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COLLECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN CONGRESS:

UNDERSTANDING AND ASSESSING
HOUSE CAUCUS LEADERSHIP EFFORTS TO WIN PRESS COVERAGE,
1981 – 2010

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Caucus leaders in the House of Representatives are distinguished from other leaders by their roles as agents for the entire caucus. Therefore, they seek to cater to the needs of their members, especially the prospects for individual reelection and collectively maintaining or attaining majority status. The electoral priority relies, in large part, on building a strong party brand and that requires active leadership engagement as national messengers speaking on behalf of the entire congressional party.

Between 1981 and 2010, top leaders in the House dramatically expanded the time, resources, and personnel dedicated to promoting their collective partisan narratives in the national media. Simultaneously, they navigated dramatic internal and exogenous change, including the aftereffects of 1970s reforms, the emergence of unique, ambitious leadership personalities, increasing sophistication in messaging technology, the changing media landscape, and a sharp rise in partisanship. We know very little about how this transpired and under what conditions leaders were more or less successful in their quest

to generate coverage. This dissertation examines those questions while taking into account the current literature's tendency to ignore differences between majority and minority leaders, Democrats and Republicans, and caucus leaders and anyone else with a leadership title.

By employing qualitative data from nineteen interviews with former communications staff members for top House leaders, and content analysis generated from 3,096 articles in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, randomly selected from the thirty-year period, this dissertation finds that coverage of congressional leadership is largely driven by the power bias: reporters write about those who have the greatest ability to affect the final outcome in the House. The majority party, therefore, consistently retains this advantage.

Further, quantitative analysis that operationalizes "media coverage" in five different ways produced very mixed results, indicating that past scholarship that relied on just one measure of coverage (e.g., mentions of leaders) may obscure a more complicated story.

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my Ph.D. long before I considered it seriously. She is the finest storyteller I've ever known and a matriarch in the truest sense of the word. My understanding wife, partner, and best friend, Amy, has been a constant rock of stability for me and our three daughters. She has patiently withstood the pressures of my research schedule and remains my guiding light. I would never have made it this far without returning to her loving smile and warm embrace every day.

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CHAPTER 1

BEGINNINGS

By the opening of the 97th Congress in 1981, Tony Coelho, the brash, ambitious 39-year old representative of California's 15th district had already spent 13 years working as a congressional aide and two as a member. First elected to the seat vacated by his retiring boss, Rep. Bernie Sisk, in 1978, he was arguably the most sophisticated Congressman of his class. In just his second term, he was appointed head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), "a position that had not bestowed on such a junior member since it was given to a young Texas congressman named Lyndon B. Johnson in 1940."[1] [2]

The DCCC had served as the fundraising wing for the House Democrats, who were then in the middle of a 40-year reign as the majority party. Coelho understood that campaigns were costing more and more as modern communication techniques were utilized. These techniques included the aggressive use of polling, public relations, and national media outreach.

Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, who appointed Coelho to the DCCC chairmanship, saw something special in the young Californian and was just beginning to share his view of the new campaign situation. The speaker had, since ascending to the post in 1977, made strong moves towards a more "public speakership."[3] He had

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[1] David Hoffman, "Rep. Coelho: Democrats' Fund-Raiser Extraordinaire," *Washington Post*, August 26, 1982.
[2] Unless otherwise noted, all newspaper articles cited in these footnotes were accessed using the Lexis/Nexis Academic database.
[3] Douglas B. Harris, "House Majority Party Leaders' Uses of Public Opinion Information," *Congress and the Presidency* 32, no. 2 (Autumn 2005): 133. See also Barbara Sinclair, *Legislators, Leaders, and*

significantly ramped up his media appearances; the nightly news mentioned him 98 times in 1977, his first year in charge of the House. In contrast, Speaker Carl Albert was mentioned just 12 times in 1972 and Speaker Mike McCormack had 17 mentions in 1969.[4] Coelho was encouraged by O'Neill's willingness to make the party's case in public. But charged with maintaining the Democrats' majority in the House, he wanted to take the national messaging effort for the caucus to a whole new level. He set out to persuade O'Neill that Democratic leadership needed to invest in polling and other campaign tools to remain competitive in elections and united in the Congress. It would cost time, money, and other resources, but Coelho was convinced that in the era of modern campaigning, a coordinated, national message was absolutely necessary.

O'Neill was resistant at first. The white-haired, Boston Irish politician epitomized Richard Fenno's "home style."[5] Winning campaigns was about a member knowing the district, the people, and delivering good things from Washington. If there was any polling to be done, it was done at the start of each campaign, just to see who was in the district and what they cared about.[6] In Washington, members saw public opinion reflected in the number of phone calls and the amount of mail that came in on an issue.[7] Coelho could see that these rudimentary measurements were increasingly being

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Lawmaking: The U.S. House of Representatives in the Postreform Era, rev. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), Ch. 11.

[4] Timothy E. Cook, *Making Laws and Making News: Media Strategies in the U.S. House of Representatives* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1989), 192-98.

[5] Richard F. Fenno Jr., *Home Style: House Members In Their Districts* (1978; repr. New York: Pearson, 2002).

[6] Thomas P. O'Neill with Gary Hymel, *All Politics is Local and Other Rules of the Game* (Avon, MA: Adams Media Corp., 1994), xv.

[7] Hedrick Smith, "House Leaders See Uphill Fight on Tax Rise Bill", *New York Times*, August 18, 1982.

manipulated by national activist groups, such as the NRA (National Rifle Association), the Moral Majority, and pro-Reaganomics businesses.[8]

The Democratic election debacle of 1980 advanced O'Neill's readiness to accept Coelho's ideas. The speaker commissioned pollsters to discern lessons from the November results and gradually came to be convinced that a negative national tide, such as that which led to several Democratic losses the previous November, could best be offset by a national promotional campaign on behalf of the House Democrats. Such a campaign would require the top leaders in the House to serve as the public face and voice of the caucus.

Internal polling by Democratic leaders in the House, usually in coordination with the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC), began shaping overall messaging and, in turn, shaped legislative strategy. The populist response to the Reagan economic agenda, with the repetitive use of "fairness," was developed by polling consultants and then adopted by many House Democrats.[9] It was a significant use of modern campaign tools by legislative leaders.

With the adoption of polling as a device paid for and used by the Democratic leadership in the Congress, O'Neill and Coelho expanded the duties of the top House leadership. They, as leaders, now had a role in shaping national public opinion. This responsibility would require that, among other things, they raise more money for polling, media consultants, and communications staff, and that they, as the core leaders of their caucus, speak more publicly as the spokespersons for the entire caucus. Party leadership

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[8] Liberal groups tended to lag behind conservative organizations in this kind of mobilization, but soon realized the new reality and began to aggressively organize its own supporters, with a good example covered in Ethan Bronner's *Battle for Justice: How the Bork Nomination Shook America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989).

[9] Smith, 1988, 527.

was expanding beyond conditional party government, in which internal caucus unity was the primary condition for activity.[10] Now, caucus leaders were responding to multiple factors, including public opinion, which shaped both their strategic decisions in Washington and on the campaign trail. In effect, they were taking the opportunity to "affect *the condition* of conditional party government." (Emphasis in original text.)[11]

O'Neill concluded that he – as the top elected Democrat in Washington – had a singularly unique obligation to lead his party's charge against the Reagan platform, especially the president's economic plan, regardless of the polls.[12] His message was less about undermining the president's agenda through legislative tactics than about offering the public all the reasons why such an agenda was detrimental to the nation. The speaker believed that someone had to stand up for those who were left out of the new conservative program, and that he was that person. This was not merely an ego-driven conclusion, but a political one demanded by O'Neill's caucus reeling from the Great Communicator's effectiveness in mobilizing public opinion:

> "Reagan taught House Democrats that they needed collective media strategies, and they of necessity looked to their party leadership to take on that task. Now, working to get the Democratic message out and to shape debate to the benefit of the party's policy agenda and its image with the public are routine parts of the leadership's job."[13]

It was not going to be a quick process. A new Democratic message needed to "be assembled over a long period of time."[14] This required a different kind of House caucus

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[10] Conditional party government was first suggested by David. W. Rohde, *Parties and Leaders in the Post Reform House* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[11] Harris, 2005, 135.

[12] The history of positive relations between O'Neill and Reagan has received much attention (See Christopher Matthews, *Tip and the Gipper: When Politics Worked*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), but they remained forceful adversaries when it came to fundamental political debates.

[13] Barbara Sinclair, *Legislators, Leaders and Lawmaking: The U.S. House of Representatives in the Postreform Era*, rev. ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 295.

[14] Sinclair, rev. ed., 1998, 289.

leadership media operation, beyond anything seen before. O'Neill enlisted Chris

Matthews, a young, former journalist and speechwriter for President Jimmy Carter, as his

press secretary. Matthews, described as "a glib wordsmith and specialist in one-liners,"[15]

understood his boss's responsibility as a national spokesman for the party and largely

redefined his own staff position by messaging on behalf of his boss and thereby, for the

entire caucus. "Before Chris Matthews was Tip O'Neill's press secretary," explained one

Republican communications staffer who worked for GOP House leadership at the time,

"the concept that any press secretary on Capitol Hill would ever speak on behalf of

themselves as a representative of an elected leader was unheard of."[16] Another

Republican leadership aide explained: "When Chris Matthews was there, [he] made

dramatic changes in the O'Neill persona and how he presented himself to the media. Just

revolutionary. Not particularly extraordinarily creative stuff but just smart stuff he did.

Matthews was his own engine."[17]

Thus, by 1981, congressional leadership entered the modern era of political

marketing.

- The Reagan victory helped convince O'Neill to accept Coelho's pitch to focus
  on national polling.

- The national focus of polling helped bring about the emergence of Matthews
  as a new kind of national spokesman for a national legislative leader.

- All of these elements dramatically changed how representatives, the press,
  scholars, and the public came to understand what leaders do.

FROM HOME STYLE TO THE MACRO DYNAMIC

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[15] Alan Ehrenhalt. "Media, Power Shifts Dominate O'Neill's House." *CQ Weekly*. September 13, 1986.
[16] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.
[17] Republican staffer B, June 25, 2012.

O'Neill's shift towards a much more public speakership was also as response to congressional reforms that restructured the motivations for Democratic leadership. Throughout the 1970s, beginning with the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 and extending to the subcommittee bill of rights in 1973, the rules under which the Democrats in the majority conducted themselves changed dramatically. For example, regular committee meetings now had to be set and committee members could vote to add items to the agenda. Committee votes now had to be by roll call, thereby imposing more accountability on each member. Committee chairs were no longer solely determined by seniority and had to be elected by the entire majority caucus in a secret ballot. The net result was a weakening of the powerful committee chairs (or "barons," as they were sometimes called) without a new centralized force taking its place. In 1975, the Democratic majority strengthened the speaker, providing him with the authority to refer a bill to several committees simultaneously, to send different parts of a single bill to different committees, and to pick all majority party members of the powerful Rules Committee. These changes strengthened the power of the speaker and gave new emphasis to central leadership coordination. Thus, in this context, the role of core leadership in generating and promoting a centralized message became an expected part of the job. O'Neill's shift towards a much more public speakership made him a different kind of speaker than his predecessors because the speakership itself was different than those of his predecessors.

This change in leadership behavior moved slowly. Yet it still reflected a dramatic shift in how congressional leaders defined their jobs, and how their fellow caucus members defined the role of a leader.

As House caucus leaders undertook these new responsibilities, visits from pollsters became more common. As they explained national trends in the electorate, it only reinforced the need for a national congressional response, one that could best be coordinated by the top leadership. For example, pollster Louis Harris, addressing the Democratic caucus on the eve of the 1984 Reagan reelection landslide, showed how a national poll would be relevant to members concerned primarily with their own districts:

> "In analyzing the vote for the House, I am talking about all of your districts and none of them. I am well aware that each district is unique and different…. Yet there is a macro dynamic, a definable pattern to this election which you can ignore at your own peril."[18]

Partially in response to a newfound appreciation of the "macro dynamic," Democratic leadership in the House soon launched "message Tuesdays" in which leaders, members, and supportive interest groups coordinated their public comments on a specific theme for the day.

As time went on, and a younger generation of Democrats took up positions in the majority, the importance of media outreach to shape the party's image kept growing. Where the older generation members, like O'Neill, "were absolutely rooted in the districts they represent," explained Matthews, "….a lot of these new-breed Congressmen could represent any district. They're better on TV than they are in person."[19]

Following the 1986 election, the first post-O'Neill House majority leadership team included Jim Wright of Texas as speaker, Majority Leader Richard "Dick" Gephardt of Missouri and Coelho as whip. All three were attuned to the collective communications responsibilities that were incumbent upon them. Wright believed that he

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[18] Harris, 2005, 147-148.
[19] Esther B. Fein, "Rangel's Charm an Ally in Race for House Whip," *New York Times*, August 18, 1986.

didn't just have a role in responding to internal polls but an obligation to shape public opinion. In 1989, Gephardt convinced Pamela Harriman, one of the party's biggest benefactors, to finance the National Polling Project. The House needed not just polling data, suggested Gephardt, but its own polling and analysis capabilities so it would not have to negotiate with the DNC and the DSCC over the wording and order of questions or the timing of individual polls. The expansion in resources dedicated to developing a national message that could be disseminated to the public through press coverage would not stop over the next quarter century.

At the same time, a growing number of House Republicans, none of whom had ever served a day during which their party was in the majority, were increasingly spurred on by Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-GA) to use flamboyant daily messages to agitate against the entrenched Democratic majority. They took advantage of every opportunity to make national news by pushing their views on the floor of the House, including during special orders sessions at the end of the day when only a handful of people would be in the chamber.[20] The House minority had as much, if not more, incentive to coordinate its messaging as did the Democratic majority.[21] But the "permanent minority" psyche, along with the traditional leadership style of Minority Leader Bob Michel (R-IL), had largely limited the effective use of tactics that would exploit GOP unity in message to gain an electoral – and not just legislative – advantage.

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[20] "Special orders" was a period at the end of a day when the House was in session when members could freely address the chamber. The fact that virtually no one was in the seats mattered little to Gingrich and his allies because of C-SPAN coverage that had begun in March 1979. The minority party suddenly had a national audience.

[21] Charles O. Jones, "The Minority Party and Policy-Making in the House of Representatives," *American Political Science Review* 62, no. 2 (June 1968).

The subsequent GOP takeover in the House in 1994 was widely perceived as resulting from Gingrich and his allies promoting a national wave election through the use of the Contract with America, a 10-point agenda of campaign promises.[22] The new majority leaders received a great deal of attention for their strategic use of polling.[23] However, they were merely applying the same tactics that Democratic leaders in the House had been using for more than a decade.

Over the next 16 years, changes in the media landscape were dramatic. Cable television news expanded into partisan media outlets, such as Fox and MSNBC. The Internet launched "social media" as part of the national lexicon and allowed anyone with a cell phone to become a reporter. In a world in which congressional campaigns spent almost all of their money on media, garnering coverage in the press was the measurement used by House caucus leaders to show they were making a difference in the setup for the next election. As then-GOP Conference chair Rep. John Boehner explained: "Communications is where it's all at. It's not what you're doing but the perceptions that are so important."[24]

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[22] The Contract with America receives far more credit for the Republican takeover in 1994 than it would seem to deserve, based on polling at the time. Surveys throughout October 1994 consistently showed that 70% or more of voters had not even heard of the Contract. See George F. Bishop, *The Illusion of Public Opinion: Fact and Artifact in American Public Opinion Polls*, (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2005) for a nice summary of the public polling. Nonetheless, in interviews with press aides to House leaders, especially those who worked for Republican House leaders, it is clear that they felt strongly that the Contract effectively conveyed a very real and influential national message. This widely held perception of Washington insiders made the myth into the reality.

[23] Lawrence R. Jacobs, Eric D. Lawrence, Robert Y. Shapiro and Steen S. Smith, "Congressional Leadership of Public Opinion." *Political Science Quarterly* 113, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 21-41; John B. Bader, *Taking the Initiative: Leadership Agendas in Congress and the 'Contract with America'* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996); Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[24] Quoted in David Marannis and Michael Weisskopf, *Tell Newt to Shut Up: Pulitzer Prize-Winning Washington Post Journalists Reveal How Reality Gagged the Gingrich Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 142.

