com/toddzwillich-1/burr1-071325-wav

that congressional leaders allowed core members to pursue their ideological tactics while they focused their efforts in promoting reputational cues and improving the electoral prospects of swing members.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I discuss the existing theoretical and empirical research on party branding. Second, I explain the most relevant events related to the government shutdown, and my theory and hypotheses. Third, I layout the methodology. Fourth, I present the results, and finally, I conclude by discussing the findings.

## Party Branding Research

The party brand is the cornerstone of several legislative theories because of its electoral relevance. According to a large number of scholars, the party brand is an informational shortcut that helps voters to identify the candidate that fits their preferences the best (Cox & McCubbins 1993, 2005; Snyder & Ting 2002; Groeling 2010; Neiheisel & Niebler 2013). However, political scientists from different fields have approached the party brand concept from very different perspectives, which has lead to a terminological confusion (Burkhalter & Byter 2012, Burkhalter 2014) and contradictory findings (Butler & Powell 2014). Whereas legislative theorists understand party brand as the party reputation resulting from legislative productivity, political communication scholars look at crafted messages related to policy positions. In this paper I aim to bring both approaches together to explain the 2013 government shutdown. By arguing that the party brand is composed of both reputation and policy positions, and that it can be set through legislative activity and also through the representatives' communication strategies, I study the budget crisis as a struggle within the Republican party to frame the party brand.

Legislative scholars use the party brand concept to theorize about legislative organization and to predict how legislators vote. In particular, Cox and McCubbins (2005) argue that the party brand is basically the reputation of a political party and that this is the result of the party's legislative productivity: "The more favorable is the majority party's record of legislative accomplishments, the better its reputation or brand name will be... The better the majority party's brand name, the better will be the prospects for (re)election of its various candidates and the better will be the prospetcs for (re)attainment of majority status." (Cox and McCubbins, 2005:17). Cox and McCubbins base their theory in the assumption that voters take legislative productivity into consideration. This is a reasonable assumption specially if we consider the results of Butler and Powell's (2014) experiment that shows that randomly assigned respondents are more likely to vote for a political party that is efficient in passing legislation. According then to Cox and McCubbins' party brand approach, all members of Congress have an incentive to support the party brand (to help the party to pass legislation) because this helps the reelection purposes of all members.

However, there are two main elements of Cox and McCubbins' understanding of party brand that could be reconsidered. The first one is that only legislative actions are believed to contribute to the party's reputation. Although it seems true that voters care about the ability of a majority party to pass legislation, it seems also reasonable to believe that other aspects may also affect the public's view about a party's reputation. As Bulter and Powell (2014) argue, a favorable record of accomplishments is important to the majority party, but it is probably not

the only way to establish a favorable party record. To understand the role that party brands play in shaping legislators' behavior, we also need to pay attention to how other actions (such as the public statements of members) affect the party's reputation. The other main problem with the legislative-productivity approach is that this only considers the amount of legislation being passed but not the types of issues being legislated. Building on Stokes' (1963) distinction between position and valence issues, Lee (2007) and Butler and Powell (2014) argue that the party brand cannot be understood only from a valence perspective but also from a position one. The party brand is not only related to reputation but also to ideology. This is why authors such as Khriebel (1998) and Lee (2007) argue against Cox and McCubbins' point that all party members share an interest in supporting and using the party brand. According to the latter, the party brand also has an ideological component and, considering that moderate electors dislike ideological and partisan politics (Downs 1957; Mayhew 1974; Carson et al. 2010), members running in a competitive district may harm their (re)election chances by attaching their name to the party brand.

Contrary to the valence approach, some political communication scholars do understand the party brand as an ideological brand. In this case, communication scholars such as Jacobs and Shapiro (2000), Groeling (2010), Burkhalter and Bytel (2012), and Burkhalter (2014) look at party brands as crafted and coordinated communication strategies around certain issues, memes, and repetitive expressions. In particular, they argue that political parties in Congress coordinate their communication strategy to shape the public's policy positions. According to Jacobs and Shapiro (2000), in the current political context of ideological polarization and safe electoral districts, political parties in Congress are mostly interested in framing the political debate according to the preferences of the party's base. They believe that, because most members of Congress do not have to face competitive elections, they are mostly concerned about raising funds from the party elite and convincing the party activists during the primary elections that they are the *right* candidate to represent the party. Such understanding of party brand is also consistent with the predictions that a party brand based on strong policy positions do not benefit members running in competitive electoral settings (Downs 1957; Mayhew 1974; Khriebel 1998; Lee 2007).

Nevertheless, whereas the valence approach undermines the ideological component of the party brand, most communication scholars do not consider the possibility that political parties base their communication strategy around reputation-related statements (valence issues) instead of policy positions. According to Cox and McCubbins' (2005) theory and the findings of scholars such as Butler and Powell (2014), an intense communication strategy based on valence arguments would indeed benefit all members of the party. I do not intend to argue that reputation (perception about the party's competence) and ideology (a set of policy positions) are mutually exclusive concepts. In fact, I do believe that at some point they overlap; for example when parties efficiently pass legislation on highly moral issues (such as religion or abortion). What I argue is that, although messages about reputation and policy positions may result from the same action, they signal different things and voters respond to those differently depending on their ideology and partisanship. Thus, I think that by distinguish and operationalizing reputation and ideology as two different components of the party brand we gain analytical and predictive leverage.

In sum, the existing research on party branding illustrates four main points. First, the party brand can serve the (re)election purposes of the members of Congress. Second, a brand

is composed of both a reputation and an ideological component. Third, moderate electors dislike a party brand based on strong policy positions but value a brand based on the party's good reputation; finally, whereas members from safe electoral districts may prefer an ideological party brand that pleases their party activists and elites, members running in competitive electoral districts should be more interested in promoting a party brand grounded on reputation.

