

A Delicate Balance:
Republican Party Branding during the 2013
Government Shutdown

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Abstract

Party branding research is generally concerned with how voters form partisan identities. In legislative research, concerns about the party brand are deemed to be central to understanding legislative organization and behavior. Yet different theories make different assumptions about branding objectives. We shed light on this debate by investigating one visible event - the 2013 government shutdown. Rather than committing to a single branding objective, party leaders employed different means to advance multiple objectives. Faced with choosing between supporting the strong partisans who favored a shutdown, and the moderates who opposed one, Republican leaders tried to appease both by moving forward with the shutdown and then emphasizing the party's unwavering efforts to end it in their public communications. Rank and file members supported their leaders' messaging efforts, but were also more likely to go "off message" if they represented more conservative constituencies.

Introduction

For 17 days in 2013, the U.S. federal government suspended all non-essential government functions. This "shutdown" happened the day after House leaders failed to schedule a vote on a continuing appropriations resolution referred by the Senate because it did not contain language defunding the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Many Republicans (and Republican supporters) saw the budget standoff as their last opportunity to prevent the Obamacare from taking effect. The 'clean' resolution proposed by the Senate probably would have passed the House with bipartisan support (Democrats and a minority of Republicans), but House leaders opted to not to bring it to the floor.

History suggested that a shutdown would hurt the public standing of congressional Republicans more than President Obama or Senate Democrats. In a similar shutdown involving congressional Republicans and a Democratic president in 1995-96, polls indicated that more Americans blamed congressional Republicans than Democrats (46% versus 26%). Approval of President Clinton's job performance actually increased.¹ A poll conducted in July 2013 confirmed that 80 percent of Americans considered a shutdown to be an unacceptable way to negotiate.² Yet Republican leaders chose to initiate one anyway. Why?

We investigate the shutdown to better understand party branding activities. Voters form partisan identities based in part on their perceptions of a party's activities in government. Important legislative theories portray branding as central to understanding legislative organization and behavior. However, different theories offer competing predictions about what this mean in practice. Do voters care about a party's governing ability or its policy positions? Which voters - strong partisans in solidly Republican constituencies, or moderate voters in electorally competitive constituencies - matter most to lawmakers?

¹Sources: Gallup's Congressional Job Approval Ratings and Presidential Approval Ratings.

²<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/government-shutdown-threat-unacceptable-poll-says/>

In this paper we are particularly interested in how Republicans portrayed the shutdown in their public communications. Republican party leaders had good reasons to support members from solidly Republican districts and states, but they also had reasons to be concerned about the shutdown’s impact on other Republicans whose constituents opposed the shutdown. We investigate this question using Twitter, an increasingly important medium of congressional communications. Republican lawmakers tweeted more than 11,000 times during the month surrounding the shutdown, to millions of followers. We develop and implement a coding methodology for capturing shutdown-related messaging strategies and employ supervised machine learning methods to automatically classify Twitter messages.

Our findings indicate that Republican leaders sought to strike a delicate balance between appeasing the party base by moving ahead, and limiting the shutdown’s broader political damage by focusing on the party’s efforts to resolve it in their public communications. Rank and file members from across the political spectrum supported their leaders’ damage control efforts, though Tea Party Republicans and members representing solidly Republican constituencies were more likely to also tweet about the policy issues driving the shutdown. Rather than committing to a single branding objective, party leaders employed multiple means to pursue multiple objectives at once.

Party Branding in Legislatures

Research investigating how voters form partisan attachments is longstanding and extensive (e.g. Campbell et al. 1960). Our focus here is on the more limited question of how party leaders in legislatures attempt to shape the party brand. A party brand is an informational shortcut. Voters “develop perceptions of partisan identities through their own observations of the party and its behavior” (Lupu 2012, 3). In legislative research, perceptions of the party in the electorate are deemed central to understanding

legislative organization and behavior (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005; Snyder and Ting 2002; Groeling 2010; Neiheisel and Niebler 2013). However, different theoretical perspectives assume different branding objectives. Some assume that the public cares about a party's ability to get things done - its governing accomplishments. Others assume that the party's policy decisions are what matter that matter but disagree about which constituents' preferences are of primary concern.

In *Setting the Agenda*, Cox and McCubbins (2005) argue that voters care about a party's ability to govern: "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 prospects for (re)attainment of majority status" (2005, 7). Because voters care about a party's governing accomplishments, majority party legislators support strong leadership agenda control.

Butler and Powell (2014) confirm (in a survey experiment) that respondents are more likely to support a party with a strong record of accomplishments. However, an important limitation of *Setting the Agenda* is that there is no discussion of whether the policy content of a party's accomplishments also impacts its brand (Adler and Wilkerson 2012). In their earlier book, *Legislative Leviathan*, Cox and McCubbins (1993) predict that party agenda control will lead to (extreme) policies reflecting the preferences of the median legislator of the majority party. If voters also judge a party based on policy substance, then majority party legislators may no longer share a common electoral interest in strong leadership agenda control (Lindbeck and Weibull 1987; Krehbiel 1998; Lee 2007).

The ongoing scholarly debate over whether policy outcomes in Congress reflect the party or chamber median is frequently cast as having only one possible answer. In practice, context probably matters. Conditional party government research finds that party agenda control in Congress varies depending on the distribution of member preferences.