The sleepy company town of Washington, DC was increasingly exposed to the public in entirely new ways. The result was a seemingly endless push for House leaders to adapt to the changing world. And they did. Consider that in 1981, when O'Neill hired Matthews as his sole, full-time press aide, only a minority of representatives had someone in a similar position. By 2010, every member of Congress has a press aide, and Speaker Nancy Pelosi alone had nine people working on media outreach, including one assigned exclusively to handle social media.

THREE GOALS OF HOUSE CAUCUS LEADERSHIP

The transformation from a solitary Matthews spinning on behalf of O'Neill and the House Democrats to a press operation team of nine working for Pelosi forms one of the central storylines of this dissertation. Leaders in the House kept adapting to the new political and communications realities around them by expanding staff, time, and resources to deal with the media. For the most part, the growth in media engagement was driven by three general objectives for House leadership.

- The first was the desire to pass or influence legislation.[25] House leaders, on both sides of the aisle, believed that effective press coverage would help them mobilize public opinion towards their agenda. "Sometimes to pass a bill you have to change the attitude of the country," explained O'Neill in 1986.[26]

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[25] Harris, 2005; Tyler Johnson and Caitlin O'Grady, "Speakers and the Spotlight: Explaining Media Coverage of Leadership in the House of Representatives," *American Politics Research* 41, no. 3 (April 2013): 498-532, Originally published online 5 December 2012; Patrick Sellers, *Cycles of Spin: Strategic Communication in the U.S. Congress* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
[26] Ehrenhalt, 1986.

- The second was a desire to guide the House in its operations. In the case of the minority party, the objective was to influence those operations to their benefit. National messaging was one of the few ways House leaders, on either side of the aisle, could rally everyone within their respective caucuses. Through the press, leaders were able to speak on behalf of the caucus and carry a banner under which their members could march. When members received positive feedback from constituents about the leadership's messages, they were pleased. Likewise, when caucus members became very agitated with their leadership, a lack of effective communications by the leaders was cited as a primary reason.[27]

- The third, and arguably most important, objective for House leaders as they expanded their national communications capabilities was electoral success. Rationally, this was the primary goal for congressional leaders seeking to maintain or attain majority status in the House. Without the majority, it was much more difficult to achieve the other goals of passing legislation and influencing House operations. Leaders certainly used their press strategy to try to protect individual members, especially those in competitive districts who might have had to take tough, but necessary, votes. How to use the press to frame policy and political questions in Washington remains the challenge

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[27] Dan Balz and Ceci Connolly, "House Leadership Battle Mirrors Deeper Conflict; Lack of Unifying Themes, Chiefs Frustrates GOP," *Washington Post*, July 20, 1997.

for leaders who want to offer "political cover" to members "for disappointing their constituents."[28]

In a broader sense, House leaders understood that they had a collective responsibility when it came to messaging as well. If voters were using party images to make sense of politics, it was only logical for "parties [to] make heavy use of party images as they attempt to close the deal with the American electorate."[29] A favorable party reputation means a better chance for a representative winning re-election under the party label. It also enhances the chances of recruiting top-tier challengers to run in November. Congressional leaders, with obligations to elect fellow partisans to the House across the country, therefore engaged in a constant stream of promotion in the media in a national effort to shape the public's image of their respective party label.

During the period covered by this dissertation (1981 – 2010), coordinated messages from House leaders happened not just during elections but constantly, in an effort to shape the political debate in the country. Such messages were especially critical to the Minority since the era of competitive House control began in 1994. "My new role," explained the incoming Minority Whip Rep. David Bonior (MI) in 1995, "will not only be counting the votes by which we are going to lose. My role will be to emphasize the message which we are going to convey to the American people."[30] Coordinated messaging also had an ongoing benefit of assisting leaders' campaign fundraising and candidate recruitment efforts, two additional critical parts of the caucus leadership portfolio.

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[28] Adam Clymer, "The Nation: Congress and Clinton: A Handshake If Not a Kiss," *New York Times*, January 10, 1993.
[29] Mark D. Brewer, *Party Images in the American Electorate* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 79.
[30] Gabriel Kahn, "Bonior Overhauls His Whip Operation," *Roll Call*, January 16, 1995.

Electoral success moved beyond the House to the fight for the White House, especially in the years before 1994, when control of the House was not nearly as competitive. Aides to Gephardt in the early 1990s were less concerned about the continuation of Democratic control in the House – which they confidently assumed – than they were with electing a Democrat as president in 1992. Their role, from a national communications perspective, was to undermine the Republican presidency of George H.W. Bush. "There was nothing more important that we could help do than elect a Democratic president," explained one senior communications aide for the Democratic majority of the time. "That was, for many of us, the end goal."[31] Doing so, he added, would create the conditions to elect more Democrats to Congress and pass a solid Democratic agenda. Similarly, after Bill Clinton's ascendancy to the White House, Republican Majority Leader Tom DeLay explained why a coordinated message attacking the Democratic administration was so necessary: "What I've seen of this administration, you give them a black eye, they move. They change [position]. As long as we're kicking them in the shins, and giving them a black eye, we're doing ok."[32]

In the post-reform House, congressional leadership sought legislative success, an impact on House operations, and electoral victories. Success in each of these areas required that House caucus leaders play much more of an "outside" game involving the media and messaging efforts on a national level. The days of focusing almost exclusively on the "inside game" of closed door deal making and ignoring the national press, as Rayburn, Albert, and McCormack had done, were over. Setting the agenda no longer sufficed for House leaders. Now they had to comment frequently and effectively if they

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[31] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.
[32] Kenneth J. Cooper and Kevin Merida, "Republican Dilemma: To Defend the Past or Define the Future," *Washington Post*, February 28, 1993.

wanted to shape their party's image and thereby set the political landscape for the next election.

WHAT THIS DISSERTATION DOES

This dissertation attempts to do two things. It aims to explain the scope and context of House leaders' expansion of their communications outreach efforts over a thirty-year period (1981 to 2010) along with what those efforts entailed. In addition to using archival material, it relies on interviews with 19 individuals who served on the communications staffs of House leaders during that time. This dissertation also aims to assess how well House leaders were able to generate coverage and under what conditions they will be more or less effective; that is, it quantifies and examines the results of those efforts. The time, effort, and resources were there, but one of the key question that has yet to be answered is how well did House caucus leaders did. Such an assessment also allows one to judge how well the media does its job of covering Congress.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIELD

Party leaders in the House of Representatives remain in leadership if they have the support of their members. Given the premise that a member's primary goal is re-election,[33] a leader seeking to build support among fellow partisans in the House will work to enhance those members' electoral fortunes. Traditionally, scholars have noted that House leaders are focused on managing the party's legislative agenda, producing good policy, and providing opportunities for credit to be taken, or avoided when dealing with necessary, but unpopular, legislation. But these are only part of House party leadership responsibilities. This dissertation argues that such objectives are secondary to

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[33] David R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

maintaining or attaining majority control in the House. Without majority control, there is no agenda control. It is "the predominant goal for both congressional parties."[34] For this reason, House caucus leaders are expected to emphasize political campaign activities.

Setting the agenda can, of course, also lead to electoral success. However, this is but one of several ways that House caucus leaders pursue November victories, and it is limited in that it only applies to the majority party, thereby telling us little about what to expect from minority party leaders. Another way by which House leadership may pursue electoral success, regardless of which party is in power, is through aggressive and – more recently – coordinated fundraising for the party's congressional candidates. The money that is raised, however, is used almost exclusively during the biennial campaign season: roughly three to six months, every other year.

A steadier effort by congressional leadership to impact the electoral landscape can be seen in the promotion of national messages into the media. Strategic messaging, it has been said, is the link to build public support for a legislative agenda.[35] But congressional leaders are not just involved in setting the legislative agenda, but in "setting" the political landscape on behalf of their respective candidates running across the nation every two years.

The media's ability to frame the issues being debated, and prime the electorate on what issues are worthy of being debated, can affect the electoral chances of political candidates.[36] This impact has not been lost on Congressional leaders. They understand

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[34] Eric S. Heberlig and Bruce A. Larson, *Congressional Parties, Institutional Ambition, and the Financings of Majority Control* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 60.
[35] Sellers, 2010.
[36] Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 105; Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 5. While this dissertation culls data from articles in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, these scholars are writing about the effects of

the importance of strategic messaging – and so do their caucus members. Today, House

leaders believe that they are expected to be effective in presenting a public face and

message on behalf of the congressional party by their fellow partisans in the House. For

example, in addition to her role as a legislative leader and as a representative of San

Francisco, Speaker Nancy Pelosi explained, "I am the Democratic political leader in

terms of making sure we win this election… I travel the country constantly to do that."[37]

In a partisan environment, House members look to their leaders to provide "unifying

themes" and "unifying leadership" as a counterweight to other leaders across the aisle.[38]

This competitive pressure is even more pronounced if one's partisan opponents are in

charge of either the Senate and/or the White House, for those leaders are also striving to

secure coverage in the limited and shrinking media landscape.

The assumption, by both leaders and their caucuses, that press coverage has

political ramifications makes it rational for party leaders in the House to focus

considerable time, resources, and personnel to explain, defend, and otherwise promote

their partisan narratives in the national press. Indeed, from 1981 through 2010, that is

exactly what they did. This dissertation is an attempt to understand the context and

substance of this expansion, as well as assess the results of these efforts.

RESEARCH DESIGNED TO EXAMINE LEADERSHIP AND MEDIA BEHAVIOR

The study of the Congress-media relationship is not, in and of itself, new. There

are several shortcomings with the scholarship (to be elaborated below). Still, existing

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television news. However, I do not believe this is a problem for my research design because (a) it can be easily assumed that the same effects occur regardless of which type of media is used and (b) other scholars have found that television news producers take their cues from what is being covered in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* (Cook, 1989, 48).

[37] Tory Newmeyer, "Pelosi Bullish on the Future," *Roll Call*, July 28, 2008. http://www.rollcall.com/issues/54_13/-27051-1.html . Accessed May 5, 2015.

[38] Dan Balz and Ceci Connolly, "House Leadership Battle Mirrors Deeper Conflict; Lack of Unifying Themes, Chiefs Frustrates GOP," *Washington Post*, July 20, 1997. See also Sellers, 2010.

theory and literature provide a number of predictions about the Congress-media nexus. These predictions form the basis of this dissertation's hypotheses and fall into one of two categories: (1) House caucus leader behavior and (2) media behavior.

Based on a review of the literature, there are a number of expectations for <u>House caucus leader behavior</u>. First, they will actively engage in the "outside game" of media outreach in order to achieve a variety of individual and collective goals. They believe they are expected to do this by their members. It is part of their responsibility as leaders. Securing coverage "is really the imprint of power."[39] Furthermore, because House caucus leaders are convinced that press coverage makes a difference in electoral fights, they will consequently assess their work and make adjustments so that they can be more effective. By interviewing 19 former communications staffers for top House leaders, a body of qualitative data was generated that allows one to investigate whether these hypotheses are accurate, and how they might have changed over time, if at all. The people interviewed provide first-person accounts of how leadership messages were first developed and then disseminated. They discuss measures of assessment that were used to gauge the effectiveness of their efforts. They also speak to the self-perceptions of their bosses when it came to media outreach, and to the challenges of competing for limited coverage space in the press with the other party in the House of Representatives and with other Washington power centers, particularly the White House.

The current scholarship also provides the basis for a number of expectations related to how the media covered House caucus leaders. This dissertation examines press coverage first by examining the differences between majority and minority status, and

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[39] Robert Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (December 1993): 51-58.

then looks at 11 independent variables, or conditions, that might impact the quantity and quality of the coverage.   These 11 variables fall under five categories, including **Time** (specific year; election year), **Status** (margin between the Majority and Minority; isolation among other Washington power centers), **Party** (Democrat/Republican), **Issue** (economy; foreign affairs; scandal), and **National Dynamics** (presidential approval; change in GDP growth; national unemployment rate).   Quantitative data is generated from 3,096 news articles that ran in either the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* between 1981 and 2010.   About 50 articles were randomly selected from each newspaper each year.   The impact of the 11 independent variables was measured against five different types of dependent variables, each of which can be seen as a way to assess "coverage."

In sum, the topic of the Congress-media relationship has been widely studied by political scientists.   While it is often incomplete, the existing scholarship still provides a number of different predictions for how House caucus leaders behave when promoting their messages in the media, and how the media behaves in covering House caucus leaders.   This dissertation uses new qualitative data to test the former and new quantitative data to test the latter.

(1) If party image affects electoral outcomes, then it is important to understand how leaders shape that image.[40]

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[40] This section builds on the work of Sellers, 2010. His research design is quite different than mine in that Sellers focuses on the Senate majority, looking at how party leaders tried to build popular support during

The pictures in our heads, as Walter Lippmann so memorably described it, allow citizens to grasp and organize large and complicated amounts of information.[41] "Conventional wisdom" within political science is that voters continue to use short-cuts to make their best informed decisions on voting.[42] The party label remains one of the most persistent of these heuristics.[43] It provides "salient information or signposts to attentive interests, campaign contributors, and a politically active electorate."[44] Therefore, those who are interested in a particular party's electoral outcomes should be interested in the public image of that party. House caucus leaders fall into this category, and indeed, scholars have found that party images become embedded in the public's mind because of the activities of party leaders.[45]

House caucus leaders can seek to shape their party's image through a variety of ways, including agenda setting, issue ownership, and public relations. Under the public relations heading, there has been much focus on the millions of dollars in media purchases expended during the bi-annual campaign season, though such efforts are

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four distinct legislative debates occurring over seven months in 1997 and seven months in 2003. Nonetheless, I share some of the theoretical reasons why he believed his work was important.

[41] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (1922; repr. New York: Free Press, 1965): 3.

[42] Richard R. Lau and David P. Redlawsk. "Advantages and Disadvantages of Cognitive Heuristics in Political Decision Making," *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 4 (October 2001): 951-71. Though the authors find that the use of the party label is significant, they also conclude that it is more helpful to sophisticated voters and actually leads to the "wrong" voting decision by less sophisticated voters. This distinction would not seem to be a major concern for House caucus leaders. From their perspective, as those who are concerned with, and partially responsible for, their party's image in the electorate, the high information voters are more important because they are, statistically speaking, more likely to vote and more likely to have an influence on how others vote.

[43] Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957); Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: Wiley, 1960); E. E. Schattsschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (1960; repr. New York: Thompson Learning, 1975).

[44] Gary Lee Malecha and Daniel J. Reagan, *The Public Congress: Congressional Deliberation in a New Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2012): 69.

[45] Jonathan Woon and Jeremy C. Pope, "Made in Congress? Testing the Electoral Implications of Party Ideological Brand Names," *Journal of Politics* 70, no. 3 (July 2008): 823-836; Brewer, 2009.

almost always limited to about six months every other year.[46] A more consistent

leadership activity to shape the party's image, under the public relations heading, is the

pursuit of press coverage. Elite opinions help drive mass public opinion and these elite

opinions are formulated in, and disseminated through, the media. Therefore, House

caucus leaders, seeking to shape the political landscape to improve their chances of

achieving their goals, have invested significant time, effort, and resources into developing

messages and then pushing them out into media outlets.

These efforts have grown significantly over the thirty-year period covered in this

dissertation, from 1981 through 2010. Such an exercise is, today, not only routine but a

critical part of what leaders believe is part of their job and what their caucus members

expect them to do. With so much effort being put into a national messaging, and so much

at stake with its success or failure, it is important to understand how leaders develop their

messages, how they disseminate them, how they assess them, how they perceive their

own responsibilities in this process, and how well the media adjust to others who are

attempting to do the same thing, both on the same side of the aisle and across it.

(2) If democracy requires an informed citizenry, we need to understand how
well media covers both parties in Congress.

A fundamental principle of democratic government is that the voters make the

final decisions on who is to represent them. This can best be done if citizens understand

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[46] Heberlig and Larson, 2013.

the issues before them and the views of the candidates seeking to serve in Congress.[47] In

American representative democracy, the media plays this educational role. Because

voting decisions, and therefore the direction of government, are made by those who rely –

consciously or unconsciously – on the media to inform them, it is important to understand

how well the media plays this role.

