

Entrepreneurs of Conflict: Media Attention without Consequences

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Personal attacks and hostility mire modern American politics. Politicians seem to expect that insults will increase media attention, improve campaign donations, and build a path to higher office, regardless of the potential harm this behavior might inflict on American institutions. We introduce a new, massive dataset of 1.2 million political texts, merged with millions of campaign contributions, appearances from 26,000 hours of cable news television, and thousands of congressional votes and bills. With these data, we identify representatives whose brand is political division—conflict entrepreneurs. We proceed to show that while the media reward conflict entrepreneurs with disproportionate coverage, this coverage does not relate to meaningful dividends. Our results suggest that conflict entrepreneurs, relative to policy-focused representatives, do not convert media attention into success: they do not raise more campaign donations, they do not perform better in elections, they are assigned to less powerful committees, and they do not leverage media attention to introduce or co-sponsor legislation. The absence of voter and donor sanctioning and increased media attention helps explain why many politicians resort to insults despite widespread public disapproval of such tactics.

Conflict entrepreneurs | political speech | US Congress

Criticizing the records of political opponents is a longstanding, healthy practice that is essential for vibrant democratic representation (1). However, there has been a noticeable shift from discussions centered on policy to exchanges filled with personal attacks and defamation, which not only serve no constructive purpose (2–6), but also threaten the stability of American politics (7–9).

Four widely-held assumptions about such language relate to its prevalence both across and between parties, its relationship to electoral success and fundraising, and its temporal dynamics. First, while defamatory language appears ubiquitous in American politics, this perception may stem from its disproportionate coverage in the news and on social media platforms (10, 11). Secondly, politicians believe that personal attacks are a path to successful fundraising (12) and political triumph (13), voters report disliking personal attacks (14, 15) and evidence for its efficacy is mixed (16–19). Thirdly, there is a notion that legislators can effectively balance policy advocacy with partisan attacks (20), and use conflict to parlay policy victories (21). Lastly, a popular narrative suggests that legislators adopt a predominantly negative tone during electoral campaigns contrasting with a more policy-centric approach outside of elections, indicating a strategic shift in messaging depending on the political context (15).

In this paper, we introduce a massive dataset of elite rhetoric, a novel method of analysis, and a new typology of representation that allows us to identify policy advocates and conflict entrepreneurs—politicians who frequently insult and name-call political rivals. We then use these data to answer the core descriptive questions above, going beyond prior work that largely conceptualizes negativity through the identification of negatively valenced speech (22, 23).

In our typology, conflict entrepreneurs aren’t just uncivil; they employ “nasty rhetoric” (15), which attacks the integrity, morality, and intellect of fellow representatives. Conflict entrepreneurs, for example, represent their constituents by claiming “Joe Biden is Hitler” * and asserting that “Your boss [Trump] failed Pictionary when he couldn’t tell the difference between his ex-wife and a woman he assaulted in a dressing room. THE END!” †.

Contrary to expectations, we show that conflict entrepreneurship is not correlated with markers of political influence. We compiled a comprehensive dataset for all members of the 118th Congress, incorporating floor speeches from Congress,

Significance Statement

We introduce a novel dataset to assess the strategic use of derogatory speech towards political adversaries within American political discourse. We integrate 1.2 million political texts with detailed records of voting, legislative success, campaign contributions, and media coverage, facilitating an unprecedented exploration of the dynamics of personal attacks. Utilizing these data, we develop a typology for representation and demonstrate the constraints of employing conflict as a legislative strategy. Politicians who engage in personal attacks over policy-driven dialogue receive more media attention, but they do not pay consequences for their divisiveness. Conflict entrepreneurship is not associated with notable advantages/disadvantages in legislative influence, electoral success, or fundraising. Relying on personal attacks does not relate to success beyond gaining attention for oneself.

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Tweets/Posts from X (formerly Twitter), newsletters, and press releases. Using Large Language Models (LLMs), we identify when representatives are discussing policy and when they are making personal attacks. We then merged these data with campaign finance, vote history, member profiles, and legislative sponsorship. With this dataset, we scrutinize several assumptions regarding the effectiveness of prioritizing defamatory language over policy.