Party leaders exercise greater control over the agenda as party members' preferences become more similar and more distinct from those of the minority party (Rohde and Aldrich 2001). Applications of the "Hastert Rule" (a general principle of only allowing votes on proposals that have the support of a majority of the majority party) suggest that similar conditional variations also exist within a given Congress. Votes violating the Hastert Rule (where a bill passes despite opposition from a majority of the majority) are rare, but they seem to occur on issues where party leaders decide that the political fallout of supporting the party base is too great.³

The variable application of the Hastert Rule suggests that party leaders must balance among branding objectives. Some issues are especially salient to the party base that provides motivated voters and campaign funds (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Cox 2010). Other issues attract the notice of moderate voters whose support is central to maintaining majority control of the chamber. Both constituencies matter for leaders' job security as well. The party caucus selects its leaders by majority vote, but retaining control requires the reelection of moderate members.

Party Messaging as a Branding Activity

Leaders also have different means at their disposal for shaping public perceptions of the party. In addition to passing laws, parties engage in "position-taking" activities such as bill sponsorship and voting (Mayhew 1974; Arnold 1990). In recent years House leaders have scheduled dozens of votes to repeal or roll back the Affordable Care Act, fully recognizing that the proposals are dead on arrival in the Senate. Another means of shaping the brand is "party messaging" where leaders coordinate communications about legislative activities and provide "talking points" for members to disseminate through different media channels (Sellers 1999; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Evans and Oleszek 2001). The

³<http://politics.nytimes.com/congress/votes/house/hastert-rule>

main goal of party messaging is to frame complex issues in ways that "generate a positive response toward [the] party among voters" (Evans and Oleszek 2001, 108). For example, Kaiser (2014) describes how (on the advice of Frank Lutz, a prominent Republican strategist) Republican leaders repeatedly described the the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act as a "bailout" bill because that frame was found to evoke the greatest opposition to the bill among focus group participants. Coordinated messaging campaigns in Congress date back to at least the 1990s and are now institutionalized leadership tools (Evans and Oleszek 2001).

Much of the research on party messaging assumes that the main goal is to influence the outcome of specific policy debates. But party messaging is also employed to shape public perceptions of the party brand more generally. We are interested in how Republican members of Congress communicated about the shutdown they instigated. After supporting the party base by shutting down the government, did Republicans go 'all in' by communicating support for the policy goals driving the shutdown? Or, given that the shutdown created significant divisions within their own party and broad public opposition, did they communicate a different branding message than the one they sent through their legislative actions?

Chronology of the Shutdown

Several months before the shutdown, House Speaker John Boehner expressed his intention to avoid one: "We, the House next week will act to extend the continuing resolution through the end of the scal 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."⁴ Boehner understood that a government shutdown would impose significant economic costs on the nation and would be unpopular among most

⁴http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/deal-to-avert-government-shutdown-likely-boehner-says/2013/03/03/bbd2a318-8425-11e2-999e-5f8e0410cb9d_story.html

voters. Nevertheless, little progress was made as the end of the fiscal year approached (September 30). On September 20, 2013 the House passed a continuing resolution (HJ Res 59) funding the government at current levels through December 15, after adding (among other things) a section prohibiting federal funds to carry out any provisions of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (section 137). HJ Res 59 then ping-ponged between chambers as the House and Senate alternately added and removed the anti-Obamacare provision until time ran out on Sept. 30.

A shutdown would almost certainly have been averted if the House had voted on the continuing resolution.⁵ Boehner later explained why he decided against scheduling one: "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. So I said, 'You want to fight this fight? I'll go fight the fight with you.'"⁶ Republicans were divided however. Supporters of the shutdown described going forward as "wonderful" (John Culberson (R-TX)) and predicted that "people will be very grateful" (Michelle Bachmann (R-MN)). Others acknowledged that it would be "painful" but the only option for preventing Obamacare from taking effect.⁷ Republican opponents of the shutdown warned that it could cost the House its majority (Rep. Adam Kinzinger (R-IL));⁸ that it "ends badly for the American people and the Republican Party if we shut down the government (Rep. Reid Ribble (R-WI));⁹ and that it was the "dumbest idea" they'd ever heard of (Senator Richard Burr (R-NC))¹⁰

Shutting down the government proved to be as controversial in 2013 as it was in 1995-6. The most visible effects involved the closing of National Parks, delayed tax refunds and failure to fund Head Start programs (which led to a highly publicized \$10

⁵with the support of Democrats and a minority of Republican lawmakers

⁶<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2014/01/24/john-boehner-appears-on-the-tonight-show-with-jay-leno/>

⁷http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/on-cusp-of-shutdown-house-conservatives-excited-say-they-are-doing-the-right-thing/2013/09/28/2a5ab618-285e-11e3-97e6-2e07cad1b77e_story.html

⁸http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/15/adam-kinzinger-obamacare_n_3762843.html

⁹<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/23/us/politics/chances-of-a-deficit-deal-are-rapidly-fading.html?pagewanted=all>

¹⁰<https://soundcloud.com/toddzwillich-1/burr1-071325-wav>

million private donation to keep some Head Start programs running).¹¹ The less visible impacts included an estimated .25 percentage point reduction in the annualized GDP growth rate and about 120,000 fewer private-sector jobs.¹² About 800,000 non-essential federal government employees were indefinitely furloughed while another 1.3 million deemed essential reported to work not knowing when they would be paid.

Polls generally found that more respondents blamed Republicans, though neither party benefited.¹³ Lawmakers also seemed to sense that the blame was likely to fall on Republicans. The vast majority of the 114 (symbolic) bills and resolutions restoring funding for specific popular programs (such as National Parks or Veterans' services) were introduced by House Republicans.¹⁴ That House Republicans were on the defensive was further indicated by the fact that only 7 bills were sponsored by Republican senators. Of course, none were taken up in the Senate, where Democrats continued to insist on a 'clean' continuing resolution.