Previous assessments frequently argue that there are one or more types of bias

reflected in the media's coverage of Congress. The forms of bias range from partisan to

structural.[48] This dissertation considers "the power bias" – that media will provide more

coverage for those members of Congress who are most likely to have an impact on the

final outcome – as one of the most robust bias theories. The implications of such a bias

can be significant. Democracy relies on electoral competition, but if the coverage of the

Majority over the Minority is overwhelming, then electoral competition is reduced. In

theory, the party out of power in the House has little chance of changing its

circumstances because it has fewer opportunities to shape its party's image before the

public. Thus, the fact that we have seen switches in partisan control of the House in

recent years – 1994, 2006, and 2010 – is surprising, given the general inability of the

Minority to generate coverage. Such results run contrary to theoretical expectations, and

require further inquiry. Understanding the scope of the media's coverage of Congress is

important to understanding political representation in the House.

Representative government also relies on a full range of policy alternatives to be

considered. Voters cannot make proper decisions on issues unless they hear all sides. In

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[47] Lippmann, 1922, repr. 1965); James Druckman, "Media Matter: How Newspapers and Television News Cover Campaigns and Influence Voters," *Political Communication* 22 (2005): 463-81; Doris Graber, *Mass Media & American Politics* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2006).
[48] These potential biases will be outlined more fully in Chapter 3.

a two-party political system, this requires adequate media coverage of both congressional parties. The press, by not covering the Minority, may well be undermining this important element of a vibrant democracy. Furthermore, the lack of coverage for those out of power incentivizes minority leaders to ramp up their own partisanship, just to be noticed. Rep. Newt Gingrich, who would eventually become speaker of the House, was once asked whether his floor speeches were needlessly provocative. He responded: "Part of the reason I use strong language is because you will pick it up…. You convince your colleagues to cover me being calm, and I'll be calm."[49]

In sum, it is presumed that the members of the public cannot make proper decisions on issues and candidates if they don't have enough information delivered through the media. Only when we understand the scope of the media coverage can we see if the press is achieving a standard appropriate for an informed electorate. If it is not, then one can expect congressional leadership behavior to become even more strident and partisan and for the Congress as a whole to become even less effective. Assessment of media coverage is also necessary if there is to be any improvement in media coverage. By facing evidence of its own shortcomings, the fourth estate might respond differently moving forward.

This research is also important because it may affect future behavior of congressional leaders, in addition to editors and reporters. An informed citizenry relies on elite opinion. Therefore, elites, such as House caucus leaders, would want to adjust their own substantial efforts to maximize press coverage as they come to understand when those efforts are successful and when they are not. These leaders are also

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[49] Jessica Lee, "Ball is in Gingrich's court / House speaker walks and talks like a candidate," *USA Today*, June 7, 1995.

responding to the demands of their membership for national messaging services, and therefore need to demonstrate their effectiveness in that pursuit. Failure to do so could jeopardize their position within the caucus. The data provided here includes a longitudinal assessment of the coverage of House caucus leaders, measured in a variety of ways, under an array of conditions. Such assessments will indicate how well the media covers these critical, party image-shaping congressional leaders, and therefore, how likely voters are to hear the party's messages. With this data, House leaders will be able to adjust their media outreach strategies so as to be more effective in the future, and the media will be able to be held accountable for their coverage.

Finally, assessing media coverage allows congressional observers to better understand how public opinion might be shaped on the question of whether an upcoming election year will be a good one – or tough one – for either party. Such perceptions can have a significant impact on political representation. First, the unpopularity of Congress among the public is shaped by the media coverage of Congress.[50] When the media emphasizes negative stories about the House, it hurts the re-election prospects of all incumbents, especially those in the majority party. Therefore, it is important to examine the scope and dynamics of congressional media coverage to see whether or not it is informing the public in a way that would likely lead to anti-incumbent voter behavior. Second, coverage of Congress sends a signal to ambitious citizens who might be considering running for a House seat. They are most likely to do so when it is perceived that it will be a "good year" for their party. Likewise, long-time incumbents are more

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[50] Charles J. Finocchiaro, "An Institutional View of Congressional Elections: The Impact of Congressional Image on Seat Change in the House," *Political Research Quarterly* 56 (2003): 59-65; David R. Jones and Monika L. McDermott, *Americans, Congress, and Democratic Responsiveness: Public Evaluations of Congress and Electoral Consequences* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

likely to step aside rather than face a strong challenger in a tough political environment.
A "good year" is determined by both elite and mass public opinion, both of which are
shaped and reinforced by media coverage of Congress. Thus, the press not only can
impact the outcome of elections, but it can also impact who runs in the first place. Given
this kind of potential influence, it is important to assess the kind of coverage
congressional leaders have received in the past.

**(3) If House caucus leaders have expanded their efforts to promote messages
in the media, then we need to understand whether they are having success
in getting covered.**

House caucus leaders greatly expanded their press operations between 1981 and
2010. During this period, the speakership of Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill was a
transformational one. Such a description would appear incongruous with the perception
of him as an old-time Boston pol who rose to power under the traditional House, as run
by Rayburn, McCormack, and Albert. But, in fact, upon his assumption of the top spot in
the House, party leaders became far more prominent in the media.[51] Indeed, while press
attention should flow to core leaders in the House majority, simply because of their
position, "holding such a position is no guarantee of coverage."[52] In the pursuit of a
better electoral environment, House caucus leaders on both sides of the aisle needed to
aggressively pursue attention. Non-leaders began to do so as well. In 1980, there were
197 House members with press secretaries on their staffs. By 1986, that number had

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[51] Cook, 1989, 67.
[52] Cook, 1989, 7

risen to 243.[53] O'Neill himself showed the new emphasis on aggressive national

messaging when he allowed his young press aide, Chris Matthews, to recreate the

position in a way that went far beyond simply responding to media inquiries, as had

traditionally been done. Within a few years, Matthews was promoted to be head of

O'Neill's entire office.

Over time, as top caucus leaders became more public figures, their offices adapted

to provide the kind of support that was necessary to play this new role. They were now

national spokespersons and they needed the tools to do the job. Further, the caucus

members who elected them began to consider the importance of core leaders' abilities to

shape party's image – so critical to the party's collective electoral chances – during

internal leadership elections. While it was never the primary determination of who

became a leader, it became a significant consideration.

In addition to the attitudinal changes among members, there were also changes in

the media over the thirty years covered by this dissertation that contributed to the new

focus and increase in investments made by House caucus leaders. For example, while the

rise of Matthews in O'Neill's office hierarchy may well have been considered bizarre by

McCormack and Albert, Nancy Pelosi's assignment of full-time staff to exclusively

handle social media would probably be alien to O'Neill. But such developments were

part of how House caucus leaders navigated the emerging political and media terrain

between 1981 and 2010.

Even as Democratic and Republican House leaders adjusted their personal and

staff time, along with other resources, to accommodate the growing communications

obligation, it is striking that no clear and consistent way of measuring the results of their

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[53] Cook, 1989, 73.

efforts was ever developed. Objectives were fluid, changing depending on the given political landscape and the specific needs of a leader. Quantifiable assessments of communications effectiveness were almost always unsophisticated and cursory. The data provided by this dissertation is necessary because it offers an initial assessment that can be used by congressional leaders and scholars alike. Given the major expansion of time, effort, and resources devoted to national messaging by House caucus leaders, it is important to understand exactly what kind of coverage was generated.

(4) If the current literature is incomplete, then we need to produce new analyses using key variables that have been typically underappreciated by past scholars.

Finally, it is important to study the context, scope, and assessment of media outreach by House caucus leaders because the results of this work will fill in gaps that currently exist in the literature. Though a more thorough review of this material will be offered in the next chapter, there are four basic areas in which the current scholarship falls short.

- Existing studies of House leaders and the media are rarely done over a lengthy period. Instead, it is more typical to see studies that focus in on media coverage generated over a much smaller amount of time, often just a few months. It has been suggested that future research into the Congress-media relationship "should interview editors and reporters to learn why they make

the choices they do. Such interviews tend to be more productive, however,

when scholars already know what the patterns of coverage are."[54] [Emphasis

added.] This dissertation examined those patterns over a 30-year period,

thereby setting up a variety of future research involving the media decision-

making side.

- Current research also tends to fall short in the distinction between the Majority
  and Minority. As the Democratic Party ruled Washington for so many years
  in the modern era of political science, it is perhaps understandable that
  scholars rarely focused on the minority leadership (or the minority party in
  general) and how they went about doing their jobs. As has been noted:

"For a long time preceding the 1994 election, congressional politics were shaped
by a high degree of certainty about which party would be in the majority in the
next election. Since 1994, majority control has been constantly at issue, and
leaders of both parties have conditioned virtually every strategic decision on its
possible effect on the parties' collective electoral fortunes."[55]

Nonetheless, even after the 1994, 2006, and 2010 majority-switching elections for

the House, scholars still remained largely focused on what the Majority was doing, rather

than the Minority.[56] To address this issue, this dissertation seeks to distinguish between

majority and minority leaders in its analysis.

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[54] Douglas R. Arnold, *Congress, the Press, and Political Accountability* (New York: Russell Sage
Foundation, 2004), 261.
[55] David W. Rohde, "What a Difference 25 Years Makes: Changing Perspectives on Parties and Leaders in
the U.S. House." In *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Parties and Interest Groups*, eds. L.
Sandy Maisel and Jeffrey M. Berry (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 338.
[56] Barbara Sinclair, "Leading New Majorities," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 41, no. 1 (January 2008):
89-93.

- Congressional scholars also tend to talk about Republicans and Democrats in the majority interchangeably. To be sure, it was easy to ignore Republicans through January 1995. But even since that time, it is still hard to find much research that distinguishes between the two parties. The failure to do so makes the conclusions less robust about leadership activities. Each party has its own issues and internal dynamics that can lead to different results when they reach out to the press. It also matters which party is in charge of the House because it is the relative isolation of one party's leadership among the Washington, DC, power centers – the Senate and the White House – that can shape its coverage.[57] Furthermore, any effort to understand the connection between press coverage and House leaders is hard to do without considering the allegations of partisan bias, particularly among dominant national newspapers, such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, both of which are used in this dissertation.

- Finally, the current scholarship tends to lump all sorts of congressional leaders together, when, because of different agenda, responsibilities, and constituencies, committee leadership should be separate from caucus leadership. Previous scholars have defined the "core leaders" of Congress as the speaker, majority leader, and majority whip.[58] But even that definition is incomplete because (a) it only looks at the majority party and (b) it considers

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[57] Tim Groeling, *When Politicians Attack: Party Cohesion in the Media* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[58] Barbara Sinclair, *Majority Leadership in the U.S. House* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 2.

congressional parties and their leaders as primarily focused on passing

legislation rather than maintaining or attaining majority status. To address

this gap in the literature, this dissertation adapts that slightly to include the

speaker, majority leader, whip, and the campaign chair for the Majority, and

minority leader, whip, caucus chair, and campaign chair for the Minority. The

dataset that forms the basis of this dissertation's content analysis was

compiled using search terms that limited the articles to mentions of the

specific people serving in these roles or any collective reference to them, such

as "House leaders," "Democratic leaders in the House," etc.

OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

The following is an overview of each of the following chapters.

Chapter 2 – Theory and Literature Review. This dissertation falls squarely in

the intersection of political science theory and scholarship on party leadership, party

image, and media coverage of Congress. Considering members of Congress as rational

actors led to several conclusions about congressional behavior. First, members are most

interested in being reelected. Second, members want to accomplish something once they

are elected. Therefore, they are also concerned with being in the majority. Third, two

House leaders, as the agents of their caucuses, are likely to respond to the demands of

their members and therefore prioritize either maintaining or achieving majority status.

Winning elections that lead to majority status involves shaping a public image for

one's party. It is the image that voters use to help them make decisions. Therefore,

House caucus leaders use the media to help shape their own party's image. In the

aftermath of congressional reforms and growing ideological homogeneity among each

caucus in the House, leaders became stronger and had a much easier time serving as national spokespersons for their party than those of the previous generation.

The media, as the prism through which the House caucus leaders' messaging efforts are displayed, shapes the coverage itself. Therefore, this chapter reviews several different theories of potential media bias and concludes that the power bias – coverage follows those in the House who are more likely to affect the outcome of any action – is the one with the most explanatory power. The power bias shapes many of the hypotheses and analysis contained in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 – Hypotheses and Research Design. A review of the existing literature shows that it falls short in several areas that are important to understanding House caucus leadership efforts to shape their respective party's image through the press. One problem with the current scholarship is that studies are usually focused on relatively short, isolated periods of time. In addition, the literature also typically fails to distinguish between majority and minority leaders, between Republicans and Democrats, and between caucus leaders – with their collective responsibility for the entire caucus – and everyone else who might claim a leadership title. Nonetheless, existing political science theory and literature has much to predict about the relationship between the media and congressional leadership. This chapter outlines a variety of hypotheses so that qualitative and quantitative research can be used to test them. The qualitative research consists of 19 semi-structured interviews with former communications staffers for top House leaders over the thirty-year period covered by this dissertation. [59] The interviews include seven Democrats and 12 Republicans. The quantitative research uses a database of 3,096 news

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[59] Beth L. Leech, "Asking Questions: Techniques for Semistructured Interviews," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 35, no. 4 (December 2002): 665-668.

articles published in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Approximately 50 articles that mentioned a specific House leader or referred to them as a group were randomly selected from each newspaper for each of the 30 years. They were then coded using five different measurements of media coverage. The five dependent variables are examined against each of the 11 separate independent variables – the "conditions" under which one might expect some leaders to receive more or less coverage.

Chapters 4 to 9 – The Process of Leadership Communications. Chapter 4 provides a historical examination of the three-decade period, 1981 to 2010, and notes five significant developments that affected the congressional-media relationship: the aftereffects of the 1970s reforms, critical personalities and ambition, increasing sophistication in messaging, the changing media landscape, and the rise in partisanship. Chapters 5, 6, and 7, relying significantly on qualitative research provided by former communications staff for House caucus leadership, provide insights into the development of a leadership message, its dissemination to the media, and the assessment that was conducted by leadership of their efforts. The perceptions House leaders had about their own unique roles and obligations in the messaging effort are considered in Chapter 8. Finally, Chapter 9 examines the dynamics of a competitive environment in Washington, in which leaders of the various power centers – the House, the Senate, and the White House – compete with each other for coverage, even though they are sometimes fellow partisans.

Chapter 10 – Measuring the Effectiveness of House Caucus Leaders' Media Outreach. This chapter provides cross-tabulations and additional multivariate analysis between the five dependent variables and 11 different independent variables. I begin by

analyzing majority / minority status, which I view as a basic building block necessary for further analysis. The 11 independent variables are the "conditions" under which House leaders – now broken down by majority and minority status – might generate more or less press coverage. They include: year of the coverage; election year/non-election years; margin of seats held by the majority party over the minority party; relative "isolation" of the House majority/minority vis-à-vis fellow partisan control of the Senate, White House, or both; Democrat/Republican status; coverage of the economy; coverage of foreign affairs; coverage of a scandal; presidential approval rating; the change in growth in the GDP; and the unemployment rate.

Chapter 11 – Conclusions and Areas for Future Research. Drawing on the qualitative and quantitative analyses, this final chapter suggests several conclusions that will further scholars' understanding of how congressional leaders in the House of Representatives interact with the media and under what conditions they are most effective in getting covered. Such conclusions should both illuminate the understanding of congressional leadership behavior and provide new insights into the scope of media coverage of Congress. These new understandings may shape the behavior of the media in years to come and the strategies and tactics of future leaders in the House.

This chapter also reviews a number of different areas for future work that can expand on the material in this dissertation. In particular, a similar study could cover the years since 2010 and prior to 1981. The theories and questions used by this dissertation could also be applied to the United States Senate, to see where similar results might be generated. Furthermore, the dataset used here contains articles from the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. It would be interesting to look at other large national papers

such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*, as well as large regional papers such as the *Miami Herald*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. The conclusions reached in this dissertation would also be more far-reaching if the Associated Press coverage is included. Finally, future research should include nightly television news coverage, nightly cable coverage, and leading online news sites.