In light of this party branding research, I discuss the 2013 government shutdown as a struggle within the Republican party to set the party brand. With the 2014 midterm elections around the corner, the stakes were very high. Although all the party members shared a common goal (to achieve a majority in both chambers and to increase their future policy influence), different party brand compositions could benefit the reelection of different members.

## The 2013 Shutdown: a Communication Battle for the Party Brand

From a strategic perspective, the 2013 government shutdown can be seen as an erratic and risky move, specially since in 1995 the GOP did not achieve any of their policy demands and their public approval drastically declined. Why did then the Republican party use the same strategy again? In this paper I discuss to what extent the shutdown can be seen as an strategic move by the Republican leadership in Congress to increse the party's likelihood of achieving the majority in both chambers and a legislative majority for the future.

The party brand is a collective good for the party but the different members may not agree in its ideal composition. Whereas members running in safe electoral districts may get more electoral benefits by attaching policy positions to the party brand, members from swing districts may prefer to build the party brand around reputation cues. Given these conflicting interests, legislative leaders have to deal with a dilemma. On the one hand, according to scholars such as Lindbeck and Weibull (1987) and Krehbiel (1998), they should prioritize the interest of swing members and candidates because of their key role in achieving the electoral majority in both chambers. However, on the other hand, leaders in Congress should not only be interested in achieving electoral majority but also in building strong and stable legislative coalitions. In particular, Cox (2009) argues that, although in some cases swing members (usually pivotal legislators) may play a key role when it comes to legislative super-majority requirements, these are "... by definition indifferent on ideological grounds... thus cheap to buy with side payments" (2009:350). Contrary to Linbeck and Weibull (1987) and Krehbiel's (1998) arguments, Cox (2009) believes that legislative leaders should also pay special attention to the needs of safe-core party members because they have clear and stable policy preferences and they may result helpful in "coordinating electoral candidacies or the legislative agenda; and to help mobilize voters or whip legislators" (2009:351).

From this perspective, I turn to the events and present the government shutdown as follows. First, ideologically extreme and electorally safe GOP members pressured the party leadership to shutdown the government. Their goal was to strengthen the ideological component of the party brand, to use ideological cues to please the party activists, and to decrease the likelihood of being challenged or defeated in the next primary elections. I argue that this is the reason why, after the 2013 congressional summer recess, some conservative Republicans led by senator Ted Cruz strongly supported the idea of a government shutdown as a valid strategy

to get the Affordable Care Act (ACA) repealed. [3]

On the contrary, some Republicans from competitive electoral districts were totally opposed to the conservatives' strategy. In a radio interview, senator Richard Burr (NC) said that shutting down the government in order to defund the ACA was "the dumbest idea [he had] ever heard of" [4] and, in an event of the *Illinois Chapter of Americans For Prosperity*, representative Adam Kinzinger warned his party that a government shutdown could cost them the House majority in the 2014 mid-term elections.[5] Representative Reid Ribble from Wisconsin also agreed with Burr and Kinzinger and stated that "It ends badly for the American people and the Republican Party if we shut down the government... I hope grown-ups get in a room and behave like grown-ups, not simply actors on a political stage." [6]

Given these conflicting opinions and interests within the party, the GOP leaders in Congress had to deal with the dilemma of either supporting the shutdown strategy and risking a future electoral majority in both chambers, or protecting the swing members of the party and risking the stability of a future legislative majority. In the beginning, the republican leadership wanted to force the government to compromise on general budget cuts, as they did before in the negotiations to raise the debt ceiling in May-August 2011. In March 2013, in a meeting with the press, the House Speaker Boehner said that he was not considering a government shutdown: "We, the House next week will act to extend the continuing resolution through the end of the fiscal year. The president this morning agreed that we should not have any talk of a government shutdown. So I'm hopeful that the House and Senate will be able to work through this." Indeed, once the shutdown was over, Boehner admitted that "it was a very predictable disaster. So the sooner we got it over with the better. We were fighting for the right thing, but I just thought tactfully it wasn't the right thing to do." [7]

However, as the September 30th deadline was approaching, the Speaker realized that the conservative coalition was getting stronger and gaining supporters within the party. As a result, he thought that his capacity to lead the House majority was on the stake and, in order to retain a strong legislative majority, he finally agreed to the shutdown strategy. Two weeks before the budget deadline he said that "the key to any leadership job is to listen," [8] leading the public to believe that he had already changed his mine. After the crisis, he also said "When you have your job there's something you have to learn... When I looked up, I saw my colleagues going this way. You learn that a leader without followers is simply a man taking a walk." [9]

Thus, the GOP leadership realized that, in order to appease a sufficient number of mem-

[3] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/us/politics/tea-party-extends-focus-to-include-rallying-against-a-syria-strike.html?pagewanted=all

[4] https://soundcloud.com/toddzwillich-1/burr1-071325-wav

[5] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/15/adam-kinzinger-obamacare_n_3762843.html

[6] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/23/us/politics/chances-of-a-deficit-deal-are-rapidly-fading.html?pagewanted=all

[7] http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2014/01/24/john-boehner-appears-on-the-tonight-show-with-jay-leno/

[8] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/19/us/politics/house-gop-to-tie-spending-bill-to-health-law-defunding.html?pagewanted=all&module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3As%2C%7B%222%22%3A%22RI%3A18%22%7D

[9] http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2014/01/24/john-boehner-appears-on-the-tonight-show-with-jay-leno/

bers and to keep a functioning legislative majority, they had to proceed with the shutdown. However, to minimize the harm that this ideological move could do to swing members, they principally focused their communication strategy on reputation cues. Finally, moderate members from competitive districts were in a very delicate situation. To protect their own electoral interests, they had to choose between not attaching their name to the party brand during the shutdown or helping the party leadership in promoting the reputation component of the party brand.