After 17 days of stalemate and public criticism, and facing a new budget crisis in the form of a debt limit increase deadline, House Republican leaders scheduled a vote on H.R. 2775, funding the government at current levels through February 7 and raising the debt ceiling.¹⁵ The House quickly passed H.R. 2775 by a vote of 285-144. However, House Republicans remained divided, with most (62%) voting against this new bill to end the shutdown.

¹¹<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/09/us/10-million-gift-to-help-head-start-through-shutdown.html>

¹²http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/weekly_indicators_report_final0.pdf

¹³http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/poll-major-damage-to-gop-after-shutdown-and-broad-dissatisfaction-with-government/2013/10/21/dae5c062-3a84-11e3-b7ba-503fb5822c3e_story.html

¹⁴Excluding the 23 bills introduced by one lawmaker on the same day (Alan Grayson D-FL), House Republicans sponsored 70% of the 91 bills we identified. Interestingly, Tea Party Republicans were significantly more likely to sponsor such 'saving' legislation than other Republicans. Many of the smaller number of Democratic bills essentially chided Republicans, for example by making continuing appropriations for ALL departments and programs, and closing the House gym during the shutdown (HR 3276).

¹⁵<http://www.politico.com/story/2013/10/congress-approval-rating-government-shutdown-98657.html>

Hypotheses

Was the decision to schedule a vote on October 17th an admission that GOP leaders had miscalculated in deciding to move ahead with the shutdown? We argue that GOP leaders found themselves in an untenable position from the beginning. As party leaders, they needed to "fight the fight" on behalf of the party base that elected them and was an important source of motivated voters and campaign funds. But they also appreciated the electoral harm that a shutdown could cause for members representing more moderate constituencies. Speaker Boehner seemed to indicate as much when he expressed his desire to avoid a shutdown, and when he later called it a "predictable disaster."¹⁶

Given this apparent conflict between competing branding objectives, how did party leaders respond? After supporting the party base by shutting down the government, did Republicans go 'all in' by similarly emphasizing their support for the policy goals driving the shutdown? Or, given that the shutdown created significant divisions within their own party, did they communicate a different branding message than the one their legislative actions sent? As discussed, prior research proposes that voters form party perceptions based on governing accomplishments and policy positions. The former appeals to constituents across the political spectrum, whereas the latter may introduce conflict in terms of which voters' preferences are represented. The policy issues driving the shutdown appealed to strong partisans but risked alienating moderate voters. We propose and test several hypotheses regarding party communications during the shutdown:

¹⁶<http://articles.latimes.com/2014/jan/24/news/la-pn-john-boehner-tonight-show-20140123>

H1: *Policy positioning:* Republican leaders supported the party base by emphasizing the policy differences driving the shutdown in their public communications.

H2: *Governing Effectiveness:* Republican leaders supported party moderates by emphasizing the party’s efforts to end the unpopular shutdown in their public communications.

H3: *Party Messaging:* Rank and file Republicans supported their leaders’ efforts by emphasizing similar themes in their own communications.

H4: *Constituency Responsiveness:* Rank and file Republicans’ communications reflected their constituencies, with members from solidly Republican constituencies devoting greater attention in their communications to policy than Republicans representing moderate constituencies.

Data and Methods

Social media research in Political Science has rapidly advanced from basic descriptive analyses of usage patterns to carefully designed studies of broader phenomena such as public preferences and legislator ideology. Early studies using Twitter suggested valuable opportunities to learn about preferences and predict voting behavior (*i.e.* Cummings et al. 2010; O’Connor et al. 2010; Tumasjan et al. 2010). Subsequent studies raised methodological concerns about the (un)representativeness of Twitter users and the predictive power of social media posts (Metaxas et al. 2011; Gayo-Avello 2012). More recent studies have since concluded that Twitter can be a valuable research tool given the right question and research design (Barbera 2014; Barbera and Rivero 2014).

With respect to Congress, existing studies of social media tend to focus on how members use platforms such as Twitter. For example, Golbeck et al. (2010) manually code over 6,000 congressional tweets to ask whether members were using Twitter for: direct communication, personal messaging, reporting activities, providing information, requesting action, and fundraising. They found that members primarily use Twitter to

provide information or to promote-report on member activities. Similarly, Hemphill et al. (2013) found that members of Congress use Twitter for advertising and credit-claiming purposes (Mayhew 1974). None of these studies investigate differences in communication patterns among members or parties. Barbera (2014) does use Twitter data to compare members. Using information about members' Twitter followers, he is able to produce ideology position estimates similar to those based on roll call voting patterns (such as DW-NOMINATE scores).

We use this social media resource to study constituent communication strategy. Fenno (1978) travelled with members to observe how they presented themselves to their constituents. Grimmer (2013) investigates member press releases. Twitter has a number of valuable attributes for studying constituent communications, including its concise format and that almost all members use it regularly. The 140 character limit encourages succinct themes while the similar format of all tweets facilitates comparisons. Twitter is also widely used by members (and their staff) because it allows members to communicate directly with their followers and with anyone who subscribes to a hashtag. In 2013, the average Republican member had 8,521 followers (subscribers) for a total of 2,471,090. Excluding former presidential candidate Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), Speaker Boehner had the largest number of followers at 570,000.¹⁷

Press officers increasingly rely on programs (such as Hootsuite and Buffer) that distribute the same message across social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram etc). This means that tweets are proxies for other communications by members. Twitter has also become an important source of content for reporters and political bloggers. One recent industry report found that 55% of journalists use Twitter and Facebook to source news stories.¹⁸ And because followers often 'retweet' messages to their own followers (and so on), the direct impact of a tweet is likely much broader than the direct

¹⁷The top members in terms of followers were McCain, Boehner, Rubio, Paul, and Bachmann

¹⁸<http://www.oriellapnetwork.com/sites/default/files/research/Oriella%20Digital%20Journalism%20Study%202012%20Final%20US.pdf>

impact of a press release, entry in the Congressional Record or a floor speech on C-SPAN.

