#21
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Shot by the Messenger: Partisan Cues and Public Opinion Regarding National Security and War

Matthew A. Baum · Tim Groeling

Abstract Research has shown that messages of intra-party harmony tend to be ignored by the news media, while internal disputes, especially within the governing party, generally receive prominent coverage. We examine how messages of party conflict and cooperation affect public opinion regarding national security, as well as whether and how the reputations of media outlets matter. We develop a typology of partisan messages in the news, determining their likely effects based on the characteristics of the speaker, listener, news outlet, and message content. We hypothesize that criticism of a Republican president by his fellow partisan elites should be exceptionally damaging (especially on a conservative media outlet), while opposition party praise of the president should be the most helpful (especially on a liberal outlet). We test our hypotheses through an experiment and a national survey on attitudes regarding the Iraq War. The results show that credible communication (i.e., "costly" rhetoric harmful to a party) is more influential than "cheap talk" in moving public opinion. Ironically, news media outlets perceived as ideologically hostile can actually enhance the credibility of certain messages relative to "friendly" news sources.

Keywords Public opinion · Foreign policy · Media effects · Media bias · Iraq

M. A. Baum (✉)
John F. Kennedy School of Government and Department of Government, Harvard University,
79 JFK Street, Cambridge, MA 02468, USA
e-mail: Matthew_Baum@Harvard.edu

T. Groeling
Department of Communication Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, Rolfe Hall,
Room 2322, Box 951538, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1538, USA
e-mail: groeling@ucla.edu

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resources available for subsequent election campaigns, and for a member's ability to influence public policy—if one is a member of the majority party (Cox and McCubbins 1993; Cox and Magar 1999). Winning election or majority party status, in turn, requires making one's self and one's fellow partisans look good, while casting the opposing party in a negative light. The implication for politicians' preferences regarding media coverage is straightforward: typical politicians prefer stories that praise themselves and their fellow partisans, or criticize their opponents or the opposition party. Thus the parties will generally prefer to broadcast cross-party attacks and intra-party praise, while avoiding cross-party praise and intra-party attacks.

However, in determining each message type's effect on viewers, it is important to note not just the content of the message itself, but also the credibility of the message or its speaker. Parties do not "inject" messages into a passive public; such messages are processed by individuals who accept or reject them depending in part on their perceived credibility (Sniderman et al. 1991; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994; Druckman 2001a). One source of credibility for a message is the belief that the speaker and listener have common interests (Crawford and Sobel 1982; Calvert 1985). This suggests that statements by a listener's own party will be regarded as more credible than those of the opposing party, all else equal. Our first hypothesis follows:

H1: Partisan Credibility Approval of the president among members of a given party will be more strongly influenced by presidential evaluations from their fellow partisans than by evaluations from members of the other party.

Another important source of credibility derives from the interaction of source and message: whether the message is costly to the speaker (Spence 1973). Typical individuals regard messages that are harmful to the interests of the speaker as more credible than those that impose no costs (so-called "cheap talk").[4] In the context of partisan communication, messages by partisan speakers that appear to damage their own party or help the other party should be regarded as more credible than messages that help their own party or damage the other party. Such costly messages should be at least somewhat credible regardless of the party affiliation of the listener. Our second hypothesis follows:

H2: Costly Credibility Evaluations that impose a cost on the speaker's own party will have a stronger effect on individuals' propensity to support the president than will equivalent "cheap talk" evaluations.

Table 1 summarizes the relative credibility of different partisan messages about the president based on their partisan and costly credibility for viewers of each party. It demonstrates the relatively weak persuasive power of "politics as usual" statements (i.e., intra-party praise or cross-party attacks). Such statements by members of the presidential (non-presidential) party serve only to rally their own followers, who probably already approved (disapproved) of the president prior to the statement (Baum 2002).

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[4] Two related lines of research in social psychology are the influence of "incongruous" (Walster et al. 1966; Koeske and Crano 1968) or "disconfirming" messages (Eagly et al. 1978).

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