CHAPTER 2

THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

History

Over the years, scholars of congressional behavior have found that the locus of

power within the House of Representatives has veered back and forth, favoring

centralized leadership in one era and more diffuse committee leadership in another. As

an example, in 1885, Woodrow Wilson's *Congressional Government* described the

growth in the legislative branch and especially the increased power of committee chairs.[60]

Though the future president suggested that the public would be more receptive to just a

few leaders in Congress, the nature of the House of Representatives at the time was such

that some two dozen committee chairs were effectively in charge.

By the turn of the century, more formalized and stronger central leadership began

to develop. Rep. Joseph G. Cannon (R-IL), one of the most dominant House leaders in

the chamber's history, served as speaker from 1903 to 1911, longer than anyone had done

previously. Cannon's forceful imposition of discipline created resentment among House

members, who organized a "revolt" against him in 1910.[61] The weakening of Cannon's

centralized leadership structure empowered committee chairs once again. For more than

a half-century thereafter, it was the chairs of the House committees, not the caucus

leaders, who largely oversaw the development of committee agendas, determined what

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[60] Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government* (1885, repr., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

[61] Roger H. Davidson, Walter J. Oleszek and Frances E. Lee. *Congress and Its Members*. 12th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2010), 161. See also: Sarah A. Binder, *Minority Rights, Majority Rule: Partisanship and the Development of Congress* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Charles O. Jones, "Joseph G. Cannon and Howard W. Smith: An Essay on the Limits of Leadership in the House of Representatives," *Journal of Politics* 30, no. 3 (August 1968): 617-646.

bills would be heard and when hearings would be held. Chairs also had the ability to appoint all subcommittees. This power fostered a new set of resentments and concerns with House governance and efficiency. These concerns were also raised because of the growth in the power of the presidency. Following World War II, the House undertook its first steps towards improving its operations. However, it was not until the latter part of the 20th century that a series of congressional reforms shifted significant power away from the committee chairs to the caucus members.[62] In short order, the unwieldiness of such diffusion of power brought about additional reforms that gave new powers in the speaker, one of the "core leaders"[63] of the majority caucus.[64]

Leadership is an organizational necessity in the Congress. This is why caucus leaders[65] – those House leaders in the majority and the minority who represent the overall interests of their members – have always been in existence, regardless of whether they operate in an era of relative strength or weakness. Providing some leaders with more authority than others is the most rational response to the longstanding collective action dilemma faced by Congress.[66] The more diffuse the leadership, the greater the collective

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[62] These reforms were not just motivated by those who sought efficiency but by liberal members of the Democratic caucus who were frustrated by the power of conservative committee chairs blocking their favored legislation. See David W. Rohde, *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 17-28.

[63] Sinclair, *Majority Leadership*,1983, 2, defined the "core" party leaders in the House of Representatives as the speaker, majority leader and majority whip. For this dissertation, I expand this definition to include the chair of majority party's campaign committee. In addition, this dissertation examines the "core" House leaders for the minority party, including the minority leader, the minority whip, the minority caucus/conference chair and the chair of the minority party's campaign committee. More than any others within each caucus, these four members are responsible for the party's message.

[64] David W. Rohde, *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 25.

[65] In this dissertation, "caucus" is used to refer to members of one party or the other in the House of Representatives. In current parlance, House Republicans refer to themselves as a "conference" and not a "caucus." For the purposes of efficiency, I simply use "caucus" when speaking of both parties. However, when referring exclusively to the Republicans in the House, I will use "conference."

[66] Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action, Public Goods, and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

action problem for House members. Giving up individual self-interest is a challenge for the House member. However, by sacrificing self-interest in favor of following strong, formalized caucus leadership, each member is more likely to achieve more than he or she could have accomplished individually.[67] Members of Congress recognize that strong centralized leadership is required to manage the institution. In the absence of leadership, policy coordination would become much more difficult, if not impossible.

The collective action dilemma for self-interested members naturally afflicts legislative bodies. However, it takes on an additional dynamic in partisan-based legislatures. Thus, the collective action dilemma for self-interested legislators does not just complicate coordination in the pursuit of policy objectives, but also applies in the pursuit of majority status. Members of Congress are, of course, not elected as free agents but as representatives of their party. It is through the majority party that the House is organized. The perks of being in the majority are significant, enabling an elected member to have a greater influence over policy outcomes, providing more opportunity for advancement, and a variety of other advantages ranging from funding for staff to office space. Thus, mere reelection is incomplete as a rational goal for a member. A more robust goal for members of Congress is to attain or maintain majority status while being re-elected.

Some scholars[68] have highlighted the party leaders' prioritization of keeping one's majority status, sometimes described as "party maintenance."[69] Fundamentally, "there

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[67] Sinclair, rev. ed. 1998; Groeling 2010.

[68] Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins, *Legislative Leviathan: Party Government in the House* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Kathleen Bawn, "Congressional Party Leadership: Utilitarian versus Majoritarian Incentives," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (May 1998): 219-43.

[69] The use of the term "party maintenance" is limited in that it refers exclusively to the majority's objective. The minority party leadership clearly wants nothing to do with maintaining the status quo. This general

really is a common element in the reelection fates of incumbents of the same party

and….it is large enough to be worth doing something about it."[70] Such maintenance

requires a delicate balancing of interests, often neglecting the voices of the majority of

the caucus in favor of "intense minorities" within the caucus, in an effort to maximize the

party's overall number of seats to be won in the next election.[71] Though the party

maintenance literature tends to focus on the Majority, the same dynamics apply to

minority leaders of a House caucus as well. For both parties, central caucus leadership is

needed because sometimes utilitarian objectives may have to trump majoritarian ones.

Working as individuals, members of a House congressional caucus have less

ability to determine whether majority status is achieved. The benefits of being in the

majority can best be attained if caucus members relinquish some of their power and

prerogatives and turn it over to a centralized, caucus leadership, what Cox and

McCubbins describe as a "cartel."[72] By deferring powers and responsibilities to

congressional leaders of their party, members are able to maximize their chances of being

in the majority, and thereby access any number of benefits.

A new wave of congressional behavior scholarship began in the 1970s. It was

during this decade when political science started to consider members of Congress as

rational actors, in an effort to understand why members behave as they do. One of the

early works of this type was Richard Fenno's *Congressmen in Committees*.[73] Fenno

suggests that representatives rationally seek one or more of three goals: reelection, power

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disregard in the scholarship for the minority party in Congress is one of the glaring weaknesses in the
literature.
[70] Cox and McCubbins, 1993, 117.
[71] Bawn, 1998.
[72] Cox and McCubbins, 1993.
[73] Richard F. Fenno, Jr., *Congressmen in Committees*, (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1973).

within the chamber, and good public policy. The committee system was the forum

through which a member could pursue such goals. A year later, in 1974, David

Mayhew's work, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*,[74] argues that members of

Congress are likely to be single-minded seekers of reelection because electoral victory is

the prerequisite for pursuing any other goals.[75] As a result, representatives will be most

concerned with activities that would ensure reelection, including advertising, credit

claiming, and position taking.

Both Fenno's and Mayhew's consideration of self-interested members of

Congress meshed well with the contextual fact at the time that political parties were at

one of their weakest points in history. Congressional observers found that there was a

rise in independent-minded candidates who accepted party designation but generally

refused to be constrained by it.[76] As Sinclair noted, this development made sense when

one considered members of Congress as rational actors focused exclusively on their own

particular goals.[77] Defining these goals, however, brought forth a variety of suggestions

from political scientists.

Generally, congressional scholars divided members' objectives into two

categories. The first pertained to House governance and the second to elections. On the

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[74] Mayhew, 2nd ed., 2004.

[75] It is important to note that in the 1970s, the House was in the middle of a 40-year reign by a Democratic majority. Research rarely examined how similar or different the minority party might be in their organization and motivations. It also tended to ignore the possibility of a realistically competitive House, which emerged after 1994. Therefore, in the post-1994 world, Mayhew's contention that reelection is a prerequisite for other goals needs to be augmented to include maintaining or achieving majority status as well. As a goal, reelection to the House minority doesn't nearly have the same impact as being reelected to the majority.

[76] Morris P. Fiorina, *Congress: Keystone of the Washington Establishment*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Martin P. Wattenberg, *The Decline of American Political Parties, 1952 – 1980* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Hedrick Smith, *The Power Game: How Washington Works* (New York: Random House, 1988).

[77] Barbara Sinclair, "Purposive Behavior in the U.S. Congress: A Review Essay," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 8, No. 1 (February 1983): 117-131.

House governance side, goals for House members were said to include prime committee assignments[78] and policy outputs.[79] On the election side, Mayhew suggests the goal of personal reelection as the driving objective. Other scholars found additional electoral concerns that drove congressional behavior. Jacobson and Kernell put forth aggregate congressional election outcomes, or how well one's party does in the election – with the ultimate goal being either attaining or retaining majority status.[80] Some have suggested that caucus leaders were most concerned with their next election to attain or remain in leadership,[81] and still others see a member's electoral goals as part of a larger, party-wide effort, not limited to the House, and focused most often on the presidential election and support for one's candidate.

In sum, rational members of Congress face a two-part collective action dilemma. First, if they pursue legislation on their own, then they are less likely to achieve see it passed. Second, if they focus exclusively on their own reelection, they might win, but they are more likely to lose, or never ascend to, majority status in the House. Since the House is a partisan-based legislature, in which party caucuses organize the rules, majority status is a rational objective for any member, in addition to reelection. The solution to these collective action problems has been to create a centralized caucus leadership structure on behalf of each party in the House. It is through such leadership that the best

[78] Kenneth A. Shepsle, *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle: Democratic Committee Assignments in the Modern House*. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978).

[79] John A. Ferejohn, *Pork Barrel Politics: River and Harbors Legislation, 1947 – 1968* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974); R. Douglas Arnold. *Congress and the Bureaucracy: A Theory of Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).

[80] Gary C. Jacobson and Samuel Kernell. "Strategy and Choice in the 1982 Congressional Elections," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 15, no. 3 (Summer 1982): 423-430.

[81] Sellers, 2010; Johnson and O'Grady, 2012.

interests of the caucus as a whole may be served. House caucus leaders understand this and accept their utilitarian objectives[82] and – importantly for this dissertation – adapt their own communications, personally and organizationally, in pursuit of a meaningful impact on these goals[83]

Norms and Reforms

The House revolt against Speaker Cannon in 1910 precipitated a rise in the influence of committee chairmen. Under the speakership of Rep. Sam Rayburn (TX), who served as speaker from 1940 through 1947, 1949 to 1953, and then again from 1953 until his death in December 1961,[84] powerful House "barons" ruled their committees as personal fiefdoms, diminishing centralized leadership until new reforms came about in the mid-1970s.[85]

This period of committee chair dominance led to both formal and informal norms widely followed by representatives, a variety of unwritten routines that proscribed the actions of members and contributed to a power structure focused on committee chairs during this period leading up to reform. Asher[86] found that House members largely understood that committees – as opposed to the floor – were the places for legislating. He noted that personal relationships with other members were helpful and therefore encouraged. The expectation was that such relationships would lead to the trading of

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[82] Bawn, 1998.

[83] Douglas B. Harris, "The Rise of the Public Speakership," *Political Science Quarterly* 113, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 193-212.

[84] During the years his speakership was interrupted, the Republicans controlled Congress and Rayburn served as minority leader. United Press International. "Rayburn is Dead; Served 17 Years as House Speaker." *New York Times*. November 17, 1961. http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0106.html Accessed July 18, 2015.

[85] Rohde, 1991; Joseph Cooper and David W. Brady, "Institutional Context and Leadership Style: The House from Cannon to Rayburn." *American Political Science Review* 75, no. 2 (June 1981): 411-425.

[86] Herbert B. Asher, "The Learning of Legislative Norms," *American Political Science Review* 67, no. 2 (June 1973): 499 – 513.

votes, another informal norm. Decorum was required whenever House members were addressing each other publicly and no personal criticism of another member was allowed on the floor. Junior members were expected to learn from more senior representatives, with a special focus on the procedural rules of the House, and to build an expertise in a subject area. During this period – 1910 to the early 1970s – rational actors in Congress were expected to operate under these rules and expectations.

Then, this institutional context, consisting of both the formal and informal norms, began to change with several rounds of reforms in the House. These efforts were not without precedent.[87] Following World War II and the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Congress undertook a study of its operations aimed in modernizing its organization and restoring its ability to be a coequal branch of government with the now-dominant executive. The outcome was the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 that, among other things, dramatically reduced the number of committees in the Senate and the House. What the Act did not touch was the number of subcommittees – which then began to increase – and the entrenched seniority system that frequently dictated who was in charge of each committee.

Two decades later, in 1965, both houses of Congress created a new joint committee to examine its operations again. While concerns about the dominance of the executive branch drove this process, as had happened in the 1940s, many liberal reformers in the House were also seeking a chance to reduce the power of committee chairs, dominated by southern conservative members because of their seniority. The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 – the product of the joint review – brought about

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[87] Donald R. Wolfensberger, "A Brief History of Congressional Reform Efforts." A paper prepared for Bipartisan Policy Center, February 22, 2013. http://bipartisanpolicy.org/library/brief-history-congressional-reform-efforts/ Accessed August 20, 2015.

several changes, including the requirement that committees had to set regular meetings dates and permitting a majority of committee members to add items to the agenda. Reformers in the House organized themselves under the auspices of the Democratic Study Group (DSG), a subgroup of the caucus united by a liberal policy agenda, and determined to change congressional rules in order to achieve their legislative goals.[88] Subsequently, a House floor amendment to the Act eliminated the practice of avoiding a roll call vote in committees. Individual members would now have to go on record when voting on a legislative amendment in committee.

The seniority system was untouched by the 1970 reforms. Though such a move was discussed by reformers, it was not widely supported. Instead, members advocating for change wanted "an instrument of control, an 'up or down' vote on the senior Democratic member of each committee."[89] By 1973, the House adopted rules (often cited as "the subcommittee bill of rights") that forced committee chairs to be elected by the entire majority caucus in a secret ballot. Previously, seniority had been the iron-clad single criterion for selecting a committee chair. Upon their arrival in Washington, the "Watergate" class of 1974 – elected in the aftermath of the Nixon administration's Watergate scandal – utilized these new rule changes and joined incumbent reformers to depose three powerful, entrenched, conservative southerners from their committee chairmanships: Texans William R. Poage (Agriculture) and Wright Patman (Banking), and Rep. F. Edward Hebert of Louisiana (Armed Services).[90]

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[88] Rohde, 1991.
[89] Rep. Donald Fraser, cited in Burton D. Sheppard, *Rethinking Congressional Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1985), 40.
[90] Roger H. Davidson, "Congressional Leaders as Agents of Change" in *Understanding Congressional Leadership*, ed. Frank H. Mackaman (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1981), 144; Sinclair, 1983, 8.

The dominance of the committee barons was eroding, and alternative powerful forces, such as the subcommittee system and the caucus as a whole, were being strengthened. But the reformers' objective was not to make Congress dysfunctional, but rather more responsive to the will of a majority of its majority membership.[91] Without additional changes, the House would be exacerbating its inherent collective action problem. Taking power away from the (perceived) dictatorial committee chairs allowed members their own powerful, individual counter-balance; collectively, however, the result was more chaos than efficiency. To keep things running smoothly and thereby allow representatives a better chance to achieve their overall goals, members had to give up some of their newfound power.

In 1975, an effort was made to strengthen central caucus leadership by allowing the speaker three important new powers:

- to make multiple referrals; that is, to send bills to several committees, either one after the other, or at the same time,

- to break up proposed legislation and send different pieces to different committees,

- to appoint all majority party members of the powerful Rules Committee.[92]

On the surface, the net result of this series of reforms in the House of Representatives was that the core leadership, embodied in the speaker, was enhanced and the next tier of leadership – the committee chairs – was weakened. But at a deeper level,

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[91] Rohde, 1991, 26.
[92] Wolfensberger, 2013.

the consequences of these changes included encouraging and emboldening leaders who understood their responsibility for the success of the overall caucus. House operations became less about fiefdoms and more about central coordination, with each subsequent speaker asserting increasing prerogatives as the top leader.[93] The collective needs were emphasized over those of parochial jurisdictions. Looking at Congress from a rational choice perspective, therefore, required a refined distinction between the limited benefits and the general benefits that one was able to gain as a member.[94] Reforms created a new system under which House caucus leaders could respond to the individual needs of members, and also – in an entirely new way – to their collective needs as well.