A Supervised Learning Approach to Studying Twitter Content

As of October 2013, all but ten members of Congress had Twitter accounts. We collected all 11,646 tweets sent by congressional Republicans between September 23rd and October 20th using the Twitter REST API (the shutdown started on October 1st and ended on October 17th). Our main goal is to study references to policy positions and governing effectiveness in tweets. We interpret mentions of governing effectiveness as a unifying messaging strategy whereas policy mentions were more likely to divide Republicans.

Tweets mentioning governing effectiveness generally highlighted the party's or individual lawmakers' efforts to end the shutdown and/or blame Senate Democrats for the stalemate.

"The House has passed three bills to keep government open. Now the #SenateMustAct."

Rep. Gregg Harper (H,MS-3)

"View from the #capitol. Voting soon. Working to get us reopened. Let's hope Dems want the same." Rep. Trey Radel (H,FL-9)

Tweets mentioning policy primarily highlighted efforts to roll back the Affordable Care Act, but also included references to fiscal responsibility:

As the layers of the #Obamacare onion are peeled back, we're getting a better sense of just how much it stinks." Rep. Walter Jones (NC-3)

Federal public debt accounts for 73% of national debt. We've got to get this under control or our grandchildren will face bigger crises." Marsha Blackburn (TN-7)

To systematically distinguish governing and policy mentions across more than 11,000 tweets sent during the shutdown, we first manually labeled a random sample of 1,000 tweets. For each tweet we created two dichotomous variables (policy (0,1) and governing (0,1)). A single tweet could include one, both or neither. Next, we used the

manually labeled sample to train and test a supervised machine learning algorithm (Support Vector Machine, or SVM). Our testing included a 1,000 fold cross validation process where 750 observations were used in training to predict the remaining 250 cases. Repeating this process 1,000 times with each possible train/test set yields 250 predictions for each of the 1,000 tweets. We assessed overall prediction accuracy by determining the majority class prediction for each tweet (i.e. a tweet was assigned a value of 1 if most of the 250 predictions were 1's) before comparing it to the human-assigned label.

Table 1 indicates overall machine labeling accuracy of 80-85%. The algorithm tends to underestimate rather than overestimate policy and governing mentions, and is as likely to underestimate each type of mention.¹⁹ This means that the expected bias when applying this algorithm to the remaining 11,000 tweets is that our findings will understate the extent to which members mentioned policy and governing. There is no reason to expect that predicted mentions will favor the policy or governing hypotheses.

Table 1: Predicting Policy and Governing Mentions in Tweets (1000-fold Cross-Validation)

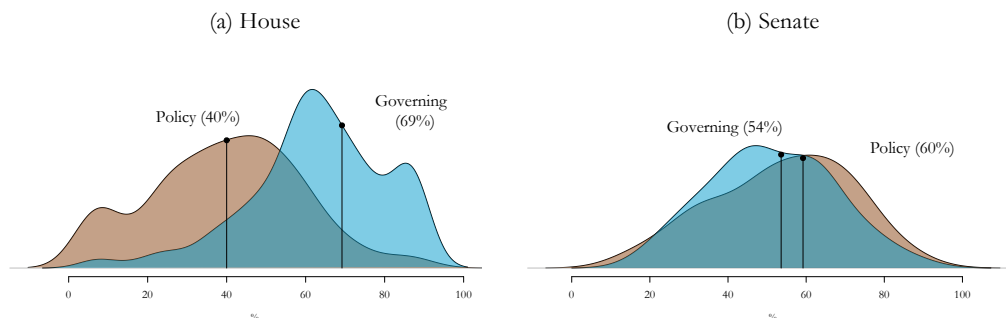
	No	95% CI	Yes	95% CI
<i>Does Tweet Mention Policy?</i>				
Correctly predicted (%)	96.5%		76.8%	
Precision [range]	96.4%	[93.9 - 98.8]	76.2%	[66.6 - 85.8]
Recall [range]	88.8%	[83.3 - 94.4]	91.5%	[86.3 - 96.7]
N	664		336	
<i>Does Tweet Mention Governing?</i>				
Correctly predicted (%)	91.2%		74.1%	
Precision [range]	91.0%	[84.6 - 97.4]	74.4%	[65.2 - 83.5]
Recall [range]	83.7%	[77.5 - 90.0]	85.3%	[76.0 - 94.6]
N	592		408	

The next step was to use the trained SVM algorithm to predict whether each of the unlabeled 11,646 remaining tweets mentioned policy or governing. Lawmakers

¹⁹Precision indicates the percentage of predicted cases that are true cases. Recall indicates the percentage of true cases that are correctly predicted.

could also, and did, tweet about unrelated things (at one point Rep. Doug Lamborn (H,CO-5) tweeted *"With Colorado Springs constituent Jennie Dangers and her newly-adopted daughter Elizabeth."*). However most (57.4%) of the tweets sent during the one month time period were shutdown-related. Two thirds (67%) included governing mentions whereas slightly less than half (44%) reference policy (both governing and policy were mentioned in 12.2% of the tweets). Figure 1 compares the patterns for the House and Senate. The density curves indicate how much attention lawmakers gave to governing and policy in their tweets. Of particular interest is how the distributions and averages for the two chambers differ, with House members demonstrating greater emphasis on governing compared to their Senate counterparts.