I argue that what principally drove the support for shutting down the government among ideologically extreme and electorally safe members was their electoral interest (specially since the 2014 mid-term elections were so close). It is hard to believe that they had in mind to achieve any policy goal since that did not happened in previous shutdowns and when in recent negotiations they got more leverage by sitting on the table (during the debt ceiling negotiations in May-August 2011). However, that does not mean that they only engage in ideological branding for electoral purposes (Mayhew 1974). They can also do it for policy purposes (Fenno 1973) since running in a safe district, and not having to compete for the moderate voters of the other party, gives them more room to push for the policies they think are right.

## Hypotheses

In order to validate the former interpretation of the events, I test the following hypotheses:

*H1: Republican members from safe and ideologically extreme districts were more likely to use policy positions as part of their communication strategy during the shutdown.* A strong ideological party brand benefits their electoral prospects and serves as an instrument to push for the policies they think are right. These members do not have to deal with competitive general elections, but they may have to face a strong challenger during the primary election. In order to increase their likelihod of being reelected (or not challanged) in the following primaries, these members have to appease the party base and show them that they are the *true* Republican of the district.

*H2: Republican members from competitive electoral districts were less likely to mention policy positions in their messages.* They do face competitive general elections and, in order to increase their likelihood of being reelected, they have to appeal to moderate partisans of the other party. Moderate voters dislike ideological brands (Carson et al. 2010) but value a good party reputation (Butler and Powell 2014). Although they also have their own policy preferences, they have to be more careful in promoting them and they will tend to do so in a less salient-public way.

*H3: Both electorally safe and weak members were equally likely to relate their messages to reputation during the government shutdown.* A good party reputation equally benefits all members of the party (Carson et al. 2010; Cox and McCubbins 2005).

*H4: The Republican leaders in Congress were more likely to talk about the party's reputation than policy positions.* Shutting down the government principally serves the party brand interests of ideologically extreme and electorally safe members. However, because congressional leaders are also concerned about having the majority in both chambers in the

future, they had to protect the electorally weak members by making the shutdown as much about reputation as possible.

*H5: Republican members that hold committee responsabilities were also more likely to talk about the party's reputation.* As Cox and McCubbins (1993, 2005) suggest, I argue that these party members are the ones who get the most benefits from achieving an electoral majority in both chambers. For this reason I believe that they supported the strategy of the main congressional leaders during the shutdown: to protect the electorally weak members.

## Data & Methodology

I use the Twitter messages sent by members of Congress during the 2013 government shutdown as a proxy to study their communication strategy. Although not all their constituents use Twitter and only a small proportion follow them in Twitter, I assume that politicians are aware of the dimension that any public statement made in Twitter can have. I argue that politicians use their presence in social media platforms very strategically because of their potential advantages but also potential risks. The clear advantage is that members of Congress can send direct messages to their constituents or the general public without the need of traditional media coverage. This makes social media a powerful tool because it allows politicians to say what they want, when they want it, and how they want it without the filter or comments of any journalist. At the same time, political representatives need to be cautious because all messages are publicly available, and any comment can be picked up and used against them by the media or political challengers. The fact that only 10 members of Congress did not have a Twitter account when the 2013 illustrates the potential benefits of social media for politicians. Moreover, from an analytical point of view, in studying the communication strategy of members of Congress, Twitter message have multiple advantages over using other sources such as press releases. First, the length limitation (140 characters) forces them to clearly state their main argument. Second, because all tweets have a very similar format, it is more feasible to compare across units.

In the last years, there has been an increasing number of political scientists who have used social media data to study different political processes. Most of the early work focused on using Twitter messages to predict electoral results. Although the first analyses where highly optimistic (*i.e.* Cummings et al. 2010; O'Connor et al. 2010; Tumasjan et al. 2010), later studies raised some methodological concerns (*i.e.* biases and replication) and were less optimistic about the predictive power of social media content (Metaxas et al. 2011; Gayo-Avello 2012). However, later works by scholars such as Barbera (2014), Barbera and Rivero (2014) or Cioroianu et al. (2014) illustrate how social media text can be a powerful tool to test hypotheses when you treat the data with the necessary cautions for statistical inference.

Using the Twitter REST API, I collected the messages sent by members of Congress between September 23$^{\text{rd}}$ and October 20$^{\text{th}}$ (to recall, the shutdown took place between October 1$^{\text{st}}$ and October 16$^{\text{th}}$). I constructed a database with all the tweets and then I decided to remove parts of the text that would not be useful for this analysis, such as links to external pages in the Twitter messages and stopwords from the NLTK stopwords corpus. I decided not to stem the words because I wanted to focus on the meaning of nouns instead of other elements such as adjectives or verbs, which would be more useful to analyze the tone rather than the content of

the messages.