This paper unfolds as follows. First, we engage with theories of representational style and the theoretical motivations for becoming a conflict entrepreneur. Second, using our novel dataset, we identify which legislators are conflict entrepreneurs. Third, we document the related benefits and costs of conflict entrepreneurship. Finally, we consider broader implications for American democracy.

Personal attacks and representation

Some politicians perceive attacking other politicians as an effective strategy to succeed in electoral contests (24–27). There is broad agreement that negativity is growing in Congress, but there is disagreement on the consequences of this behavior.

Some scholars argue that negativity does not harm citizen trust in politics and efficacy (28), but negativity, and, in particular, personal insults, distracts from substantial debates over policies that are at the heart of healthy democratic discourse (29) and is related to cynicism and disenchantment with politics (30). Voters are particularly responsive to hostility and tend to internalize and recall negative attacks on other politicians more than positive political messages (1, 31).

The majority of early work on negativity in politics largely focused on relatively benign negativity toward rival candidates in electoral campaigns, such as attacks on the weaknesses of political rivals’ policy platforms, records in office, and personal flaws (32, 286). However, politicians have increasingly turned to deploying personal attacks toward fellow politicians (3, 4), and they do so outside the confines of a campaign. Negativity in campaigns is well-documented (28, 33), but considerably less attention has been devoted to what elected officials say after they enter office.

In the modern era, politicians question the personal integrity, intelligence, patriotism, and morality of other politicians throughout their time in office. These attacks come through official and unofficial channels: speeches on the campaign trail and campaign ads, contributions to public discussions and debates, and appearances in the media. This represents a substantial deviation from historical norms (28).

Attention over substance. Politicians employ nasty rhetoric, in part, because they believe it aids in winning elections (12). In the view of many members of Congress, stressing differences (policy or personal) with the other party communicates to voters that their party offers a different platform and a real alternative to the other party (34). However, evidence that negativity is electorally beneficial is scant (16) and most voters explicitly say dislike negative rhetoric (14).

However, negativity has a secondary benefit: it garners significant attention and can mobilize a politician’s base (13, 15). The media’s disproportionate focus on negative statements and personal insults toward political rivals (35) may reinforce

conflict entrepreneurs’ belief that insults, not policy, can more effectively advance their careers. Strategically, public attacks divert media attention from a candidate’s flaws and scandals and distract the public from critical scrutiny (36). Consequently, negative rhetoric remains an appealing strategy for politicians as long as voters do not actively penalize it.

Tests of this theory are limited. Scholars have relied on measures of sentiment and incivility that do not delineate between opposing policy in strong terms and personally attacking members of the other party. Setting that issue aside, the attention hypothesis has been primarily tested in the context of social media engagement (15, 37), particularly on Twitter, rather than potentially more impactful forms of media engagement like cable news. Due to data limitations, scholars have yet to test the critical prediction that such rhetoric garners attention without resulting in electoral punishment.

A new approach to measuring what legislators say

Not all negativity is detrimental to political discourse, both from a normative and empirical perspective. It can be informative to voters when politicians point out policy differences with their political rivals, including criticizing others’ policy proposals or records in office (38). By contrast, personal insults are destructive to political debates and likely only exacerbate partisan animosities among political elites and citizens alike.

With this in mind, we develop a measure of conflict entrepreneurship for all members of the 118th Congress based on a large text corpus of public statements from the universe of floor speeches, press releases, social media posts made on X (formerly Twitter), and newsletters sent by members of Congress. We retrieved the data daily from January 3rd, 2022, split the text into approximately two-sentence chunks, and used LLMs to classify the text, amounting to more than one million segments of text.[‡]