Figure 1: Density Plots Indicating Governing and Policy Mentions in Lawmakers' Shutdown-related Tweets



Findings: Party Messaging During the 2013 Shutdown

We hypothesize that Republican party leaders tried to balance competing branding objectives by promoting a more unifying message in their public communications after instigating the divisive shutdown. Specifically, they will emphasize their party's governing efforts to resolve the unpopular stalemate. Party messaging theory leads us to further expect that rank and file members will support these messaging efforts as all members of the party share an interest in seeing moderate members reelected. Other things equal, a member's own constituency should also predict differences in communication behavior.

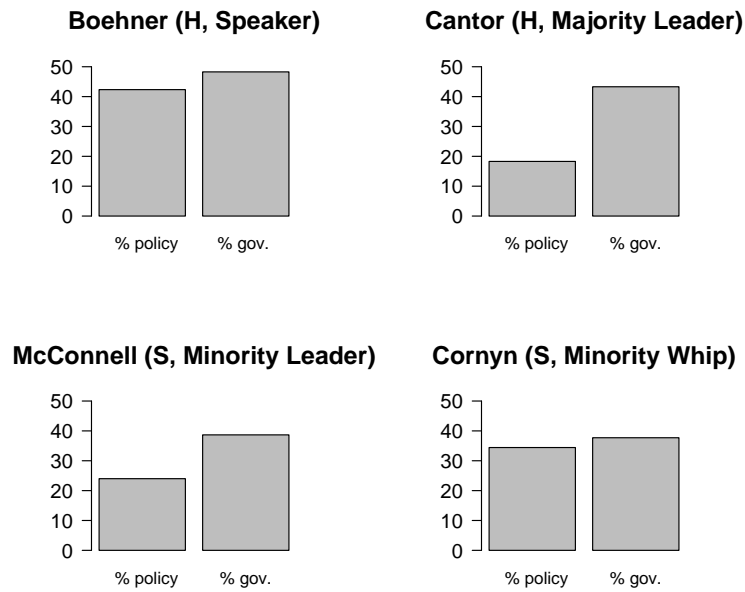
Members representing solidly Republican constituencies should be more likely to mention the policy issues driving the shutdown compared to members representing moderate districts where the shutdown was less popular.

Figure 2 compares policy and governing mentions in tweets sent by Republican leaders and prominent Tea Party caucus members during the shutdown.²⁰ Each bar graph indicates the percentages of total tweets during the shutdown that were shutdown related (the percentages do not sum to 100% because tweets sent during the shutdown were not always about the shutdown.) For example, only about 30% of Sen. Marco Rubio’s (R-FL) tweets were shutdown related. When Rubio did reference the shutdown, he was as likely to mention policy as governing. Tea Party members mentioned policy more often than governing in their tweets, whereas Republican leaders were more likely to mention governing than policy. As examples, Rep. Michele Bachmann (MN-6) mentioned policy twice as much as governing (*“Senate deal doesn’t give relief to Americans hurting under Obamacare, nor does it address \$17 trillion national debt”*) while House Majority leader Eric Cantor mentioned governing twice as often as policy (*“The House will pass a bill to pay federal workers for their time in furlough once the shutdown ends”*).

²⁰House majority whip Kevin McCarthy did not send any Twitter messages.

Figure 2: Policy vs. Governing Mentions in Tweets (Selected Lawmakers)

(a) Republican Leaders



(b) Tea Party Affiliates

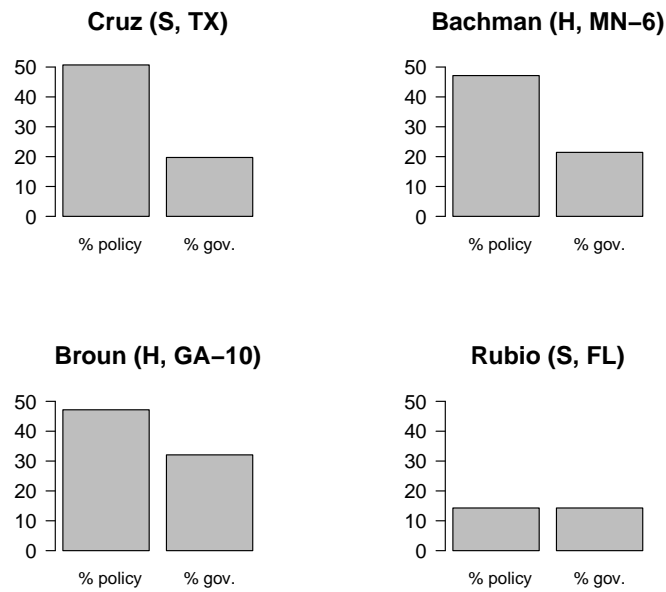


Figure 3 presents similar comparisons (mean proportions with 95% confidence intervals) for all Republican lawmakers. As noted earlier, Twitter mentions of governing effectiveness were more common than policy mentions. Comparing mentions of governing (Figure 3.1), we see no significant differences between Tea Party²¹ and other Republicans, or between Republicans representing safe and competitive constituencies.²² Figure 3.2 indicates significant differences in policy mentions however. Tea Party Caucus Republicans, and Republicans representing solidly Republican constituencies were significantly more likely to bring up policy in their tweets. Thus while members across the board supported the party’s rhetorical focus on ending the shutdown, the members who went ”off message” also tended to be the ones that had the most to gain politically from doing so.