In the final dataset I had 11,506 messages from the 269 Republican members who tweeted during the shutdown (90% of them). To test my hypotheses, I was interested in looking wether these messages contained a reputation or an ideological cue. On the one hand, I considered as reputation cues those messages related to the shutdown that were either praising and taking credit for the Republican's behavior or criticizing the Democrats' conduct. For example, a large number of reputation-related messages highlighted the efforts made by the Republicans in the House to end the shutdown and accused the democrats in the Senate of not doing enough: *i.e.* Gregg Harper (H,MS-3) *"The House had passed three bills to keep government open. Now the #SenateMustAct"*; Treu Radel (H,FL-9) *"View from the #capitol. Voting soon. Working to get us reopened. Let's hope Dems want the same."* Other examples of reputational statements are when members tried to get credit for individual actions or to appeal to certain values: *i.e.* Kay Granger (H,TX-12) *"Sent the Chief Administrative Office a letter asking that my pay be withheld as long as government remains shutdown"*; Jack Kingston (H,GA-1) *" -Let us never fear to negotiate- JFK #FairnessForAll".*

On the other hand, I considered an ideological cue when a member linked the shutdown to a certain policy or policy position, such as the Affordable Care Act (also known as *Obamacare*) or any fiscal policy statement: *i.e.* Walter Jones (H,NC-3) *As the layers of the #Obamacare onion are peeled back, we're getting a better sense of just how much it stinks"*; Raul Labrador (H,ID-1) *I voted against funding #ObamaCare + raising debt ceiling tonight. Insider deal will not make substantial changes for American people"*; Jason T. Smith (H,MO-8) *"Pres Obama thinks #ObamaCare is good enough for our family, but not good enough for him #StandFirmGOP."*

To distinguish what messages were related to reputation, a policy position, both, or none, I used a supervised learning method. First, I draw a random sample of 1,000 Republican tweets and, for each messages, I coded two dummy variables for whether the tweet had a reputation cue and whether it had an ideological one.[10] Hence, one tweet could have both type of cues, for example: Scott Tipton (H,CO-3) *"The US economy has many challenges. @JECRepublicans confirms House policies will work to reduce deficit/grow econ."* Moreover, it could also be the case that a tweet was not related to the shutdown at all, *i.e.* Doug Lamborn (H,CO-5) *"With Colorado Springs constituent Jennie Dangers and her newly-adopted daughter Elizabeth."* To distinguish those messages related to the shutdown from those who were not, I forced all shutdown-related tweets in may first random sample (of 1,000 messages) to be either reputation-related or ideological or both. Thus, even if a message did not have a high ideological content (*i.e.* a tweet with the keyword *shutdown* that did not mentioned any specific policy position), I still coded it as an ideological tweet since, despite of having the option of not saying anything about the shutdown, the member decided to get involved in a policy issue.

Then, I used 750 of the manually coded tweets and trained a support vector machine algorithm (SVM). Afterwards I tested the algorithm's reliability on the remaining 250 manually coded tweets. I repeated this process using different sets of 750 and 250 messages, and I finally decided to train the SVM algorithm using the training set with higher precision and

[10] As the number of observations that one uses to train a supervised learning algorithm increases, the marginal improvement on accuracy decreases. Collingwood and Wilkerson (2011) showed that the marginal improvement specially decreases when the number of observations reach the 1,000 treshold.

recall (Jurka et al. 2013). The following confusion matrices show the accuracy of the supervised learning method to predict the tweets with reputation-related statements and policy positions.

Table 1: Confusion Matrix I: Tweets with Policy Position Cues

| | Manual | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Auto | Negative | Positive | n | % right |
| Negative | **165** | 16 | 181 | 91% |
| Positive | 5 | **64** | 69 | 92% |
| n | 170 | 80 | | |
| % right | 97% | 80% | | |

Table 2: Confusion Matrix II: Tweets with Reputation Cues

| | Manual | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Auto | Negative | Positive | n | % right |
| Negative | **142** | 20 | 162 | 88% |
| Positive | 6 | **82** | 88 | 93% |
| n | 148 | 102 | | |
| % right | 96% | 80% | | |

After testing the accuracy of the coding method, I used the trained SVM algorithm to code the rest of the tweets (10,565 messages). As a result of this automatic coding process, for each Republican member of Congress who sent at least one Twitter message I obtain the following: their total number of messages, the number of messages with a policy position cue, the number of messages with a reputation cue, the number of messages related to both policy positions and reputation, and the number of messages that were not related to the shutdown (see Table 3). The sum of messages with ideological cues, reputation cues, and not shutdown-related may be bigger than the total number of messages because of the fact that one message can be counted both as ideological and reputational.

Table 3: Number of Republican Tweets by category

| All Republican Tweets | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 11,656 | | | |
| Non-Shutdown Tweets | Shutdown Tweets | | |
| 4,969 | 6,688 | | |
| (42.6%) | (57.4%) | | |
| | Policy Positions | Reputation | Both |
| | 3,284 | 4,220 | 816 |
| | (49.1%) | (63.1%) | (12.2%) |

## Modeling the Party Brand

### *Dependent Variable*

To test whether different members of the Republican party were interested in different party brand compositions during the 2013 government shutdown, I use as dependent variable whether a member principally focused his/her communication strategy in reputation or ideological cues. To build this variable, first I calculate the difference between the percentage of messages related to policy positions and the percentage of messages related to reputation. As a result, I obtain an variable that ranges from -1 to 1. However, because I am interested in modeling the data using a Beta regression (so that the model does not predict expected values over 1 or under -1), I transform this [-1,1] index into a [0,1][11] and I use Smithson and Verkuilen (2006) and Cribari-Neto and Zeileis' (2010) suggestion to transform the extreme values 0 and 1.[12] When the resulting dependent variable falls between 0.5 and 1, it means that a member related a larger percentage of messages to policy positions than ideology. When it falls between 0 and 0.5 means the oppostie. A value of 1 means that a member mentioned a policy position in 100% of the messages and a value of 0 means that a member talked about the party's reputation in 100% of the tweets.

### *Independent Variables*

*District Competitiveness*: One of the hypothesis is that those members running in competitive electoral districts are less likely to use ideological statments as part of their communication strategy. In particular, I believe that members running in districts with high levels of partisans of the opposing party will be less likely to include policy positions in their messages. According to Bartels (2000), Carson et al. (2010), and Grimmer (2013), an indicator that is highly correlated with the predominant partisanship of an electoral district is a presidential candidate's share in the same district. For this reason, to measure district competitiveness I use Obama's 2012 electoral share in each district. I consider that, as Obama's share in a district gets higher,

[11] $(y/2) + 0.5$

[12] $(y \cdot (n-1) + 0.5)/n$ where $n$ is the sample size

the competitiveness of the district is also higher for Republicans.