Interestingly, the improvements in the power of the caucus leadership did not result in an immediate shift in the focus of congressional scholarship away from the committee structure. For much of the decade that followed the reforms, congressional committees were still viewed as the primary organizing structure in the House. Committee chairs might have seen their position eroded, but the power of subcommittee chairs was strengthened. Therefore, committees – as an organizing entity – were still powerful even if power was more diffuse within them. Congressional parties, and the role of caucus leaders in the House, were not considered important. Thus, Mayhew concluded:

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[93] Rohde, 1991.
[94] Norman J. Ornstein, Robert L. Peabody, and David W. Rohde, "The Changing Senate: From the 1950s to the 1970s," in Lawrence C. Dodd and Brice I. Oppenheimer, eds. *Congress Reconsidered*. (New York: Praeger, 1977).

"The fact is that no theoretical treatment of the United States Congress that posits parties as analytic units will go very far. So we are left with individual congressmen, with 535 men and women rather than two parties, as units to be examined in the discussion to come."[95]

Theories on Congressional Leadership

Former Senate Minority Leader Howard Baker suggested that congressional leadership is the "least understood of the political institutions."[96] But by the 1990s, after a decade of caucus leadership steadily increasing its public and internal influence, new theories of how Congress organizes itself began to emerge. Such theories, by definition, focused on the majority party, as it had the power to do the organizing.

One idea is that Congress operated as a conditional party government.[97] Under conditional party government (CPG), it was the homogeneity of policy preferences among the majority caucus that drives leadership power and activity. Members, who increasingly found themselves in alignment on issues, grant caucus leadership the ability to act on behalf of that unified agenda. Further, it suggests that as the differences between Democrats and Republicans in the House increase, the deference to caucus leadership will be enhanced. It is under this "conditional" circumstance of caucus policy alignment that leadership could be most aggressive in its work, including national messaging.

CPG assumes that members sought reelection, institutional power, and policy preferences, a la Fenno, but "because the two parties are more cohesive internally, and more different from each other, rank-and-file members of both parties are more willing to

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[95] Mayhew, 2nd ed., 2004, 27.

[96] Frank H. Mackaman, ed. *Understanding Congressional Leadership*, (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1981), v.

[97] Rohde, 1991; John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); John H. Aldrich and David W. Rohde, "The Transition to Republican Rule in the House: Implications for Theories of Congressional Politics," *Political Science Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Winter 1997/1998): 540-67.

trust their leaders with institutional authority," as opposed to going it alone.[98] Thus, an

emboldened caucus leadership had greater influence over the outcomes involving all the

things that members desired.

A second approach to understanding the role of party leadership in the House was

"pivotal voter" theory, developed by Krehbiel.[99] Like CPG, it too focuses on control

over the policy agenda, but it has more in common with the Mayhew view that House

leaders and parties in Congress are weak and therefore do not matter. Rather than

studying the power of party leadership to shape the agenda, Krehbiel's argument is that

leadership is driven by the need to find 218 votes – thereby providing a majority in the

435-member House – to pass anything. Ergo, the most important, or pivotal, member

was not the speaker but the 218th vote (or in some cases, the 288th vote when a 2/3

majority was needed to override a veto). Members are seen more as free agents, able to

vote for or against their own leadership's policy positions based on their own preferences.

Therefore, the influence of parties in Congress was less important than each member's

personal perspective. Krehbiel suggests that if a member of the majority party disagreed

with the leadership on a bill, the rational representative will work with the Minority and

other disaffected members of the Majority to form a winning coalition for the legislation.

Cox and McCubbins offer an alternative approach known as "cartel theory."[100]

They emphasize the relevance of parties in government and argue that majority House

leadership focuses on establishing a procedural cartel that takes full control of agenda-

setting power, a power than can be manifested negatively (preventing a bill from coming

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[98] Davidson, Oleszek, and Lee, 2010, 172.
[99] Keith Krehbiel, *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
[100] Cox and McCubbins, 1993.

to a vote) and positively (pursuing a specific legislative agenda). Negative agenda power (NAP) just requires top leaders to block legislation. Only when using the positive agenda power, referred to as PAP, does policy homogeneity matter.

Cartel theory emphasizes that for members of Congress, reelection means far less if one is not in the majority. The authors argue that a member's reelection is dependent, in a significant way, on the party's reputation – its "collective characteristics" and the party's reputation is dependent on its legislative accomplishments.[101] Therefore, majority caucus leadership does everything it can to dominate the legislative process, using its influence to build achievements and thereby create a positive party image. This is chiefly done by monopolizing control of the agenda; that is, what bills are considered, what they look like, when are they considered, and under what constraints (rules) they are considered by the House.

Like CPG, cartel theory is driven by the collective action problem facing the House majority: party reputation can only be enhanced if the majority comes together, and thus incentivizes members to temper their individual views for the sake of communal goals. But rather than focusing on the caucus-wide goal of policy making, as CPG stresses, Cox and McCubbins emphasize the equally important dynamic of goal of shaping "a party's record" – understood to be the "commonly accepted summary of the past actions, beliefs, and outcomes with which it is associated."[102] As the inputs used to generate this record – economic conditions, presidential job approval, legislative accomplishments, and other national events, etc. – are "no doubt mediated by press

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[101] Cox and McCubbins, 1993, 109.
[102] Cox and McCubbins, 1993, 110-111.

reactions," caucus leaders are motivated to aggressively pursue news coverage as a part of their efforts to unify and serve their members.[103]

Each of these approaches helps one to consider the role that House caucus leaders are expected to play on behalf of their members in the crucial area of media outreach – which is the focus of this dissertation; in particular, Cox and McCubbins's arguments that the party's image matters to those leaders as much as the legislative agenda. They note that the 1994 Republican revolution launched a much more competitive House era, quite unlike most of the latter half of the 20th century. As a result, House caucus leaders are now widely expected to participate in a perpetual campaign that involves partisan skirmishes over legislation and messaging in between elections. The importance, therefore, of core leadership in the House has been magnified and its power within Congress has become even more centralized in order to better serve caucus members.

Goals of House Caucus Leadership

Scholarship that focuses specifically on leadership in the House tends to come in two broad areas. The first involves the proper functioning of the institution itself (this is most true for studies of the majority party leadership), including assigning members to committees, negotiations with other power centers in the Senate and the White House, and strategies for legislative accomplishments, such as bill introductions, the placing of bills in committees, etc., all geared towards legislative passage or blockage.[104] The second area of scholarship involves House leadership activities geared towards elections,

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[103] Cox and McCubbins, 1993, 111.
[104] Frank H. Mackaman, ed., *Understanding Congressional Leadership* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1981); Barbara Sinclair, *Unorthodox Lawmaking: New Legislative Processes in the U.S. Congress,* 2d ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2005); and Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins, *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the U.S. House of Representatives*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

including their own leadership contests within the caucus, election in their home districts,

the race for the presidency, and bi-annual congressional elections.[105] [106]

If reelection, as Mayhew said, is the priority goal among all other objectives

because it is the precursor to everything else one would want to achieve, then the cartel

theorists offer the best starting point for examining House caucus leadership behavior.

Cox and McCubbins suggest that House majority leaders have three goals: party

maintenance of their majority status, reselection to their leadership position by a vote of

the caucus, and reelection in their individual House seat.[107] Their three goals, however,

are too limited and in need of revision for several reasons. First, they ignore the policy

agenda of the leadership. Arnold points out that through their understanding of the

electoral concerns of members, House caucus leaders enact strategies for a policy

agenda.[108] The two are inexorably linked. As one House press secretary noted: "Press

work is an extension of policy."[109] Second, successful challenges to sitting leaders are so

rare that it seems hardly worthy of listing it as a primary objective for those in positions

of power.[110] Finally, House caucus leaders usually come from some of the safest

districts, positions of comfort that afford them the time to handle all of the other tasks

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[105] Robert L. Peabody, *Leadership in Congress: Stability, Succession, and Change* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976).

[106] Such a division is quite similar to the goals often suggested as being held by members of Congress. The similarity makes sense. As Sinclair, "Transformational Leader or Faithful Agent? Principal-Agent Theory and House Majority Party Leadership," Legislative Studies Quarterly 24, no. 3 (August 1999): 421-99, and others suggest, House caucus leaders are "agents" of their fellow partisan members, and therefore, the goals of the members *ipso facto* become the goals for the leaders.

[107] Cox and McCubbins, 1993.

[108] R. Douglas Arnold, *The Logic of Congressional Action* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

[109] Cook, 1989, vii.

[110] In open leadership contests, with no incumbent, there are certainly aggressive campaigns. In addition, some challenges to caucus leaders don't actually come to a vote. Nonetheless, during the period of this dissertation (1981–2010), there have been no successful "coups" of sitting leadership.

with which they are charged.[111] For House leaders, reelection challenges are not nearly as big a concern as they are for many other members.[112]

I would propose a different set of House caucus leadership goals. To begin, I suggest that all central House leadership's activities fall primarily within three categories: (1) elections, (2) operations (both within the caucuses and within the entire chamber), and (3) legislation. Significantly, for majority and minority leaders, the objectives are slightly different, a reflection of their status.

For the Majority, caucus leadership efforts are focused on:

Maintaining their majority. Leaders aren't leaders if they don't have members behind them. For the Majority, party maintenance is the critical first step before any other activity may be launched. Winning and expanding one's majority requires constant attention to candidate recruiting, fundraising, national and district-by-district polling, coordination of national independent expenditures (a task that has recently, in light of new rules and rulings governing campaign finance, taken on greater importance), and – critical to this dissertation – messaging.

Running the House of Representatives. The obligations of majority leadership include the operations of the House in its entirety. Most prominently, this includes designating committee and sub-committee assignments, establishing a calendar of voting sessions, ensuring that there is appropriate coverage in the chair on the House floor, and

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[111] An exception would be a case like that of Democratic Whip David Bonior (MI) who ended up with a gerrymandered district following the state's redistricting process, controlled by the Republican majority in the state legislature. Bonior's district was made much more Republican. He chose to leave the House in 2002.

[112] The shock surrounding Majority Leader Eric Cantor's loss in 2014, albeit in a primary election, demonstrates it is the exception, not the rule.

other legislative tasks. It also includes overseeing the "business" side of the House, including payroll, benefits, assignment of office space, allocation of supplies, etc.

Further, this focus includes all activities that tend to the internal needs of the majority caucus members, which can include anything from the mundane (e.g., listening, one-on-one, to the concerns of a member) to the elaborate (having the leader visit a member's district for an event). Catering to these varied needs is critical to effective leadership in the House.

Passing legislation. The majority party in the House has a legislative agenda, and leadership is relied upon to guide it through. While finding unity in this agenda has become easier with the increase in ideological homogeneity inside the caucus, developing legislation, responding to legislation passed by the Senate or initiatives from the White House, negotiating with various pockets of voters within one's caucus (and occasionally with the Minority), as well as the Senate and the White House, remain challenging parts of the leaders' ongoing obligations.

For the minority caucus leadership in the House, the same categories of activity exist, but the objectives are different.

Taking over the Majority. It is the primary objective for every Minority in the House to become the Majority. As Rep. Bob Walker (PA) noted, "You have to accept that fact that you are not capable of governing [from the minority], so the only reason you exist is to take over the majority."[113] Certainly, in the middle of 40 years of uninterrupted Democratic control (1955 – 1995), this goal seemed elusive, but that didn't make it less of a priority. The 1994 elections brought in a GOP majority and a modern competitive

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[113] Quoted in Ben Pershing, "10 Years Later; Lessons to be Learned from GOP's '94 takeover Republican Revolution Evidence that Change is Decade-Long Process," *Roll Call*, September 8, 2003.

era for House control; a state of affairs that continues today. As with the Majority, the implementation of this goal involves recruiting, fundraising, independent expenditure coordination, polling and messaging.

Influencing the House operations. Minority members in the House look to their leadership to advocate on their behalf when the Majority allocates resources, both legislatively and operationally. They charge their leaders with ensuring that the rights of their caucus are always protected. Furthermore, this leadership goal includes maintaining consensus within its own caucus, though that unity can be strong or weak depending on a variety of factors.[114] Minority leaders, even with less to give away, also focus on doing favors for their colleagues, as a way of making life without much power that much more tolerable.[115]

Influencing legislation. Given the chamber's rules, being a minority member in the House can be an extremely lonely position. Nonetheless, there are moments when its votes are needed and the minority leadership's ability to shape a bill and negotiate other benefits is enhanced. For example, the minority Republicans in the 1980s were far more powerful than their raw numbers would indicate, because they were able to join with renegade Democrats to push through President Ronald Reagan's major economic legislation.

For each of these three minority leadership objectives, I would suggest there is a **traditional** and **contrarian** application. Traditional politics prioritizes bargaining, negotiation and compromise, all of which are assumed to be needed for government to function. Thus, a traditional politics approach for the minority caucus leadership would

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[114] These factors can include the margin of seats between the majority and the minority, internal ideological homogeneity, and outreach from the other party that targets potential party switchers.
[115] Peabody, 1976.

include competing for open seats and challenging vulnerable majority party members in elections, negotiating for seats on committees and attempting to influence legislation through public argument, and backroom compromises.

Contrarian politics views the fundamentals of traditional politics – bargaining, negotiation and compromise – as parts of a flawed strategy. It is precisely because others have bargained, negotiated and compromised that our party remains in the minority. Therefore, the contrarian application of the House minority's three primary aims include aggressively and ceaselessly attacking the majority's members throughout the year to draw the strongest and most persuasive contrast in the public's eye at election time, working to prevent the House from operating smoothly, and obstructing the passage of majority-favored legislation, sometimes by refusing to negotiate on many key issues.

During the time period examined in this dissertation, the traditional view was represented best among minority House leadership by the rule of Rep. Bob Michel, the Illinois Republican who led his GOP conference from 1981 through 1995. The contrarian view was perhaps most clearly reflected by Rep. Newt Gingrich, Republican of Georgia, who ascended to the House minority leadership team in March 1989 when he was elected by his fellow partisans as the party's whip, the number two position behind Michel. The tensions between the two leaders – with two very different approaches to minority leadership – were palpable. It was a fight that the younger, more aggressive Gingrich would eventually win.

Table 2a summarizes the categories and goals as they apply to the majority and the minority leadership in the House.

Table 2a – House Leadership Objectives

	Category 1 Elections	Category 2 Operations	Category 3 Legislation
Majority's goal	Maintaining their majority	Running the House of Representatives smoothly	Passing legislation
Minority's goal	Becoming the Majority	Influencing the House operations	Affecting legislation
Minority – Traditional application	Compete for open seats and challenge vulnerable opponents	Negotiate with Majority for seats on committees, office space, etc.	Negotiate with Majority to shape legislation
Minority – Contrarian application	Attack Majority in a permanent campaign; draw stark distinction between Minority and the Majority, as a whole and not just individual members	Work to prevent the House from operating smoothly	Obstruct the passage of legislation favored by the Majority

Implications of House Leaders Prioritizing Elections

One premise of this dissertation is that for all caucus leaders, on either side of the aisle, the primary objective is to win seats. Attaining majority status means everything for it is the precondition that sets up all other leadership objectives. The ability to influence House operations and a legislative agenda stem from the electoral objective. Certainly not every member of Congress thinks about such matters, but that is precisely why there are caucus leaders – so that someone is focused on "the big picture."

To be sure, the prioritization of winning seats seems somewhat ironic given the historical trends that show well over 90% of House incumbents will typically win reelection. Why, one might ask, are elections so important to leaders if their outcomes are apparently predetermined? I would suggest there are two possible answers: First, it doesn't matter if challengers were successful; the point here is that it was expected, by both the regular caucus members, and therefore by the caucus leaders themselves, that House caucus leaders actively support these campaigns, regardless of the actual

competitiveness of the race. Second, since the switch to Republican control in 1994, the

House is far more competitive, with majority control switching two more times – 2006

and 2010. In this kind of fierce, zero-sum environment, elections have more at stake, and

that makes leadership efforts to protect existing and pursue additional seats even more

important. Most incumbents might win reelection in a given year, but recent history is

showing that majority party status is far from secure.