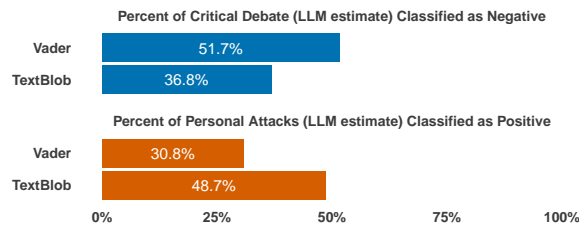
The LLM classified the text in our corpus across multiple dimensions (see Appendix A), three of which we explore in this paper: 1) personal attacks, 2) critical debate, and 3) policy discussion. We provide details in the Appendix, but at a high level, we tasked the model to evaluate statements to determine if they constitute a personal attack against individuals or political parties (Democrats or Republicans). Importantly, negative or derogatory language alone does not qualify as an attack; the text must specifically target the character, integrity, intelligence, morality, or patriotism of a person or political party. The prompt distinguishes between personal attacks and policy criticism, stating that criticism of policies or legislation, even if negative, does not qualify as a personal attack. Additionally, attacks on entities or individuals not fitting the specified categories (e.g., leaders of countries other than the United States, or foreign terrorist groups) are not considered personal attacks. Critical (negative) discussion of policy that does not contain a personal attack is classified as critical debate.

The resulting data was much larger, fine-grained, and accurate than what would be possible with manually coded approaches. For personal attacks, our model was 97.5% accurate, with precision of 91% and recall of 100%. The

[‡] We do not split X (formerly Twitter) posts, as this text is already in short chunks due to the character limit.

LLM outperformed highly trained professional annotators, whose accuracy was 92%, precision 56%, and recall 82% (see Appendix A for details).

A. Agreement Between Automated and LLM Approaches



B. LLM Personal Attacks and Negative Sentiment by Party

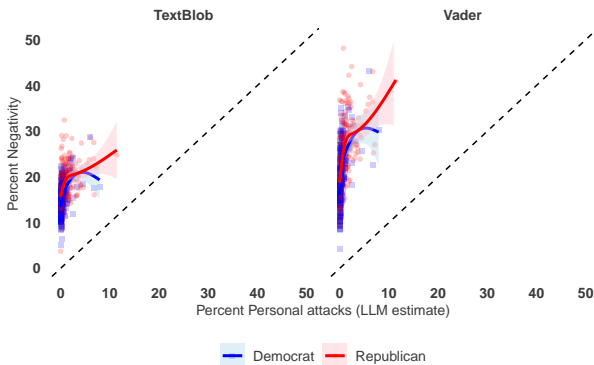


Fig. 1. Traditional sentiment models (Vader/TextBlob) overestimate the negativity of critical debate (A) and underestimate the negativity of personal attacks (B). Loess curves and 95% CIs are shown in B.

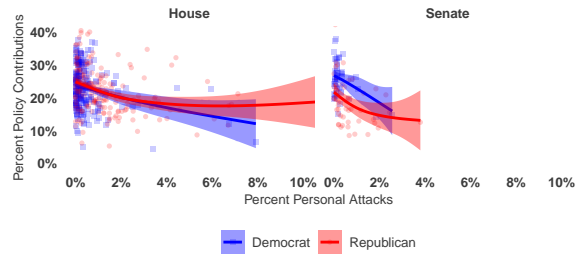
Previous research, which largely focuses on the overall valence of political speech, conflates policy negativity with personal insults. Our approach addresses this shortcoming by distinguishing insults from other forms of negativity in political speech. To evaluate this, we pit our LLM-based results against two of the most widely used sentiment classifiers: Vader (39) and TextBlob (40).

Figure 1A shows that simple sentiment-based approaches misclassified between 23.7% and 28.5% of respectful critical discussions of policy as negativity. Similarly, these simplistic approaches missed between 30.8% and 48.7% of personal attacks, instead labeling the text as positive. Relative to the LLM measure we propose, Figure 1B shows that sentiment-based models fail to accurately identify the rate at which legislators either engage in substantive policy disagreement or make personal attacks.

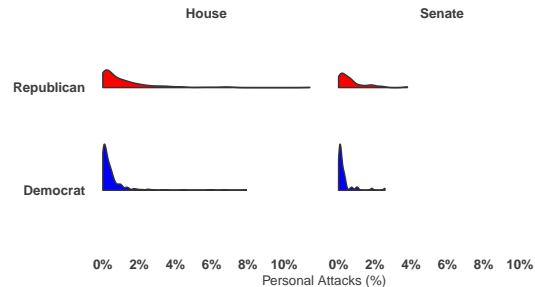
Patterns of conflict entrepreneurship in the 118th Congress

Who are conflict entrepreneurs? The more often legislators engage in conflict, the less likely they are to discuss substantive policy. Figure 2A shows that representatives do not simultaneously advocate for policy and make personal attacks. There is a trade-off: as personal attacks rise, policy discussion falls. This relationship holds for both parties and chambers. This pattern provides strong evidence that personal attacks come at the cost of critical debate.