*Leaders*: I believe that during the government shutdown the Republican congressional leaders focused their communication strategy in making more prominent the reputation component of the party brand in order to help the (re)election prospects of swing members. To test this hypothesis I use a dummy variable to distinguish congressional leaders from rank-and-file members. I consider as leaders (=1): the Speaker of the House, the House majority leader and whip, the Senate minority leader and whip, the House committee chairs and ranking members, and also the subcommittee chairs and ranking members. The rest of the Republican members have a value of 0 for this variable.

*Tea Party*: To test the hypothesis that members from safe but also ideologically extreme districts are interested in a party brand built around policy positions, I create a dummy variable for wether a republican member is or has been part of the Tea Party Caucuses in the House or Senate (=1).

*House*: In the model I also add a dummy variable for wether a member is a representative (=1) or a senator (=0) in order to test the argument made by some scholars and journalists (Uslaner 1999) that Senate members have a more civic behavior and are less likely to engage in partisan messaging and fights.

***Control Variables***

*Ideology*: To rule out the possibility that differences in ideal compositions of the party brand are only the result of the members' ideology, I include the members' DW-NOMINATE scores for the 113th Congress as a control.

*General Election*: To be sure that what is actually driving the results is the percentage of the other partisans' party in the district instead of the member general elections results, I control for the voting share they obtained in the last general elections.

*Seniority*: Some studies of congressional organizations show that seniority may be a relevant variable to explain certain outputs, such as the number of bills considered by committees (Pearson 2005). For this reason I include in the model a control variable indicating the number of days a member has been serving in Congress (measured in 1,000 days).

*Number of Tweets*: Finally, to refute the possibility that the results are only driven by whether a member is very active or not in Twitter, I include as a control variable the total number of tweets send by the members during the period of analysis.

## Results

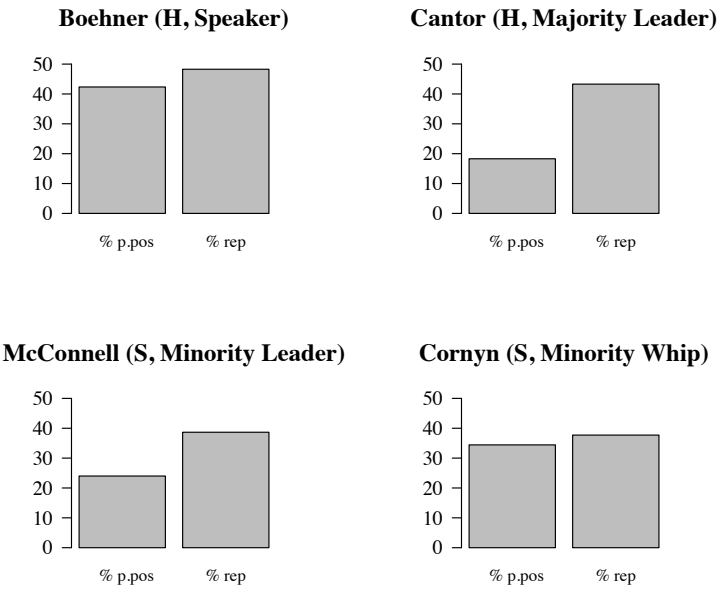
An initial descriptive analysis of some particular members show relevant differences between the communication strategy of congressional leaders and members of the Tea Party Caucus. The results in Figure 1a show a strong pattern among the main GOP leaders in Congress. When I look at the messages of the House Speaker John Boehner, the House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, the Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, and the Senate Minority Whip John Cornyn,[13] I observe that all of them focused their communication strategy more on reputation than on policy positions. The results are consistent with the hypothesis *H4* and *H5* and the argument that, although the congressional leaders finally agreed on shutting down the government so that they could maintain a stable legislative majority, they especially focused their communication strategy on reputation in order to protect the interests of the electorally weak members. The GOP leaders focused on communicating the efficiency of the Republican House in trying to solve the shutdown and the different problems related to it: Eric Cantor (House Maj. Leader) "*The House will pass a bill to pay federal workers for their time in furlough once the shutdown ends*"; and on communicating that Democrats were to be blamed for the shutdown: John Boehner (House Speaker) "*How Senate Democrats will change course. We need to re-open the government; we need to provide #hcr #FairnessForAll.*"

On the contrary, in Figure 1b I observe how some of the main Tea Party members dedicated a larger percentage of their message to ideological cues than to defend the party's reputation. This supports the idea that, for members representing extreme ideological districts, the shutdown was a good opportunity to send ideological messages to their constituents and to strength the ideological component of the party brand (*H1*). These members focused on advocating for defunding *obamacare*: Ted Cruz (S,TX) "*Americans are rising up to #MakeDCListen; stop the train wreck and the disaster that is Obamacare*"; and also for getting more budget cuts and reduce the national debt: Michele Bachmann (H,MN-6) "*Senate deal doesn't give relief to Americans hurting under Obamacare, nor does it address $17 trillion national debt.*"