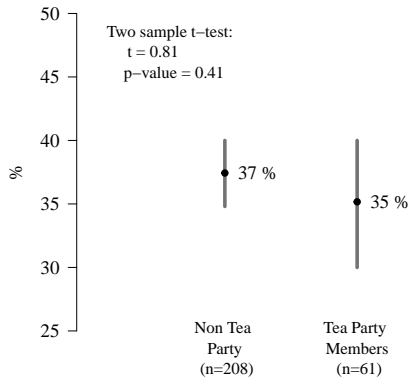
²¹Our Tea Party membership information comes from Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea_Party_Caucus) which claims to list the information once available on the now defunct House Tea Party Caucus (<http://teapartycaucus-bachmann.house.gov/membership>). Appendix 1 includes the full list used in this analysis.

²²Districts and states where Obama received at least 45% of the vote in 2012 are considered competitive (Bartels 2000; Carson et al. 2010; Grimmer 2013).

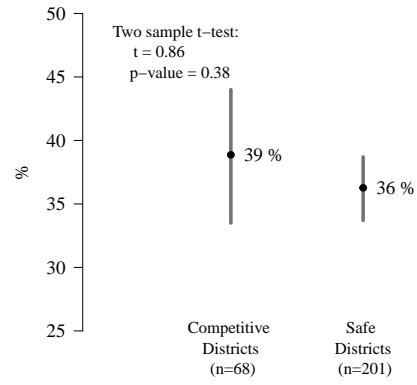
Figure 3: Policy vs. Governing Mentions in Tweets (all lawmakers)

3.1: Tweets with Governing Mentions

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

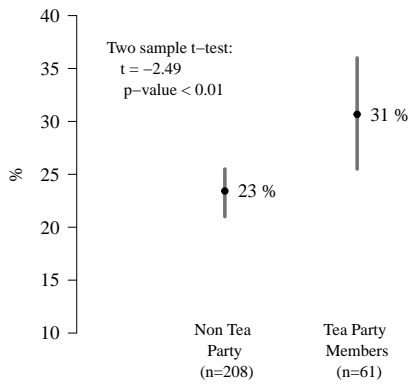


(b) Safe v. Swing members

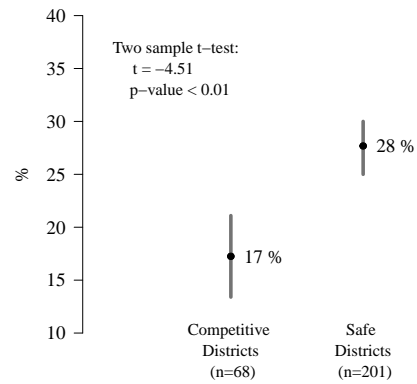


3.2: Tweets with Policy Mentions

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



(d) Safe v. Swing members



Modeling Shutdown Communications

To investigate whether these preliminary findings hold after controlling for alternative explanations, we test two Beta regression model specifications (Ferrari and Cribari-Neto 2004) that predict relative attention to policy and governing in a member’s tweets. The *dependent variable* is the proportion of all tweet mentions of policy or governing that are policy mentions. Thus a value of 0 indicates governing mentions only whereas a value of 1 indicates policy mentions only. Beta regression models cannot compute a prediction for extreme values of 0 and 1 so we transform those cases using the method recommended by Smithson and Verkuilen (2006) and Cribari-Neto and Zeileis (2010).²³

Our main expectation is that Republican leaders sought to limit the political damage of the unpopular shutdown by emphasizing efforts to resolve it, rather than emphasizing the policy issues driving it. We also expect to find that other Republicans supported this messaging effort, though to different extents. *Leaders* includes (in the House) the Speaker, Majority Leader, Majority Whip and committee and subcommittee chairs. In the Senate it includes the Minority leader, Minority Whip, and committee ranking members. In addition to *Electoral Competitiveness* and *Tea Party membership*, we also test member *Ideology*, *General Election Margin* and *Number of Shutdown-related Tweets*. Member ideology (DW-NOMINATE) controls for the fact that ideologically extreme constituencies also tend to elect ideologically extreme representatives (Downs 1957; Miller and Stokes 1963; Bartels 1991; Erikson and Wright 1997). The incumbent’s share of the vote in the 2012 general election (or in their most recent reelection in the case of senators: ’12, ’10, or ’08) captures personal electoral vulnerability. Finally, number of shutdown-related tweets is a measure of intensity. We expect stronger supporters of the shutdown to send more tweets and mention policy more often.

The plots in Figure 4 present standardized coefficients and 95% confidence intervals (see Appendix II for additional information). Compared to the average member,

²³ $(y \cdot (n - 1) + 0.5)/n$ where n is the sample size

House leaders and members from competitive electoral constituencies were more likely to emphasize governing over policy. Compared to the average member, Tea Party Republicans were significantly more likely tweet about the policy issues driving the shutdown. For the Senate, electoral competitiveness is the only significant variable. Senators from competitive states were more likely to emphasize governing compared to other senators. Leaders and Tea Party are in the expected directions but not significant for the Senate. Part of the explanation may be the small N (42 Republican senators compared to 217 Representatives). But another explanation may be that Senate Republican leaders were not in the majority and arguably not as accountable as House leaders. The puzzle in the Senate results would seem to be that Tea Party Republicans were not significantly more policy focused. While Ted Cruz (R-TX) clearly emphasized policy (more than 70% of his tweets included policy mentions) other Tea Party Republicans (such as Rubio) seemed to avoid the issue. On average, Tea Party Senators represented more competitive constituencies than House Tea Party members (average Obama vote share of 41% versus 38%) and won by smaller margins (58% versus 63% on average).