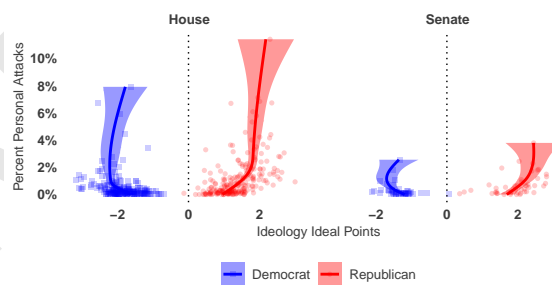
A. Relationship Between Policy Discussion and Personal Attacks



B. Distribution of Personal Attacks by Party and Chamber



C. Personal Attacks by Ideology Estimate (GGUM)



D. Personal Attacks and Critical Debate Over Time

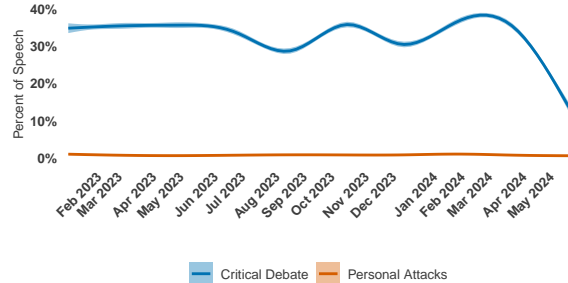


Fig. 2. The percentage of personal attacks increases as policy discussion decreases (A). Most legislators minimally deploy personal attacks, though there are outliers in both parties and chambers (B). Personal attacks increase as legislators become more ideologically extreme, though this relationship is less pronounced as ideology increases to the extremes (C). Loess curves and 95% CIs are shown in A and C.

How prevalent is conflict entrepreneurship in Congress? Figure 2B shows the distribution of attack scores by party and chamber. While conflict entrepreneurship is common in both parties, it is not a dominant strategy. The majority of federally elected officials either never make a personal attack (66; 12.2%) or do so in less than 1% of their communication (350; 64.8%). Media attention to conflict entrepreneurs is disproportionate.

Nevertheless, there are patterns in the data: a higher number of Republican members of Congress engage in conflict entrepreneurship in both the House and the Senate. However, there are a substantial number of Republican Representatives and Senators who refrain from attacking fellow politicians and concentrate on policy contributions. Overall, conflict entrepreneurship is more prevalent in the House than in the Senate.

More ideologically extreme legislators are more likely to engage in conflict entrepreneurship. Figure 2C shows that, in both chambers, more conservative Republicans engage in conflict entrepreneurship to higher degrees. Likewise, more liberal House Democrats tend to personally attack rather than make substantive policy contributions. In contrast, we find that conflict entrepreneurship and ideology are not related among Democratic senators.

Moreover, personal attacks are more than just a campaign dynamic: while the level of defamatory political speech tends to be consistently higher among Republican than Democratic legislators, attacks are a common phenomenon in both parties over time and do not ebb and flow with electoral cycles (Figure 2D). There is variation in the week-legislator mean of personal attacks, but it is substantively small with a mean of .9% (sd = .4%; range = [.3%, 2.7%]). Consistent with earlier results, there are only 10 observations where a legislator made only personal attacks during a week (reflecting 8 unique legislators), while every legislator has gone at least a week without making a personal attack.

In contrast, there is wider variation in the level of critical debate, but this is largest when Congress is not in session. There are 491 legislators who have gone at least a week without any critical debate (weekly mean = 32.8%; weekly sd = 6.6%; range = [5.3%, 74.6%]). Personal attacks appear to be a constant strategy for legislators.