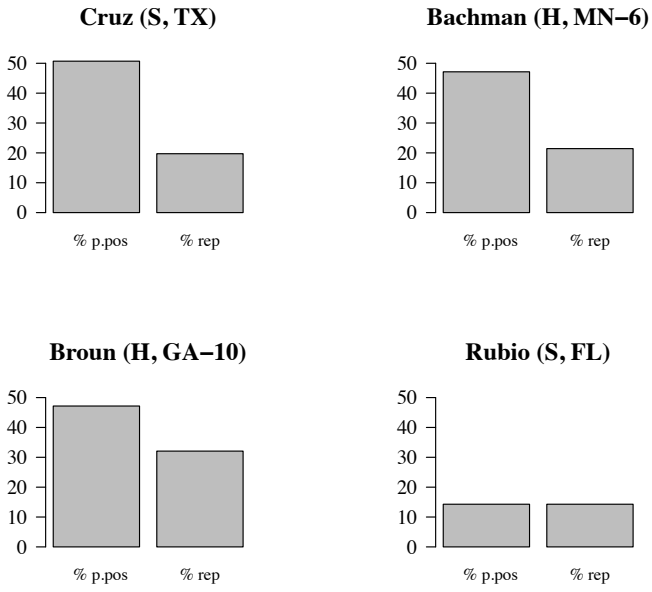
[13]The results for the House majority whip Kevin McCarthy are not in Figure 3 because he did not send any Twitter message during the government shutdown.

Figure 1: Percentage of messages with policy positions and reputation cues

(a) Main Republican leaders in Congress




(b) Some Tea Party members in Congress



Beyond the behavior of specific members, to compare the strategy of different groups within the Republican party I proceed with a bivariate analysis. The resutls show that ideologically extreme, electorally safe, and swing members did actually use different communicaiton strategies during the shutdown.

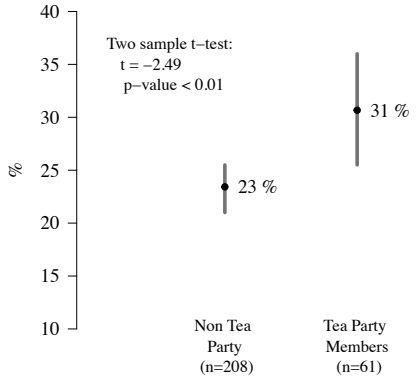
On the one hand, as I expected, the results (Figure 2.1) show that on average the Republican members representing very conservative and electorally safe districts used policy position more often. This evidence supports the theory and hypothesis *H1*, which states that these members are more interested in an ideological brand in order increase their likelihood of being reelected. In particular, Figure 2a shows that Tea Party members talked about policy positions more often (8% more) than non Tea Party members (31% versus 23%). Figure 2b also shows that, when comparing the Republican members based on the competitiveness of the electoral district (the most competitive quantile versus the other three quantiles), there is a relevant difference between those representing competitive districts and those running in less competitive and safe districts. Whereas on average the first group made a policy statement in 17% of their messages, the other group did it in 28% of the tweets. This is consistent with the hypothesis *H2* and the argument that members from competitive districts are not interested in using policy positions because, in order to increase their chances of reelection, they have to appeal to moderate electors who dislike ideological brands.

On the other hand, when we look at the percentage of messages related to the party's reputation, we do not see any significant difference. On the contrary, we observe that on average the four groups (Tea Party, non Tea Party, competitive, and safe members) tweeted reputation cues in about 35% to 39% of the messages (see Figure 2c and 2d), supporting the idea that all members are equally interested in promoting the party's reputation because both moderate and extreme voters value a good party reputation.

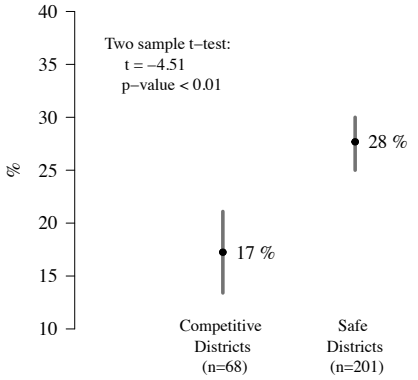
Figure 2: Percentage of tweets with policy positions and tweets related to reputation among different groups