Figure 4: Member Characteristics Predicting Policy Emphasis During the Shutdown

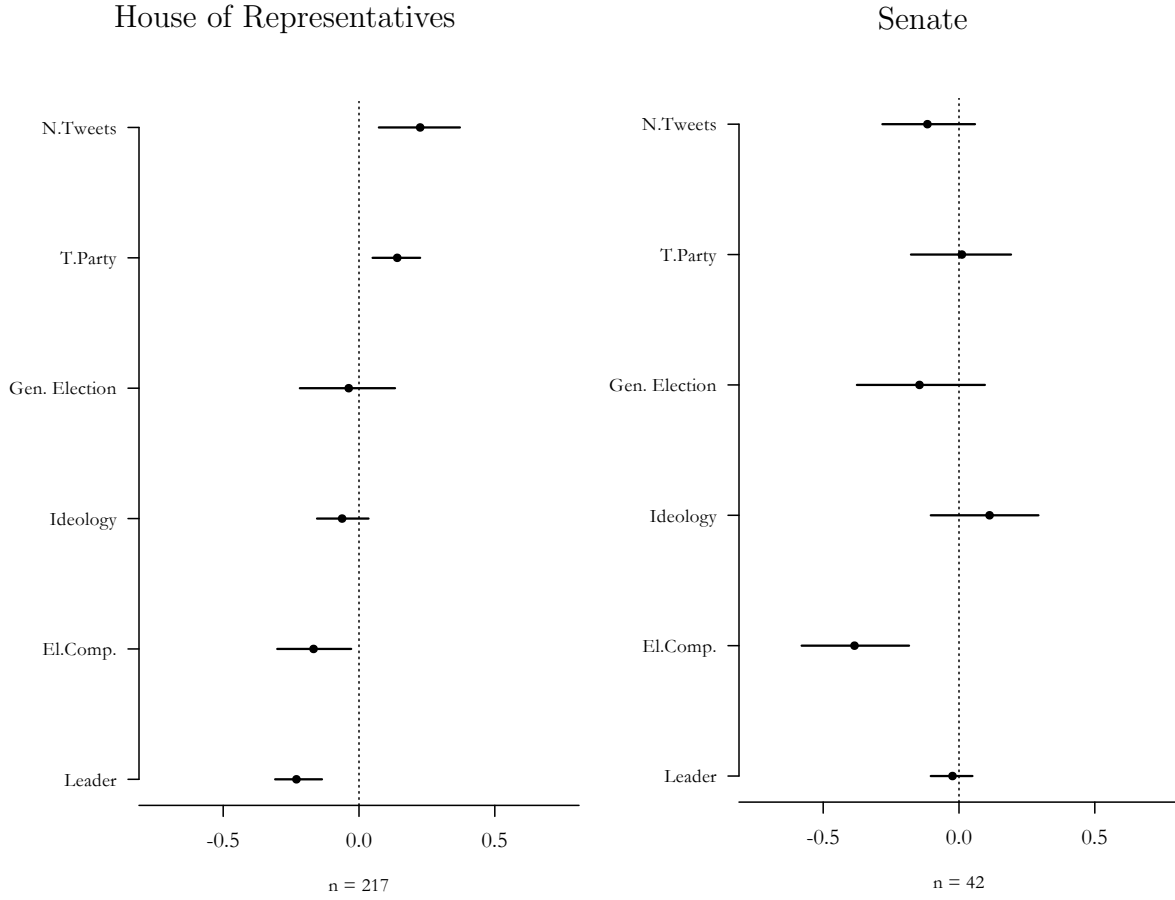
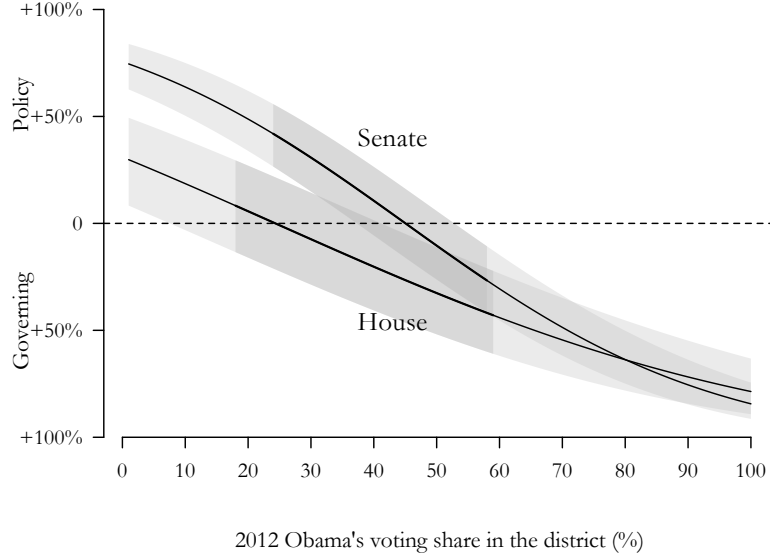


Figure 5 illustrates the estimated effects of district competitiveness on propensity to tweet about policy versus governing during the shutdown. Similarly situated House members were less likely to tweet about policy versus governing during the shutdown than senators. Other things equal, about 30% of the tweets of a House member from the most competitive districts mention policy, compared to about 65% for a House member from the safest district.

Figure 5: Electoral Competitiveness and Shutdown Communications



Discussion

Party branding research seeks to understand how voters form partisan attachments, and how such considerations influence legislative organization and behavior. Different theoretical perspectives make different predictions about the goals of party branding activities in legislatures. Some theories assume that a party's ability to get things done is what matters to voters - its governing effectiveness. Others assume that voters care about policy positions, but make different assumptions about which voters' preferences are of primary concern to the party.