Personal attacks occur both in formal and informal settings.

While most elected officials do not engage in conflict entrepreneurship on social media or in informal settings (mean occurrence of 1.3%), there is a meaningful set of outliers (58 members[§]) who disproportionately rely on this rhetoric and dedicate up to 14% of the social media presence to attacks (see Figure 3A). Attacks occur even less often in formal contexts: 0.4% and 0.3% of statements on the floor made by Republicans and Democrats, respectively, feature personal attacks. Similarly, it is mostly uncommon for newsletters and statements to contain defamatory language.

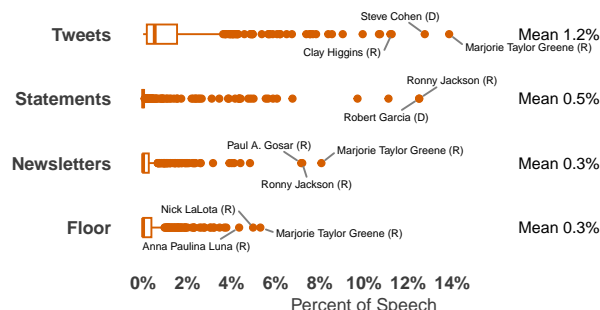
In comparison, most engage in a considerable amount of critical debate that spans both formal and informal channels (see Figure 3B)

Conflict entrepreneurs receive more attention, but are no less politically successful than substantive legislators.

Media Attention. The attention hypothesis suggests that legislators use nasty rhetoric not necessarily to win elections, but to garner media attention. Our data supports this hypothesis.

Conflict entrepreneurship is strongly linked to cable news media attention. Moreover, personal attacks are related to

A. Personal Attacks by Source



B. Critical Debate by Source

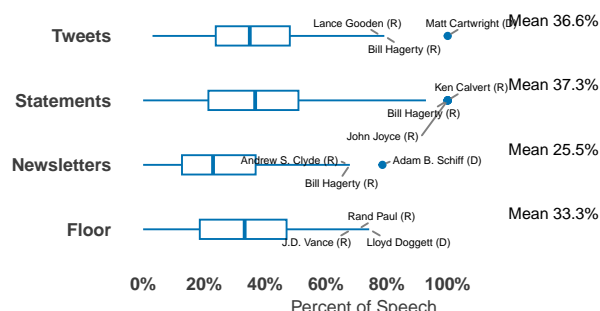


Fig. 3. These are box plots that show the prevalence of rhetoric by source. Most legislators do not make many personal attacks, but there are extreme outliers, with some attacking at more than 10 times the overall mean. Attacks are also 3 times more common on social media than other sources (A). In contrast, must legislators engage in ample critical policy debate (B). The box shows the IQR, the bold vertical line indicates the median, and the horizontal lines represent the largest value observed before 1.5 times the IQR plus the value of the third quartile. The points are outliers.

more media attention than critical debate, and are associated with much larger returns (a legislator with a ~5% share of personal attacks is associated with the level of media attention expected for a legislator with a ~60% share of critical debate). Figure 4A plots the level of derogatory language against the logged number of media mentions in 2023. For context, the top 11 most conflictual members of Congress get twice as much media attention as the 66 members who never make a personal attack. In both chambers, higher personal attack scores are strongly related to cable media mentions.

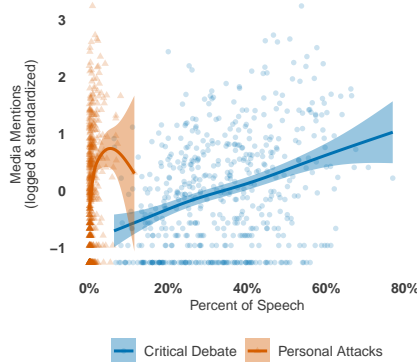
Analysis of social media reach replicates the cable news results. X posts (tweets) that make personal attacks are, on average, shared (retweeted) more often than policy posts (126.7 vs. 82.35). This is consistent with likes (590.0 for attacks and 330.6 for policy).

These patterns suggest that personal attacks on fellow politicians, rather than engaging in substantive policy debates, help members of Congress expeditiously generate public attention and build a national profile across multiple media channels.