With the rational focus on an electoral goal, as opposed to a legislative one,

scholars have found it necessary to re-think all of the decisions and motivations made by

members of Congress, as well as those who wanted to join that relatively exclusive club.

Several observers conclude that the incumbency advantage in Congress is not only a

result of Fenno's "home style",[116] but also a result of the quality of challengers.[117] The

strongest challengers among potential candidates emerge when they can foresee a good

political climate for their party. Further, the public expectation of one side having a good

year may encourage incumbents from the opposite party to retire, rather than face a tough

race with a well-financed challenger. As Jacobson writes:

> "When national conditions favor a party, more of its ambitious careerists decide
> this is the year to go after a House seat. Promising candidates of the other party
> are more inclined to wait for a more propitious time…. The collective result of
> individual strategic decisions is that the party expected to have a good year fields
> a superior crop of well-financed challengers, while the other party fields more
> than the usual number of underfinanced amateurs."[118]

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[116] Fenno, 1978, repr. 2002.
[117] Gary C. Jacobson and Samuel Kernell, *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983); Gary W. Cox and Jonathan N. Katz, "Why Did the Incumbency Advantage in US House Elections Grow?" *American Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 2 (May 1996): 478-497.
[118] Gary C. Jacobson, "Strategic Politicians and the Dynamics of U.S. House Elections, 1946-86," *American Political Science Review* 83, no. 3 (September 1989): 773-793.

In determining whether it will be a good year for a party's candidates, Jacobson and Kernell focus primarily on variables such as presidential approval and economic conditions.[119] Such variables fluctuate over time and, as such, are subject to crucial interpretation by the public.

It is the ability to affect this public interpretation that makes media outreach by caucus leadership so important. A good political climate is defined by the electorate. Therefore, House leaders have a very strong, rational reason to shape the views of voters as much as possible to their favor. The shaping of public opinion can best be done through messaging in the press. Therefore, House caucus leaders, with their goal of achieving or maintaining majority status, must of necessity prioritize media relations.

Several congressional scholars incorporate this idea into their work. Sinclair suggests that since reelection is the primary goal of members, then reelection of caucus members is the primary goal of House caucus leaders, who she understood to be agents for those members who elected them.[120] The reelection drive includes both attention to individual races as well as the broader objective of either maintaining or achieving majority status. She argues that House leaders have the obligation to prioritize the party's reputation as part of the reelection effort and that that managing the party's reputation required aggressive messaging efforts. Sinclair built on Cox and McCubbins who argue that every member has a stake in their party's reputation because it affects "the vast majority of party members' reelection probabilities in the same way (either helping all or hurting all)."[121] The party label remains an effective and widely used

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[119] Jacobson and Kernell,1983.
[120] Sinclair, 2008.
[121] Cox and McCubbins,1993, 112.

heuristic for voters.[122] Therefore, members of the majority caucus "came to expect their

party leaders to participate effectively in national political discourse, to attempt to

influence the terms of the debate so as to further Democrats' immediate legislative goals,

and to protect, and enhance the party's image."[123] A similar conclusion is reached by

Brewer, who emphasizes the incentive members have to cater to their own party image,

while also chipping away at the image of their opponents.[124] Kimball takes a slightly

different approach and makes the case that the public responds to partisanship, as

opposed to being turned off by it.[125] Therefore, members seeking public support in

elections have an incentive to create partisan conflict because it mobilizes attentive

partisans, who are critical to future electoral success. In short, there is significant

scholarship that brings together Congress, the media, and the drive for electoral victories

by focusing on the overall party image.

The period 1981 to 2010 was marked by stronger political parties as House

leaders used new strategies to maintain or achieve majority status. The revitalized

"party-in-government"[126] was a result of both two major developments in the 1970s and

1980s. First, the House reforms of the mid-1970s democratized the Majority's operations

while also – and critically – strengthening the office of the speaker.[127] Stronger central

leadership meant stronger congressional parties. The second major change was the

gradual erosion of one-party dominance in southern states. Democrats began taking on

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[122] Downs, 1957; Schattsschneider, repr. 1975; Brewer, 2009.

[123] Sinclair, rev. ed. 1998, 261.

[124] Brewer, 2009.

[125] David C. Kimball, "Priming Partisan Evaluations of Congress," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (February 2005): 63-84.

[126] V.O. Key, Jr., *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups*, 5th ed. (New York: Thomas Crowell Publishing, 1964), 163-165.

[127] Barbara Sinclair, "The Emergence of Strong Leadership in the 1980s House of Representatives." *Journal of Politics*, 54, no. 3 (August 1992): 657-84.

the Republican label following the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan as president, and even more so following his sweeping reelection in 1984.[128] As southern conservative Democrats started running and winning as conservative Republicans, each congressional party began to drift towards becoming a more ideologically-unified entity, making it easier for caucus leaders to take on a more active role in marketing the party in the press.

Previously, the lack of homogeneity had contributed to weaker House caucus leadership when it came to playing the "outside game" of media relations. There were strong House leaders throughout history, but they were judged as strong because of their dominance of the "inside game" of legislating, and not the increasingly important area of representing one's party in the press. For some scholars, it was the structure of the House of Representatives, as a legislative body, that dictated the level of national messaging effort by each party's respective leaders. Downs assumes that winning elections was the top priority for each party in the House.[129] Therefore, in a two-party system, he predicts that both parties would converge towards the views of the median voter in the electorate, so as to maximize the potential national vote total. This dynamic was best seen when the Democrats and Republicans each contained a broader ideological spectrum; that is, when their caucus membership included either larger numbers of conservative Democrats from the South and moderate Republicans from the Northeast. The resulting focus on the median voter washed out whatever ideological distinctions there might have been, making it harder for caucus leaders to message in a way that motivated base voters. Over time, however, GOP moderates and conservative Democrats became smaller parts of

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[128] While party-switching occurred most frequently in the 1980s, Rohde (1991) pointed out that the seeds for this partisan realignment were probably set in motion decades earlier when the Democrats began voting for and then enforcing civil rights legislation and other progressive policies.
[129] Downs, 1957.

their respective party caucuses. The more homogeneous the caucus, the less theoretical support there was behind Downs's argument for limited media messaging by caucus leaders.

Cooper and Brady suggest that it is the nature of the party system, within the broader political framework, that shaped the power and style of House caucus leaders.[130] They saw it as rational that the majority caucus leadership, during a "weak party" era, made no significant effort to talk to the media. Such initiatives were more likely to unbalance the party's fragile coalition than to generate a groundswell of public opinion in their favor at election time.

However, with the partisan "re-sorting" that took place in the 1980s, the two congressional parties became more homogeneous internally and more ideologically distinct from each other. With issues increasingly separating Democrats from Republicans in Congress, convergence on the median voter is less likely to occur and it becomes much easier for House caucus leaders to speak to the press on behalf of their party without upsetting members as much.[131]

In the aftermath of congressional reforms and growing ideological homogeneity, stronger House leaders had newfound leverage over their caucuses and were ready to act on it.[132] As described earlier, Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill took on these new responsibilities at a level unheard of among previous speakers. Newcomers to leadership, such as Rep. Tony Coelho (D-CA) – serving first as DCCC chair and then as majority

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[130] Cooper and Brady,1981.
[131] Donald Wittman, "Platform Motivation: A Synthesis of Alternative Theories," *American Political Science Review* 77, no. 1 (March 1983): 142–57.
[132] Rohde, 1991.

whip – brought a more sophisticated understanding of modern campaigning, along with the energy and desire to utilize it throughout the year, not just at election time.

This emerging reality created a very different world for House leaders in which to operate, as compared to the era before O'Neill's speakership. Stronger, more homogeneous parties encouraged leadership to tend to the relationship between their respective party caucuses and their primary goal of maximizing seats won in congressional elections in new ways; namely, by being much more active in supporting the party's public image. It took a while for scholarship to catch up to this new dynamic. Consider this conclusion from Sinclair: "The leadership's ability to influence the reelection chances of its members, although not negligible, is usually marginal."[133] She was not alone in reflecting the widely accepted view of the time that congressional parties were weak, the caucuses were hamstrung by their heterogeneity, and members were far too independent to be seriously affected by leadership. The scholarly lag failed to account for how all three of these assumptions were changing to reflect the opposite: congressional parties were growing stronger, the caucuses were becoming more homogeneous, and members were recognizing that larger, national trends in public opinion could have as big as an impact as their own independent home style.

Acting on the Electoral Priority

For many years, political scientists focused on V.O. Key's division of political parties as party-in-government, party organization, and party-in-the-electorate as separate entities.[134] Breaking down parties this way discourages others from seeing the reality of interconnectedness between the categories. In this case, when examining the role of

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[133] Sinclair, 1983, 24.
[134] Morris P. Fiorina, "Parties and Partisanship: A 40-Year Retrospective," *Political Behavior* 24, no. 2 (June 2002): 93 – 115.

House caucus leaders in building up their party's image, party-in-government advocates should be very concerned with party-in-the-electorate, as the latter drives the former.

The concerns of House members and their caucus leadership fall well within the scholarship on voter behavior that emphasizes the importance of the party label among voters. Historically, understanding party-in-the-electorate was largely about party identification and loyalties among voters.[135] I am using a broader understanding of party-in-electorate here, so that it encompasses a party's brand – the image that the party has that is required to engender strong identification among the voters. Party images, in turn, are embedded in the public's consciousness because of the history of party leaders' actions.[136] [137] House caucus leaders have come to understand this reality: National trends in public opinion shape overall election results, and more specifically, that their party's image impacts voting behavior. Therefore, anyone taking responsibility for electing members of a party therefore needs to focus on ensuring that such an image is positive.[138]

Traditionally, House leaders prioritize the drive to maintain or achieve majority status by assisting the most electorally vulnerable incumbents within their caucus. Protect your weakest members and the caucus is that much closer to the ultimate goal. Such assistance could include campaign donations, allocation of staff, offering the

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[135] Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960.

[136] Brewer, 2009.

[137] Though I am outlining a theory that links party image, for each party, to the activities of House caucus leaders, it is worth noting that scholars have found that an unpopular Congress – as an institution – will hurt the election prospects of the majority party. See Samuel C. Patterson and James Q. Monson, "Reelecting the Republican Congress: Two More Years," in *Reelection 1996: How Americans Voted*, Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier and Herbert F. Weisberg, eds. (Chappaqua, NY: Chatham House, 1999); Jones and McDermott, 2003; Finnocchairo, 2003.

[138] There is no reason to limit this theory of leadership behavior to Congress. Other scholars find that the perception of this responsibility – by leaders and by the members who elect them – is very much evident in state legislatures. See Thomas H. Little, "Understanding Legislative Leadership Beyond the Chamber: The Members' Perspective," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* XX, no. 2 (May 1995): 269-89.

member key committee assignments, and prioritizing the member's favored legislation. However, even the most entrenched incumbents, ensconced in safe seats, look for additional support from caucus leaders during election season,[139] and leaders rarely have enough resources to sufficiently help their priority races, much less to aggressively support safe incumbents.

By augmenting direct help to candidates with an aggressive media campaign to build a positive party image, House leaders are able to act on the electoral priority while spreading the positive effects to everyone in the caucus. With the public's perception of the party so important to a member's goals of reelection and to achieving majority status, the importance of parties in Congress – and their leaders – was enhanced as well.

Since the 1980s, House leaders have acted on this responsibility to cultivate a positive party image within the electorate.[140] Obviously, their efforts exist within a competitive environment. Each party promotes its own version of what is happening in Washington, and their messages compete for limited, quality media coverage. Furthermore, messages that are not accepted as credible by the media or by the public need to be adjusted. For House leaders, ineffective messaging is almost as bad as no messaging. Therefore, rational congressional leaders will continually assess and revise their media outreach efforts, based on the changing issues of the day and the messaging of the opposite party, but also with the amount and tone of coverage they are receiving.

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[139] A district office chief-of-staff to a Representative from New Jersey who routinely won with overwhelming majorities once remarked to me that her boss's philosophy was, "Run scared or run unopposed."
[140] Sinclair, rev. ed., 1998.

Beginning in 1981, O'Neill emerged as a transitional speaker. He linked past House caucus leaders who shied away from national messaging efforts with a newer generation who embraced it. At the time, the ideological clash between congressional Democratic leadership and the Reagan White House was stark. As previously noted, O'Neill accepted his role as a national spokesman for the Democratic Party and made far more media appearances than any of his predecessors. He also began to institutionalize the House leadership as a vehicle for modern public relations and campaign resources that served the entire Democratic caucus. Indeed, O'Neill proved to be a bridge between two generations of House leaders. As Fiorina writes:

> "Congressional leaders in the 1960s were colorless legislative tacticians and managers, men like John McCormack and Carl Albert in the Democratic House and Mike Mansfield in the Democratic Senate. In the 1990s congressional leaders were men like Dick Gephardt and Newt Gingrich in the closely balanced House and Tom Daschle and Trent Lott in the nearly tied Senate—hard-edged partisans who led their troops into fierce battle and served as the congressional faces of the national parties in the media."[141]

Other scholars have examined the media outreach efforts by the speaker of the House.[142] They argued that such work was done because it is in the speaker's personal interest. However, it is important not to lose sight of the theoretical origins of all House caucus leaders. These positions were established precisely to discourage the leaders from thinking only of themselves. They are charged with thinking collectively; that is, to act on behalf of their entire partisan caucus. In the post-reform House, these central leaders began to approach the press differently, and subsequently, the press began to cover them

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[141] Fiorina, 2002, 101.
[142] Sellers, 2010; Johnson and O'Grady, 2012.

differently. Even by 1981, it was clear that – at least on the Democratic majority side –

the top caucus leaders were receiving more coverage than committee chairs.[143]

The newfound media attention being given to House caucus leaders brought about

some negative consequences as well. The public's views of the House leadership

themselves have emerged as a critical aspect of the overall party brand. Abetted by

today's computer technology, it is not uncommon to see a congressional campaign create

television advertisements in which the opposing candidate's face is morphed into the face

of an unpopular Congressional caucus leader. Such a tactic could hardly have been

conceived in the days of McCormack or Albert.

As House leaders focus more attention on the image of their party, they also face

external variables that can affect the impact of their efforts, including perceptions of the

party generally (as opposed to just the congressional party), the state of the economy, and

the relative popularity of other leaders of the same party, especially the president.

Halbert suggests that "strong centralized leadership in Congress can be fashioned only

when a receptive exogenous political climate exists."[144] Despite having only partial

control over the shaping of the overall image of the party, House caucus leaders still play

key roles in each party's larger effort. They take the role seriously and as Brewer notes,

it is a fierce competition that has gotten tougher over time.[145] Since the 1980s, media

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[143] Gary Lee Malecha and Daniel J. Reagan. "News Coverage of the PostReform House Majority-Party Leaders: An Expanding or a Shrinking Public Image?" *Congress & The Presidency* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 53-76. In the literature, committee chairs for the House majority are typically thrown in with caucus leaders under the catch-all phrase of "leadership." However, as will be noted later, these two groups can have very different motivations, audiences and responsibilities. Journalists themselves began to make that distinction, as evidenced by their overall coverage shifting to focus more on the top caucus leaders than on committee chairs.

[144] Leon Halpert, Review of *Understanding Congressional Leadership* in *American Political Science Review* 77, no.1 (March 1983): 211.

[145] Brewer, 2009.

coverage of party images has risen in frequency, largely because of increased partisanship among elites.

The Party Image Focus

There are three primary areas in which House caucus leaders promote their respective party's image to assist their members' electoral chances:

Agenda setting. Sinclair defines agenda setting as "singling out, *focusing attention on*, and attempting to build pressure toward action on a problem, issue, or policy proposal."[146] [Emphasis added.] This definition of agenda setting implies a relationship with the press, as that is how one "focuses attention" on a given topic. Since a party's collective reputation is dependent in large part on its influence over legislation,[147] then managing the agenda falls within the purview of the House majority leadership.   With the rarest of exceptions, they are the ones who dictate what gets to the floor for vote, when it comes to the floor, and the rules for the debate and possible amendments. Agenda control by the Majority sends a message to the public – through the media covering the House – that the party has a legislative plan for the country it is seeking to pass.