Party branding findings are frequently presented as supporting one or the other of these perspectives. Our findings offer insights into the balancing act party leaders engage in when faced with conflicting branding objectives. Lawmakers have different means at their disposal, from bill sponsorship, to roll call voting, to public communications. We investigate Twitter communications during the 2013 government shutdown,

arguing that tweets are a valid proxy for broader communication strategies. Examining more than 11,000 tweets by Republican lawmakers, we differentiate mentions of governing effectiveness from mentions of policy. Usage of these different frames corresponds with what most would expect. Tea Party Republicans were significantly more likely, and Republicans representing moderate constituencies less likely, to tweet about the policy issues driving the shutdown. Perhaps more surprising is the fact that variations in policy mentions, not variations in governing mentions drive these findings. Republicans across the board were as likely to tweet about the party's efforts to bring the shutdown to a close.

Republican party leaders felt compelled to "fight the fight" the party base wanted, but also recognized that the unpopular shutdown threatened the party brand in moderate constituencies. Their response, we argue, was to send a different message in their public communications than they sent via their legislative actions. After instigating the shutdown, these leaders did not focus on defending it. Instead, they tried to focus public attention on the party's unceasing efforts to bring an unpopular shutdown to a close. Consistent with party messaging research, other Republicans picked up this theme in their own tweets.

Was this communications strategy successful? Republican gains in the 2014 elections, despite dire warnings and widespread public opposition, suggest that the shutdown did not cause long term damage to the party brand. Whether party messaging helped is impossible to know. Nevertheless, we believe that this study demonstrates that most Republicans were aware of the threat the shutdown posed for their party, and supported efforts to mitigate its effects.

Branding includes valence and ideological components. Voters care about a party's ability to get things done - its governing ability - and they care about what it does - its policy choices. In addition, parties have multiple means at their disposal - branding is not just about roll call voting. Different means (sponsorships, roll call votes, public communications) can be employed to promote the same or differing branding objectives.

How parties balance among these competing demands deserves more scholarly attention. Rather than choosing between supporting the party base or party moderates, Republican party leaders sought to strike a delicate balance during the shutdown, and the party rank and file generally supported their efforts.

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Appendix I: Tea Party Caucus Members

HOUSE		SENATE
Bachmann (MN-6)	Palazzo (MS-4)	Blunt (MO)
Barton (TX-6)	Pearce (NM-2)	Cornyn (TX)
Bilirakis (FL-12)	Poe (TX-2)	Cruz (TX)
Black (TN-6)	Price (GA-6)	Enzi (WY)
Broun (GA-10)	Roe (TN-1)	Johnson (WI)
Carter (TX-31)	Ross (FL-15)	Lee (UT)
Cassidy (LA-6)	Royce (CA-39)	McCain (AZ)
Coble (NC-6)	Scalise (LA-1)	McConnell (KY)
Coffman (CO-6)	Schweikert (AZ-6)	Moran (KS)
Crenshaw (FL-4)	Sessions (TX-32)	Paul (KY)
Culberson (TX-7)	Smith (NE-3)	Risch (ID)
Duncan (SC-3)	Smith (TX-21)	Rubio (FL)
Farenthold (TX-27)	Stutzman (IN-3)	Scott (SC)
Fincher (TN-8)	Walberg (MI-7)	Sessions (AL)
Fleming (LA-4)	Westmoreland (GA-3)	Toomey (PA)
Franks (AZ-8)	Wilson (SC-2)	
Gingrey (GA-11)		
Gohmert (TX-1)		
Hartzler (MO-4)		
Huelskamp (KS-1)		
Jenkins (KS-2)		
King (IA-4)		
Lamborn (CO-5)		
Lummis (WY-0)		
Marchant (TX-24)		
McClintock (CA-4)		
McKinley (WV-1)		
Miller (CA-31)		
Mulvaney (SC-5)		
Neugebauer (TX-19)		

Appendix II: Beta Regression Models predicting Shutdown Communications of House and Senate Republicans

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Comm. Strategy of HOUSE Repr.	
	(1)	(2)
Dist. Comp (Obama '12)	−0.023** (0.011)	−0.024** (0.011)
Tea Party	0.342** (0.136)	0.269** (0.130)
Gen. Elections '12	−0.420 (1.012)	−1.292 (0.990)
Ideology (DW1)	−0.370 (0.355)	0.133 (0.351)
Leader	−0.453*** (0.106)	−0.639*** (0.109)
Seniority		0.106*** (0.020)
Num. Tweets	0.007*** (0.003)	0.009*** (0.003)
Constant	0.980 (1.067)	1.051 (1.024)
Observations	217	217
R ²	0.066	0.103
Log Likelihood	73.687	87.103
<i>Note:</i> *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01		

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Comm. Strategy of SENATORS	
	(1)	(2)
Dist. Comp. (Obama '12)	−0.049*** (0.016)	−0.051*** (0.016)
Tea Party	0.017 (0.224)	0.078 (0.229)
Gen. Elections '12	−1.418 (1.398)	−1.366 (1.390)
Idology (DW1)	0.508 (0.617)	0.253 (0.649)
Leader	−0.125 (0.215)	0.028 (0.255)
Seniority		−0.038 (0.035)
Num. Tweets	−0.007 (0.007)	−0.007 (0.007)
Constant	2.952** (1.435)	3.194** (1.440)
Observations	42	42
R ²	0.232	0.247
Log Likelihood	22.423	22.992
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	