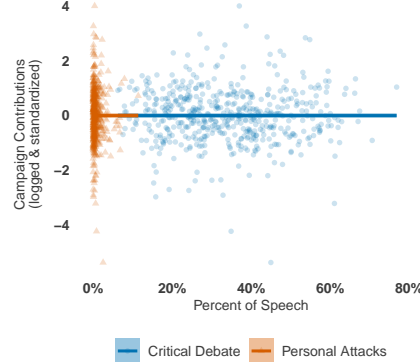
Fundraising. Research on negativity suggests that such language rallies a legislator's base (15). However, evidence regarding its impact on donations, which largely come from the base, is mixed (41, 42). The increased media attention documented in the previous section might also translate to a

[§]We classify observations in the dataset that lie above the upper bound calculated using the interquartile range (IQR) method as outliers.

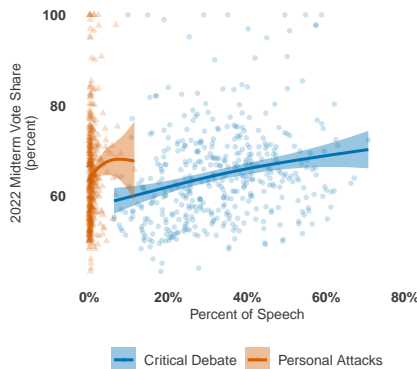
A. Mentions on Cable News



B. Campaign Contributions



C. Election Returns (2022)



D. Legislative Effectiveness

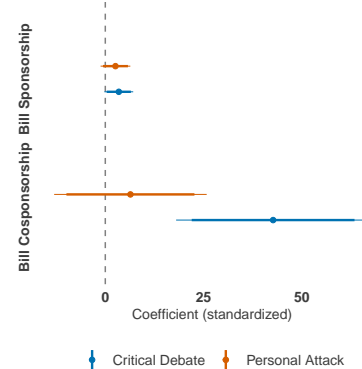


Fig. 4. Personal attacks are related to more media attention (a legislator with a ~5% share of personal attacks is associated with the level of media attention expected for a legislator with a ~60% share of critical debate) (A), are not related to campaign contributions (B), and are only weakly related to electoral returns (C). Loess curves and 95% CIs are shown in A-C. D shows standardized regression estimates with 90% and 95% CIs. Note that results are comparable when splitting by party (see Appendix C).

national base, affecting representation. Members of Congress who receive more donations from out-of-state tend to adopt the policy preferences of their national donor base instead of their state donor base (43).

There is, in fact, no associated bonus from focusing on critical policy debate and no cost for those who attack (4B). Legislators who personally attack fellow politicians raise neither more nor less money than more civil legislators. This pattern holds for in-state and out-of-state donations. Campaign contributions, it seems, are driven by other considerations.

Electoral performance. Conflict entrepreneurship is related to electoral margin (Figure 4C) in the 2022 Midterm elections. More conflictual and policy-focused legislators obtained more votes, but this masks the complexity of elections. Moreover, the majority of candidates did not engage meaningfully in attacks, with this group finishing with between 40% and nearly 100% of the two-party vote share.

This is a superficial relationship that might appeal to legislators, but controlling for pre-election district competitiveness eliminates this relationship.[¶] Overall, the results do not suggest a substantive reward for conflict entrepreneurship in elections.

Legislative leverage. Conflict entrepreneurs are less effective legislators on multiple dimensions.

First, they are less likely to serve on powerful committees, even accounting for tenure in Congress. While conflict-forward legislators are neither more nor less likely to serve as committee chairs or ranking members, they are less likely to be assigned to a prestige committee, even when accounting for years served in Congress. In the Senate, however, conflict entrepreneurs are as likely as their more civil counterparts to be assigned to a prestige committee (see Appendix D for full results).

Second, increased conflict entrepreneurship is not related to the introduction or co-sponsorship of legislation. Members are not able to use conflict to build support for legislation or deliver theorized policy victories (21).^{||} Those who engage in critical debate, however, are more likely to cosponsor legislation, suggesting there is no penalty for civil disagreement in building legislative networks.