The Minority certainly tries to influence the agenda – for example, by forcing the Majority into potentially politically embarrassing votes – but the structure of the House rules, set by the Majority, denies them at almost every turn. Nonetheless, minority leaders will sometimes try to make the Majority's management of its agenda as difficult as possible by, for example, requiring constant votes to reconsider motions, and other time consuming, though usually futile, hoops for the Majority to jump through to pass

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[146] Sinclair, 1992, 661.
[147] Cox and McCubbins, 2005.

what it always knew it would pass. The more common way that House minority leaders

seek agenda influence is by messaging in the media. They try to promote their issues and

proposed alternatives, and bring public opinion pressure on the Majority.

Issue ownership. A second way that House caucus leaders promote their party's

image is through issue ownership.   Voters link certain parties with certain issues, and

thus reward or punish them at election time.[148] Over time, parties tend to "own" certain

subject areas. As a result, issue ownership is one of the most significant variables that

Congressional leaders consider in their efforts to have an effective media strategy on

behalf of their respective caucuses.

Several scholars view issue ownership as the glue that brings congressional

messaging efforts together in the pursuit of electoral victories.[149] Campbell et al. say it

most succinctly: "Voters identify parties with issues. If voters think about the issue, they

think about the party. Issue ownership is a matter of reputation."[150] Other scholars find

similar results and concluded that the party that owns the issues most salient to the voters

will find electoral success.[151] As Van den Bulck argues: "it would be in parties'

electoral interest to stick to their own issues: People simply do not expect a party to say

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[148] See Campbell, et al.,1960; Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, "Riding the Wave and Claiming Ownership Over Issues: The Joint Effects of Advertising and News Coverage of Campaigns," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 335-57; Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro. *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); John R. Petrocik, "Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study," *American Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 3 (August 1996): 825-50.

[149] Campbell et al., 1960; Petrocik, 1996.

[150] Cited in Stefan Walgrave, Jonas Lefevere, and Michiel Nuytemans, "Issue Ownership Stability and Change: How Political Parties Claim and Maintain Issues Through Media Appearances," *Political Communication*, 26 (2009): 153-172.

[151] Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994); Owen G. Abbe, Jay Goodliffe, Paul S. Herrnson, and Kelly D. Patterson, "Agenda Setting in Congressional Elections: The Impact of Issues and Campaigns on Voting Behavior," *Political Research Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (December 2003): 419-30.

something about an issue that it is not identified with, and even if the party did say

something, it most likely would not be considered credible."[152]

If their party owns the issue, House caucus leaders seek to prime the electorate by

talking to the press about that issue in the hope of generating enthusiasm among

supporters for their position.[153]   Under these circumstances, one would not expect any

rational deviance by party leaders away from the issues that they own, unless it is a non-

salient issue. Owning an issue that is *not* a priority with the electorate doesn't make

much of a difference.[154] Thus, over time, issue ownership should be stable.[155]

Walgrave, collaborating with others, concludes that media coverage allows for the

movement of public opinion.[156] Using a longitudinal time-series, Walgrave and De Swert

argue that reporters and editors make all the difference, especially for issue ownership in

the short term. "Mass media do not associate parties with issues haphazardly," they

write. "There is a clear tendency of media to give the stage to and to quote parties

considered as the owners."[157] Such coverage is part of a competitive environment in

which party leaders and other representatives seek to speak on issues they want to own.

If the press gives leaders adequate coverage, they can make a change. "It is through

media exposure – more concretely via party representatives talking about issues on TV,

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[152] Cited in Walgrave et al., 2009.

[153] Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Dietram A. Scheufele and David Tewksbury, "Framing, agenda setting, and priming: The evolution of three media effects models," *Journal of Communication* (online) 57 (2007): 9-20. http://www.unc.edu/~fbaum/teaching/articles/J-Communication-2007-1.pdf Accessed July 11, 2015.

[154] David F. Damore, "The dynamics of issue ownership in presidential campaigns," *Political Research Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (September 2004): 391–397.

[155] Page and Shapiro, 1992.

[156] Stefaan Walgrave and Knut DeSwert. "Where does issue ownership come from? From the party or from the media? Issue-party identifications in Belgium, 1991–2005," *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 37–67; Walgrave, et al., 2009.

[157] Walgrave and DeSwert, 2007, cited in Walgrave et al., 2009, 171.

radio, or in newspapers – that parties become connected to issues in the heads of media consumers."[158]

If the issue is owned by the other party, leaders can work to "trespass" on the topic, and perhaps change the ownership dynamic, at least temporarily.[159] Such efforts have been a systematic part of national campaigns for years.[160] Bill Clinton's effort in 1992 to re-brand the party's image on crime is but one high-profile example.[161] These non-owning party leaders often face a difficult task because the press tends to follow its own perceptions of issue ownership: those who own the issue are considered worthy of coverage on that issue.[162] Thus, because issue ownership relies so heavily on a media-generated construct of a party's image, House leaders engage the press to generate salience of the owned issues that are most likely to benefit their candidates at election time.

As they do this, caucus leaders will also react to new circumstances, especially negative ones.[163] For the party that "owns" the issue, there might be times when the issue itself is so unpopular that ownership hurts more than it helps. One example would be the major electoral losses suffered by the House Republicans in the 2006 election followed their strong identification with the increasingly unpopular war in Iraq. These are moments when media outreach efforts by caucus leadership are even more critical. It is through messaging that the unpopular owned issue becomes nuanced so as to mitigate

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[158] Walgrave, et al., 2009, 154.

[159] Damore, 2004; Lee Sigelman and Emmett H. Buell. "Avoidance or engagement? Issue convergence in U.S. presidential campaigns, 1960–2000," *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 4 (October 2004): 650–661.

[160] Sigelman and Buell, 2004.

[161] David B. Holian, "He's Stealing My Issues! Clinton's Crime Rhetoric and the Dynamics of Issue Ownership," *Political Behavior* 26, no. 2 (June 2004): 95-124.

[162] Walgrave and DeSwert, 2007.

[163] Fiorina, 2002.

the potential for negative electoral effects. Members of Congress cannot escape the party label, roll call vote, or leadership responsibility when things go bad, but they can try to frame the debate in a different way, and they expect their leadership to be the primary players in that effort.

Public relations. Finally, House caucus leaders attempt to influence party image through public relations, sometimes referenced in the literature as promotion. This was not always the case. Speaker Sam Rayburn (D-TX) despised talking to the press. "Damn the fellow who's always seeking publicity," he said.[164] He divided members into workhorses, those who played the "inside game" and helped pass legislation, and show horses, those who were more concerned with seeing their name in the paper. Perhaps because of this popular viewpoint, many scholars primarily saw congressional party leadership as a largely internal function.[165]

What became clear in the O'Neill era was that successful leadership on the "inside" required a strong and aggressive "outside" game as well. Leaders in the House accepted this new reality and adopted a variety of strategies to excel at it. The use of polling to guide party messaging, the willingness of leaders to go before the press to articulate their case on behalf of the entire caucus, and the expansion of communications staffs and resources are all developments that took place between 1981 and 2010. In subsequent chapters, this dissertation examines the promotional strategies employed by House caucus leaders, how they were implemented, and whether they were successful.

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[164] D. B. Hardeman and Donald C. Bacon, *Rayburn: A Biography* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1987), 5.
[165] Peabody, 1976; Robert L. Peabody, and Nelson W. Polsby. eds. *New Perspectives on the House of Representatives*, 4th ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

Fundamentally, each of these three areas of focus relies on the press to do its job in covering Congress. Agenda control and issue ownership efforts each begin when a leader or leaders take some kind of official action in Congress. This is reported to the electorate, and public opinion is affected. And by accepting the role of modern public relations as a core part of their leadership responsibilities, regardless of whether they were in the majority or the minority, House leaders attempt to achieve an objective – strengthening the party's image – through words as much as through official actions.

Media Coverage of Congress

Not everyone reads the newspaper or follows the news. Still, House leaders spend tremendous time and resources in pursuit of high quantity and high quality coverage by the top press outlets. It is clear that they act on the assumption that influencing the elite media will influence the electorate.

Most information on politics is disseminated by political elites.[166] Zaller elaborates that existing political knowledge determines the likelihood that a voter will get additional information through the media. Exposure to the media results in voters copying arguments presented by elite voices with which they share a perspective. Therefore, the best way to shape public opinion is to be covered in the elite press.[167] "What elites do and what voters do is connected; the behavior of each is conditioned on that of the other," notes Fiorina.[168] The result is that the more successful House leaders

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[166] Lippmann, 1922, repr. 1965; James A. Stimson, *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
[167] David C. Kimball, "Priming Partisan Evaluations of Congress," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (February 2005): 63-84.
[168] Fiorina, 2002, 111.

are in shaping public opinion, the more successful they will be in achieving their primary

goal: winning elections.

A reciprocal relationship exists between Congress and the media. Members seek

publicity to achieve certain goals, while the media seeks out newsworthy stories from

members. As political scientists have examined this broad subject, another widely

accepted finding emerges: size matters.[169] The presidency, with its singular point of

reference, will dominate media coverage in Washington, and the 100-member Senate will

see more coverage than the 435-member House. The House is simply too large and

unwieldy for the press to cover easily. Reporters are trying to tell a story about what

happened, or perhaps why it happened, and having to cover the opinions of several

hundred elected officials make that task much tougher. This is one reason why a limited

number of House caucus leaders have a much easier time being covered than an average

member.

Beyond size, however, the literature tends to examine one or more of several

questions:

- How does Congress try to shape media coverage?

- What influence do the media have on congressional lawmaking?

- How should the media cover Congress?

- How do the media cover Congress?

[169] Ross K. Baker, *House and Senate*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

The scope of the research, to be sure, often covers multiple areas, with a given article or book answering several of these questions. Nonetheless, these lines of inquiry can help delineate what has been said before and thereby place this dissertation within an appropriate scholarly context.

(1) How does Congress try to shape media coverage?

The continued growth of communications staff throughout Congress has ushered in renewed attention to what these people are doing. Unfortunately, the literature is often limited by examining a narrow time frame, using overly broad definitions of House leadership (and sometimes ignoring it altogether), and failing to distinguish between Republicans and Democrats and the Majority and Minority.[170] This dissertation, in an attempt to understand and assess the media outreach efforts of the top leaders in the House of Representatives, seeks to address each of these shortcomings.

Scholars often find members anticipating what will be covered, and then focusing on that. Kimball argues that the more partisan the political climate, the more likely high-knowledge supporters will be motivated.[171] Thus, press secretaries, reflecting the needs of their bosses, are incentivized to push partisan battles into the media. Sellers highlights how carefully members of Congress choose their words in order to be picked up by the news media.[172] He also emphasizes how the most effective messages are those that are coordinated, event-driven and repeated by the largest number of members, even though the media tends to cover just a handful of key representatives. Sellers does not

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[170] See Sellers, 2010; Arnold, 2004; Sinclair, 1998; Timothy E. Cook. "Press Secretaries and Media Strategies in the House of Representatives: Deciding Whom to Pursue." *American Journal of Political Science* 32, no. 4 (November 1988): 1047-69.
[171] Kimball, 2005.
[172] Sellers, 2010; Patrick Sellers, "Manipulating the Message in the U.S. Congress." *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 22-31.

completely ignore the role of the Minority – as many congressional scholars do – and concludes that both sides of the aisle work harder at delivering their message when the Minority receives coverage, because such media attention is an indication that the Minority is doing well. Thus, the congressional minority is encouraged to press its message and the Majority is forced to respond more aggressively.

The literature suggests that, by virtue of their position, the caucus leaders play a larger role in shaping press coverage than almost anyone else. They are covered and therefore have the ability to push a national message. Doing so provides assists in a number of leadership tasks, including the ability to set an agenda, increasing issue salience among fellow members along with the electorate, and then pushing the agenda forward.[173] Scholars continue to debate whether the passing of laws makes a positive difference in coverage[174] or has little to negative effect[175]

There have been a few works that choose to focus exclusively on caucus leaders. These studies offer insights that shape the research of this dissertation. Harris describes it as "the rise of the public speakership."[176] He augments the scholarship of Cook and tracks both House speaker mentions and appearances in the nightly news broadcasts and finds – as Cook does – a dramatic increase over time.[177] Harris also focuses on the growth in internal, organizational support for the speaker's new media obligations. Later on (2005), he argues that the House majority's investments in modern polling added to the overall leadership media operation, and ushered in a new era of national

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[173] Sellers, 2010.
[174] Sinclair, 2008.
[175] Johnson and O'Grady, 2012.
[176] Harris, 1998. "Public speakership" was originally coined by Sinclair, 1995, rev. ed. 1998.
[177] Cook, 1989.

messaging.[178] Like Harris, Johnson and O'Grady look at the speaker as an independent

operator, isolated from everyone else, who receives more coverage when levels of

partisanship are higher within the House.[179] Passing laws, in and of itself, they suggest,

does not drive coverage of the chamber's top member. Malecha and Reagan look at

television news coverage with a broader definition of House majority leaders – the

speaker, majority leader, and majority whip.[180] They also concluded that there had been

an increase in coverage of these individuals in the post-reform House. The newfound

attention allows House caucus leaders many more opportunities to shape media content.

(2) What is the power of the media in lawmaking?

Within the literature, several analyses focus on the relationship between press

coverage and legislative efforts.[181] Cook, one of the field's foremost authorities, suggests

that garnering press attention is integral to the passing of legislation.[182] While leaders in

the House had the most access to reporters, backbenchers were certainly able to become

authoritative sources as well. Therefore, Cook concludes, it was the reporters who

"negotiated power" on the Hill by deciding who and what to cover. Journalist decisions

make all the difference in terms of what was accomplished.

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[178] Harris, 2005.

[179] Johnson and O'Grady, 2012.

[180] Malecha and Reagan, 2004.

[181] Daniel Lipinski, *Congressional Communication: Content & Consequences*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), approaches this topic by linking legislative victories and electoral victories. Though representatives were often accused of "running against Congress" during election season, he suggests that House members are actively involved with credit taking for legislative accomplishments, so as to buttress their arguments for reelection. As his study was of official congressional mail, such as constituent letters and newsletters, overt campaign appeals were prohibited. While Lipinski did not focus on House caucus leaders, he did contribute to the literature by focusing on the messages that came unfiltered from members.

[182] Cook, 1989.

The media's perceived power in agenda setting is another widely explored area.[183] Such power is "the process by which problems become salient as political issues meriting the attention of the polity."[184] Scholars often find the data to be murky. Rarely does one journalist or reporting entity manipulate the agenda setting process.[185] A man-behind-the-curtain explanation will not do. Rather, it is more likely to be a "dance" between elected officials and the media, with the impact dependent on who – which member of Congress, which media outlet – was trying to lead at the time.[186] Under the right circumstances, different players have influence. But overall, "a shift in attention by either the media or Congress is often followed by a shift in attention by the other."[187] Regardless of whether they initiated the agenda item or not, House caucus leaders are able to seize these opportunities to "ride the wave" to accomplish key objectives.[188] Doing so requires that an issue remain widely covered by the press, which is the best way to mobilize public attention and concern. Generating that coverage will often necessitate official actions, such as congressional hearings, as well as promotional efforts.