2.1: Tweets with policy positions

(a) Tea Party v. Non-Tea Party members

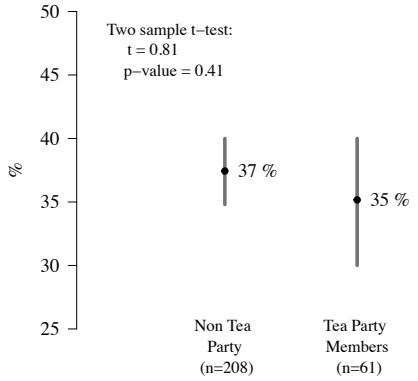



(b) Safe v. Swing members

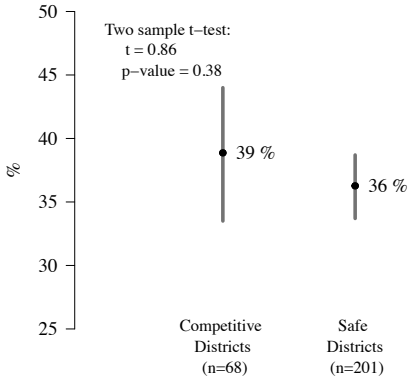



2.2: Tweets related to party reputation

(c) Tea Party v. Non-Tea Party members

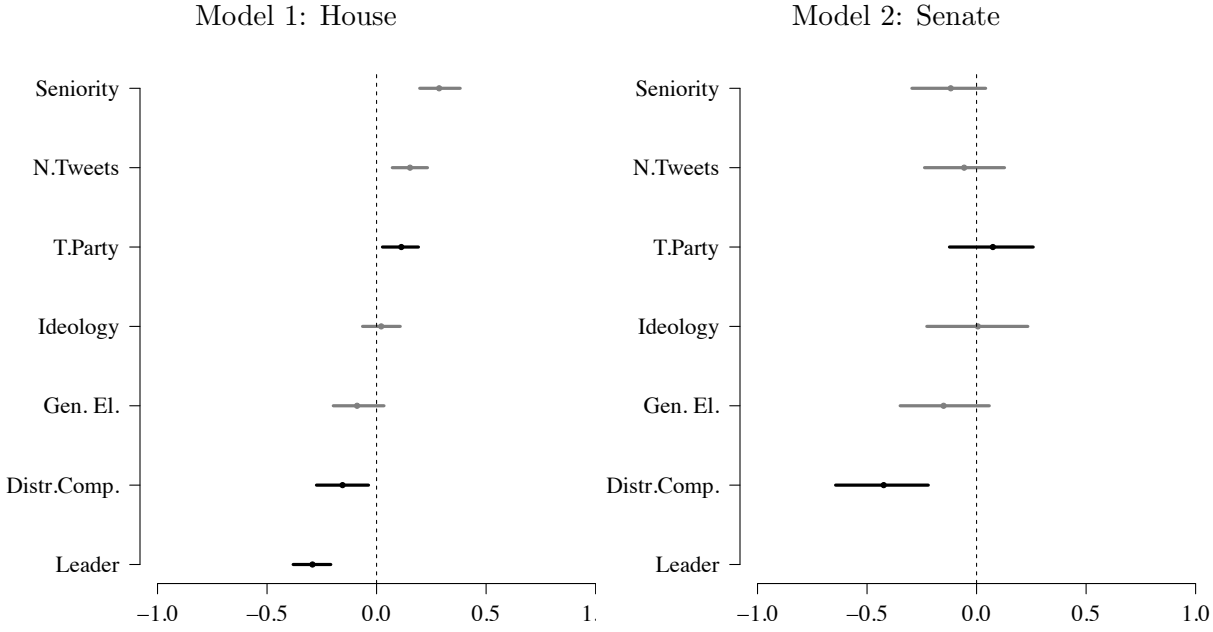



(d) Safe v. Swing members



To see if these findings hold when I take into account other explanatory variables, I model the members' communication strategy considering variables that are relevant for my argument (District competitiveness, House, Tea Party, and Leader), and also other plausible explanatory variables (General Election, Number of Tweets, Seniority, and Ideology). As suggested by Ferrari and Cribari-Neto (2004), because I am dealing with a proportional response variable, I use a Beta regression to model the data so that the model will always predict expected values from 0 to 1. First I use a Beta regression to predict the communication strategy of House members (Model 1) and then I use the same type of model to predict the strategy of senators (Model 2). Because I use different units to measure each variable, in Figure 3 I present standardized coefficients for both models.

Figure 3: First difference plots (as a variable moves from its mean to 1 standard deviation above) for Beta Regressions predicting the member communication strategy. Positive values indicate a communication strategy based on policy positions and negative values a strategy around reputation.



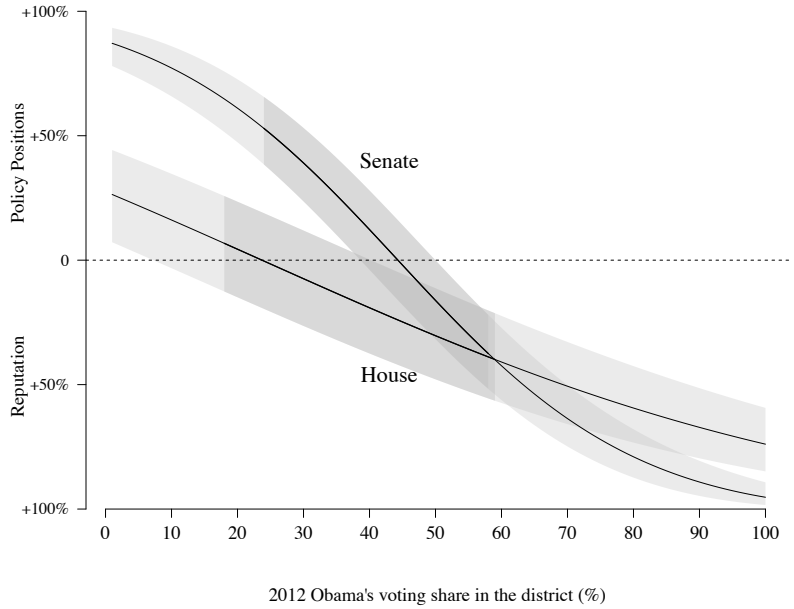

When we look at the results for the House members (Model 1), we see findings very similar to the ones in Figure 1 and 2. The standardized coefficients for Model 1 indicate that, the main congressional leaders and those members who have committee and subcommittee responsibilities (chairs and ranking members) were less likely to use policy positions as part of their communication strategy and more likely to engage in promoting a good party reputation (*H4 and H5*) . Moreover, as the percentage of votes obtained by Obama in a district increased (district competitiveness), the likelihood of member using policy positions decreased (*H2*). On the contrary, representatives who were part of the Tea Party caucus in the House were more likely to promote ideological cues(*H1*).

In Model 2 I do not take the leadership variable into consideration since at that time the Republicans did not have the majority in the Senate and so they did not have any committee

or subcommittee responsibility. However, the results for the Senate are similar to Model 1. I observe that district competitiveness is also significant to explain the communication strategy of senators; as district competitiveness was higher, a Senate member was less likely to mention policy positions and more likely to focus on the party's reputation. Compared to Model 1, although Tea Party Senators were more likely to engage in ideological messaging, because of the smaller sample when dealing with the Senate, in this case the coefficient is not statistically significant.