Conclusion

Normatively, legislators who focus on policy and critical policy debate should be rewarded for this behavior, while those who focus on personal attacks to face sanction. Instead, we find that while attacks are related to media attention, neither attacks nor critical debate are related to differences in campaign support, and that there is a slight positive relationship between these behaviors and election outcomes. The lack of accountability for personal attacks over substantive debate presents a serious challenge to the democratic process.

[¶] We further divide districts into competitive, semi-competitive, and safe districts and find that personal attacks are not related to better performance in any of these competitiveness levels (see Figure D.1).

^{||} These results are also null for passing legislation, but the dearth of signed bills in the 118th Congress makes this analysis uninformative.

The media's focus on insults and personal attacks instead of reporting on policy debates provides incentives for legislators to engage in conflict entrepreneurship, even if it doesn't have a strong relationship with material outcomes like campaign support. This behavior allows legislators to build a national audience without investing in the effort required to advance in the legislative hierarchy in Congress or draft and promote legislation. In other words, our findings indicate that conflict entrepreneurship appeals to members of Congress under myopic criteria: building fame in front of a national audience without following the traditional path of building a strong legislative record to advance in party ranks. The dataset we present here is a first step toward future research that can achieve causal leverage on this question.

While we find evidence consistent with the attention hypothesis (15), but we challenge four widely-held assumptions about negative rhetoric:

Personal attacks, though rare compared to substantive debate, receive disproportionate social media engagement and media coverage, creating a distorted image of American politics and incentivizing bad behavior. Despite not being ubiquitous, such language remains constant, suggesting that campaigns are perpetual. Contrary to popular belief among political actors (12), conflict entrepreneurs are not more successful electorally than policy-minded legislators. Additionally, conflict entrepreneurs are far less likely to discuss policy, suggesting that such language comes at the cost of constructive debate.

Conflict entrepreneurs undermine democracy. While most voters dislike their tactics, they are likely unaware of their behavior. We need strong political parties (44) to sanction this behavior by denying these politicians influential positions. Media outlets must also cover these individuals responsibly, highlighting how anomalous and damaging their rhetoric is rather than focusing on political conflict as if it were a fight in an NHL game.

Materials and Methods

Policy contributions. In addition to constructing a personal attack measure for members of Congress, we classify references to policy

in their political statements. Specifically, we present the AI model with a prompt that requests the classification of all statements as policy contributions if the text includes discussions on policy, encompassing specific legislation or general discussions on topics such as healthcare, education, environment, foreign policy, the economy, defense spending, national security, etc. The prompt further provides an extensive list of policy areas, each with definitions, covering a wide range of subjects from agriculture and food to water resources development.

Media appearances. We use the written transcripts of major US cable TV channels (CNN, MSNBC, FoxNews) and count how often each legislator is mentioned on air. The number of mentions provides us with a measure of media visibility, that is, the degree to which media pays attention to legislators and, in particular, to conflict entrepreneurs.

Campaign contributions. We use data from the Federal Election Commission (FEC) to record the sum of donations and the number of donors for each member of Congress. We examine the relationship between raising donations and members of Congress' rhetoric, separately for in-state and out-of-state donations and donors. Lastly, we calculate the ratio of in-state to out-of-state donations and donors, which allows us to discern what type of legislator is more likely to have a national rather than a regional donor support base.

Election returns. We use data from the 2022 midterm elections to measure the most recent electoral performance for each member of Congress. We restrict this analysis to members of the House of Representatives only because all members of the House are on the same election cycle.

Ideology. We estimate members of Congress' ideological orientation using GGUM ideal point estimation (45). Based on each legislator's voting record in the 118th Congress, we implement an ideal point estimation approach that takes into account that more extreme legislators tend to reject moderate bills.

Committee rank and assignment. We collect data on members of Congress' committee ranks and assignments. These data allow us to evaluate whether conflict entrepreneurs are more or less likely to be assigned to serve as committee chairs or ranking members and whether they are assigned to committees with more policy impact. To account for the potential role of seniority in committee ranks and assignments, we implement linear probability models controlling for years served in Congress.

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