Finally, in Figure 4, I illustrate the predicted effects of the previous models. In particular, I show how as the percentage of votes for the Democrats in a district increases, the expected percentage of messages with policy position decreases (*H1* and *H2*) for both House and Senate members. Members above the horizontal line at 0 dedicate a larger percentage of their messages (communication strategy) to ideological cues and members below 0 pay a larger relative attention to reputation.

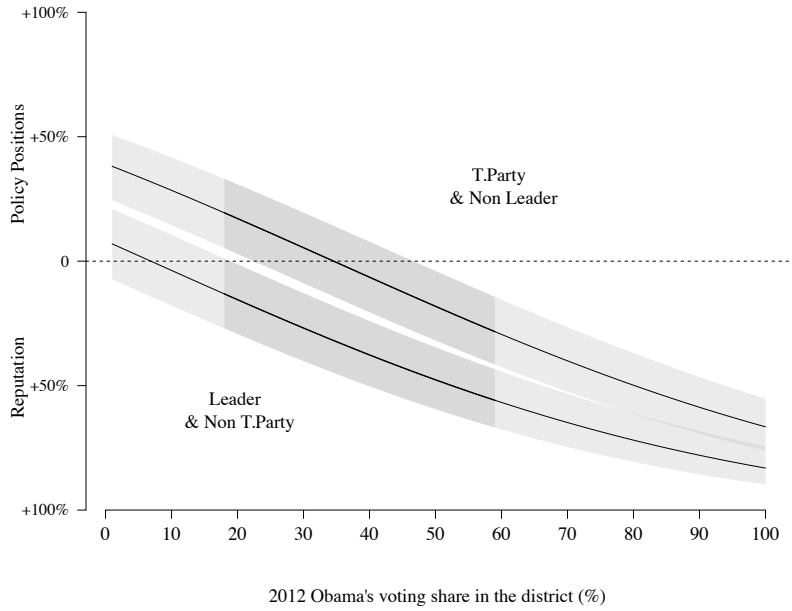
Figure 4: Effect of electoral competitiveness on the communication strategy of representatives and senators (95% CIs). The areas in dark gray indicate the range of district competitiveness values for which there are actual observations.




I observe that the competitiveness of the district has a larger effect on senators than representatives. This is because, as we saw in Figure 3, the substantive effect of district competitiveness is smaller in the House but also because there are other variables that explain communication differences in the House (*Leader, Tea Party, Number of Tweets, and Seniority.* To illustrate the explanatory power of these other variables, in the following figure (Figure 5) I

show the expected communication strategy of House representatives with leadership responsibilities who are not part of the Tea Party Caucus, and Tea Party members with no leadership responsibilities. The results show that, for the House, Model 1 predicts that it was highly unlikely for congressional leaders to dedicate a larger percentage of messages to promote the party's ideological brand than to strength the party's reputation. On the other hand, the model predicts that Tea Party members who were not committee or subcommittee chairs spent most of the time sending ideological messages as long as less than 50% of their constituents voted for Obama in 2012.

Figure 5: Effect of electoral competitiveness on different groups of House representatives (95% CIs). The areas in dark gray indicate the range of district competitiveness values for which there are actual observations.




## Conclusion

The main goal of the paper is to present and test a theory to explain why, despite the failure of previous government shutdowns, the Republican party decided to use the same strategy again in October 2013. Building on the party branding literature, I argue that members from safe electoral districts aim for a strong ideological party brand. Because shutting down the government is a very ideological move, when some extreme conservatives proposed the idea, the large number of electorally safe members joined the effort. Then, drawing on Cox's (2009) argument that congressional leaders are interested in having a majority in both chambers but also in

having a strong legislative coalition, I have argued that the Republican leadership allowed the shutdown to happened in order to please a majority of the party, and that then they focused their communication efforts during the shutdown in protecting the electorally vulnerable members. Moreover, despite presenting a theory to explain why the 2013 government shutdown took place, the paper also follows up the work of other scholars (*i.e.* Burkhalter and Bytel 2012; Butler and Powell 2014) in showing that the party brand has both a position and a valence component; and in illustrating that, for electoral and policy purposes, members from safe districts are interested in an ideological party brand, and members from competitive electoral settings prefer a party brand built around reputation.

I find evidence to support my theory and hypotheses about the government shutdown and how district competitiveness affects a member's party brand preferences. First, I observe that members from safe and extreme districts were actually more likely to mention policy positions in their messages (*H1*). Second, I find that, on the contrary, members from competitive districts were less likely to incorporate any ideological cue as part of their communication strategy (*H2*). Third, both electorally safe and weak members were equally likely to engage in supporting the party's reputation (*H3*). Fourth, the main Republican leaders solved their dilemma by allowing the government shutdown and then focusing their communication strategy principally on reputation instead of ideology (*H4*). Finally, I find that Republican members with committee and subcommitte responsibilities in Congress followed the strategy of the main leaders and were also less likely to use policy positions in their messages (*H5*).

In this study I have used a specific understanding of party brand: the voters' perceptions of the competence and policy positions of a political party. In part, this is a limitation because I am not addressing other questions related to the creation, characteristics, and effects of party brands: *i.e.* Is a party brand composed of multiple brands? Can a party brand be more or less cohesive? Independently of its composition, do some members attach themselves to the party brand more often than others? However, by using this approach, I have been able to operationalize the party brand to explain a relevant political event and to build a theory that explains part of legislators' communication strategy. Hence, despite its limitation, the party brand approach used in this paper clearly has some advantages while leaving room for future research.

In conclusion, the paper shows that the lack of electoral competitiveness in a large number of districts, combined with the existence of some extreme ones, makes the political debate more ideological and increases the likelihood of extreme political strategies (such as a government shutdown) to happen. Thus, according to this findings, a larger number of competitive districts would encourage a more moderate political context where political parties, in order to keep a good reputation, would be specially interested in compromising in order to get things done.

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