Beyond setting the agenda, some scholars have suggested that there is an even stronger connection between the press and lawmaking. Reporters and editors will often fill the space between interest groups, political factions, and other policy players in ways that establish themselves as key players within the policy making process. It's a step

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[183] Larry M. Bartels, "Politicians and the Press: Who Leads, Who Follows?" Presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. San Francisco, CA. September 1996; Sellers, 2000.
[184] Fay Lomax Cook, Tom R. Tyler, Edward G. Goetz, Margaret T. Gordon, David Protess, Donna R. Leff and Harvey L. Molotch, "Media and Agenda Setting: Effects on the Public, Interest Group Leaders, Policy Makers, and Policy," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 16-35.
[185] Frank R. Baumgartner, Bryan D. Jones and Beth L. Leech, "Media Attention and Congressional Agendas" in *Do The Media Govern? Politicians, Voters, and Reporters in America*, Shanto Iyengar and Richard Reeves, eds. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997).
[186] Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time* (New York: Random House, 1979).
[187] Baumgartner, Jones, and Leech, 1997, 350.
[188] Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994.

beyond agenda setting, veering towards outright advocacy. "Although the news often acts to reinforce official power," writes Cook, "it also provides incentives to act in only particular ways."[189] Through agenda setting and persuasion, the media can set the tone and contours of the public debate, thereby suggesting the "favorability, even inevitability, to some sort of resolution of the newly publicized problem."[190] In essence, the press is such a significant player than any caucus leader is highly motivated to do everything possible to shape media coverage so that it is aligned with his or her own partisan goals.

Other scholars examine the allegation that press coverage of Congress breeds public cynicism and sharply negative views towards the institution.[191] The linkage is typically asserted because of two historical developments that seem to have mirrored each other: as approval ratings of Congress have dropped precipitously, the tone of congressional coverage has become bitterer and less trusting.

(3) How should the media cover Congress?

Some of the political science scholarship focuses on the questions of what role the media plays – and frequently the role it should be playing – when covering Congress. Schudson outlines three journalism models in a democracy: market, advocacy, and trustee.[192] The Trustee Model, under which "journalists are professionals who hold citizenship in trust for us, and we rely on their expertise or political analysis when we want information about the state of the country," is most common in the United States,

[189] Timothy E. Cook, *Governing With the News: The News Media as a Political Institution*, 2d ed. (1998; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 111.
[190] Cook, repr. 2005, 129.
[191] Mark J. Rozell, *In Contempt of Congress: Postwar Press Coverage on Capitol Hill* (Westport: CT: Praeger, 1996); John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, "The Media's Role in Public Negativity Toward Congress: Distinguishing Emotional Reactions and Cognitive Evaluations," *American Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 2 (April 1998): 475-98.
[192] Michael Schudson, "The Public Journalism Movement and Its Problems," in *The Politics of the News/The News of Politics*, Doris Graber, Denis McQuail, Pippa Norris, eds. (Washington: CQ Press, 1998).

but has increasingly come under intense criticism, in part because of deference to the

agendas of federal officials and candidates.[193] "Reporters in the field may have spoken

truth to power," he explained, "but reporters in Washington too often accepted power as

truth."

Other scholars, notably Zaller, see the critics of the Trustee Model as finding fault

because of a presumption that representative democracy requires a "full news standard"

from its media.[194] Scholars are inevitably disappointed when confirming their belief that

very few outlets actually meet this high threshold. Better to employ a "burglar alarm

standard" for the media covering Congress needs, argues Zaller.[195] Not only will one be

less disappointed with the resulting assessment data, but the public purpose will still be

achieved. Arnold produces a longitudinal study of local media coverage of members of

Congress and finds that the chance for a voter to learn what is needed to hold

representatives accountable depends on the "richness" of the "informational

environment." While this does not bode well for an informed citizenry (as opposed to an

informed elite), he also notes that a variation of the burglar alarm standard is often met:

"Information regularly flows to those who act as watchdogs… these watchdogs reflect

the diversity of interests in a constituency, and [these] watchdogs have easy ways to

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[193] Schudson, 136.

[194] John Zaller, "A New Standard of News Quality: Burglar Alarms for the Monitorial Citizen," *Political Communication* 20 (2003): 109-30.

[195] Zaller, 2003, 110, 122, explains that under the Full News standard, "the news should provide citizens with the basic information necessary to form and update opinions on all of the major issues of the day, including the performance of top public officials." Using his preferred Burglar Alarm standard, "Journalists should routinely seek to cover non-emergency but important issues by means of coverage that is intensely focused, dramatic, and entertaining and that affords the parts and responsible interest groups, especially political parties, ample opportunity for expression of opposing views."

communicate with citizens when they discover a representative doing disagreeable things."[196]

Arnold also makes the case that the lack of coverage allows members to avoid serious legislative work. Channeling the often cited "work horse vs. show horse" dichotomy, he writes that representatives "can be talkers, rather than doers, and their constituents will be unable to observe the difference."[197] However, the point made by this dissertation is that talkers are just as important as doers. The power of the press is that it shapes the party's image through its coverage. The talkers that Arnold derides are perhaps the best chance that representatives have to influence the coverage, and thereby have a huge impact on their own electoral fortunes as well as those of their fellow partisans. Because House caucus leaders are much more likely to be covered in the press, it is incumbent upon them to use that ability to address the goals of their caucus, including electoral victories and a policy agenda.

(4) How do the media cover Congress?

Finally, the broadest range of scholarship about how the press covers Congress focuses on various biases of the reporters. Of course, reporters will routinely insist that they are only concerned with reporting the facts as objectively as possible. However, scholars looking at this coverage from the outside have developed no less than five theoretical biases that they claim are consciously or unconsciously imposed by reporters.

Routines bias. Perhaps best espoused by Tuchman and later by Graber, this theory of press coverage argues the norms instituted by the media largely determine the

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[196] Arnold, 2004, 252.
[197] Arnold, 2004, 254.

coverage of politics and politicians.[198] Reporters follow set routines to do their jobs.

Action in Congress happens, and then reporters tell the "who, what, when, where and

why." They get comments from both sides of the issue and the story gets printed. By

committing themselves to following certain routines, reporters can avoid any accusation

of not being objective. And yet, following those routines ends up having other effects on

the coverage: certain people get covered more than others, and their arguments receive

more attention than others. As Kuklinsky and Sigelman find, "in reporting (or not

reporting) news events, [reporters] affect them."[199]

Power bias. This idea is related to the aforementioned "routines bias." It differs

in that the focus here is exclusively on those who have the ability to shape the final

outcome of any congressional action. Therefore, in the highly partisan House, the

Minority would rarely be covered. As Cook explains, from the reporter's perspective:

> "Not only does choosing a leader [to quote in an article] ease the problem of
> selecting among potential sources, but implying the reason for the selection by
> being able to identify the member by title also rationalizes it before potentially
> skeptical superiors…. The majority party, presumed more responsible for
> legislative action, usually is first to be covered."[200]

If the Minority does receive some coverage, it is likely because its leaders

suddenly had some leverage to affect the final outcome of a House action. Routines bias

theory, in contrast the power bias, relies on the more traditional journalistic exercise of

getting both sides to offer comment. The power bias accepts the reality that the Minority

has virtually no power to actually affect anything in the House of Representatives and

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[198] Gaye Tuchman, "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity." *American Journal of Sociology* 77, no. 4 (January 1972): 660-79; Doris Graber, *Mass Media & American Politics* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2006), 830.
[199] James H. Kuklinksi and Lee Sigelman, "When Objectivity is Not Objective: Network Television News Coverage of U.S. Senators and the 'Paradox of Objectivity.'" *Journal of Politics* 54, no. 3 (August 1992): 830.
[200] Cook, 1989, 55.

therefore is not worthy of coverage. Regardless of how well-spoken a leader is, or how well one may look on camera, "what he has to say is important because who he is, not how he says it."[201]

Initial research that I have done has shown a wide disparity between the quantity of coverage for majority caucus leaders and minority caucus leaders. Therefore, it is the power bias theory of congressional press coverage that largely influences my hypotheses and analysis in this dissertation.

Isolation bias. Groeling writes extensively about the paradox of a party's best chances of passing legislation is when all three power centers in Washington – the White House, the Senate, and the House – are controlled by the same party.[202] Yet the best press coverage comes when one party in control of a single power center is most isolated from the other two. In other words, to get something done, House leaders would want to see fellow partisans in control of the Senate and the White House. But press coverage, according to Groeling, isn't based on one's power or even routine journalistic behavior. Instead, he argues that media attention is focused on newsworthiness, and the most newsworthy position is to be in charge of just the House and have the other party in control of the other two power centers. The isolation of House leaders, much as when O'Neill was speaker and faced a Republican-led White House and Senate, elevates them as a countervailing voice as issues and policies get debated in public.

Conflict bias. This idea explains media coverage of Washington as conditioned by the drama of two sides pitted against each other. The conflict makes the story more interesting, and thereby helps garner the attention of consumers. Whether between the

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[201] Cook, 1989, 7.
[202] Groeling, 2010.

two parties, or different power centers, it is "the fight" that makes congressional action more interesting to read. Print reporters, conclude Tidmarch and Pitney, Jr., "thrive on the provocative quote, the clever quip, the profound lament. If conflict, actual or incipient, is embodied in the words of the source, all the better."[203] And because of the profit motive of the news media companies, every fight becomes a chance to generate interest among the public and thereby sell more papers, more advertising, etc.

Though it only applies to campaigns, I include "horse race journalism" under this theory of coverage of House coverage."[204] Reporters who cover the "who's up / who's down" aspects of a campaign are, in essence, focusing on the conflict at hand. Generating interest in the electoral competition is a corollary to this overall theory that applies to coverage of Congress.

Partisan bias. Despite some evidence to the contrary,[205] there is no shortage of scholars and commentators who would explain reporting on Congress as being filled with a liberal bias that favors modern day Democrats and disparages conservatives.[206] This theory sometimes leads people to criticize the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, despite their wide acceptance as standard bearers among media outlets. In covering Congress and the rest of American politics, critics say:

- Democrats are favored across a wide range of media,
- Their leaders receive more references, more quotes, and a more favorable tone, regardless of the issue being debated,

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[203] Charles M. Tidmarch and John J. Pitney, Jr, "Covering Congress," *Polity* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1985): 476.
[204] C. Anthony Broh, "Horse-Race Journalism: Reporting the Polls in the 1976 Presidential Election," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Winter 1980): 514-29; Kuklinski and Sigelman, 1992.
[205] Tidmarch and Pitney, Jr., 1985.
[206] Edith Efron, *The News Twisters* (Los Angeles: Nash, 1971); Eric P. Veblen, "Liberalism and national newspaper coverage of members of Congress," *Polity* 14, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 153–159; Thomas R. Dye and L. Harmon Zeigler, *American Politics in the Media Age* (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1983).

- Furthermore, in cases where the facts or public opinion don't favor the liberal perspective, the coverage will not be as bad for Democrats as some would expect.

Conclusion

The rise of rational choice as a guiding principle for congressional scholarship has driven home several key points. First, members are most interested in being reelected. Second, they want to accomplish something once they are reelected. Therefore, they are also concerned with being in the Majority. Third, the top House leaders – as agents of their respective caucuses – rationally respond to the demands of their members and prioritize either maintaining or achieving majority status. This is not to say that such leaders aren't also concerned with legislative matters; merely that the reelection concern is a huge priority for rational members.

House leaders have always been needed to overcome the collective action problem found within a legislative body. Members would be able to accomplish more if they deferred certain powers to a centralized authority than they would on their own. The need for such leaders is even more pronounced in a system divided by two parties, as with the House of Representatives. Collective action in Congress doesn't take place among free agents, but among self-identifying partisans. Members of each party's caucus need central leadership to help them achieve their collective goals.

The congressional reforms in the mid-1970s initially diffused power in the House, thereby exacerbating the collective action dilemma. Members recognized this and sought to correct it by strengthening the speaker, imbuing the position with significant new powers. Congress was changing and so was its leadership, which was increasingly

accepting of the responsibility to work for the collective good, specifically, majority status. Among the theories of congressional leadership and organization that would be developed in the aftermath of this transition, cartel theory offers the most explanatory power, especially when one considers the significant increase in time, resources, and personnel devoted to media outreach.[207] However, Cox and McCubbins's focus is on the majority party, while the goals of House caucus leaders are affected by whether one is in the Majority or the Minority. Further, it is suggested here that minority caucus leaders have developed both a traditional and contrarian form of application. The differences in both strategy and style between two Republican leaders – Rep. Bob Michel and Rep. Newt Gingrich – are perhaps the best reflections of the differences between traditionalist and contrarian approaches to House minority leadership.

Of all the goals considered by House caucus leaders, maintaining or attaining majority status remains the priority. This requires a focus on recruiting top challengers to run and attention on keeping popular incumbents in marginal districts from retiring. Scholars have suggested that the decision to run for Congress is dependent on whether it will be a "good year" for one's party. Since a "good year" is subject to interpretation by the public, leaders in the House will rationally seek to influence public opinion. Over the thirty years covered by this dissertation, such an effort became easier to do as congressional parties became stronger, a result of the 1970s reforms and growing ideological homogeneity within each caucus. Core House leadership was willing to use its newfound strength on behalf of the collective election goal.

Stronger parties would mean that a party's image was more significant with the electorate. House leaders understood this and set out to do whatever they could to exert

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[207] Cox and McCubbins, 1993.

their own influence. Primarily, leaders on both sides of the aisle tried to shape their

respective party's image through agenda setting, issue ownership, and promotion. This

dissertation focuses on the public relations aspect of that effort. It was a new role for

leaders to play and Speaker Thomas "Tip" O'Neill served as a transitional figure between

a previous generation of House leaders who generally shunned the press and the

emerging generation of leaders who embraced it completely.

The media itself plays a role in this process of House leaders trying to shape their

party image and many scholars have examined its relationship with Congress, from a

variety of angles, over the years. Several conclude that it is a reciprocal relationship.

They posit that the sheer size of the House makes it much more difficult to follow and

cover. Furthermore, congressional observers have pointed to no less than five different

types of bias that might characterize the media's coverage of congressional behavior.

The argument of this dissertation is that the power bias – coverage that follows those in

the House who are most likely to affect the outcome of any action – has the most

explanatory power. Therefore, it is the power bias idea that shapes many of the

hypotheses and analysis contained here.

This dissertation attempts to:

(1) Understand the context and mechanics of House caucus leadership to shape

their respective party's image through the press over a thirty year period, 1981

to 2010, and

(2) Assess under what circumstances House caucus leaders are likely to do better or worse in these efforts.

These questions fall squarely in the intersection of political science theory on party leadership, party image, and media coverage of Congress.

CHAPTER 3

HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Starting in the 1980s, leaders on both sides of the aisle in the House of Representatives became more sophisticated in their media outreach efforts. Over time, the leaders hired additional staff who would aggressively court reporters and push out messages on behalf of their bosses. This behavior was considered a new way a doing the press staff job and reflected a growing consensus that effective leadership required those who were skilled at the outside game of shaping public opinion about the leadership, the caucus, and especially the party. Significant investments in time – both from the staff and the leaders themselves – were expended in pursuit of media coverage. Generating coverage meant you were a stronger leader, able to speak on behalf of your caucus, and effective at presenting yourself as a face of the party. The reporting on what leaders were saying and doing also shaped the political climate. While some scholars have focused on the linkage between press efforts and the legislative agenda,[208] this dissertation suggests that leaders were also focused – quite rationally – on an electoral agenda. It was through media coverage that House caucus leaders would be able to shape the landscape upon which they, their partisan colleagues, and those candidates who wished to join them, would do battle during election season.

The ultimate objective for House caucus leaders between 1981 and 2010 was to either maintain or attain majority status. Other objectives were much more difficult to achieve without first securing control of the House. Leaders assumed that good press would make it easier for their party to succeed in the biannual elections. Coverage

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[208] Cook, 1989; Sellers, 2000; Sellers, 2010; Cox and McCubbins 2005; Johnson and O'Grady 2012.

allowed House caucus leaders to shape their party's image. That image was critical because it helped direct the votes of millions of voters across the nation. In theory, the House majority could be won or lost based on a party's image. Because the core congressional leadership for each party reflected the interests and needs of their reelection-seeking caucus members, it made sense that they would feel encumbered to act on the electoral priority. As a consequence, a primary goal of national media messaging by House caucus leaders was to shape the party's image. Messaging in the media was one part of this overall endeavor to win seats and members came to increasingly expect such activity from them as well.

The two purposes of this dissertation are to understand the scope and context of the media outreach efforts by Democratic and Republican House caucus leaders, and to determine under what kinds of circumstances House caucus leaders will be more effective in garnering such coverage. Based on a review of the existing literature, a variety of predictions emerge for both House leader behavior and media behavior.

Working on their own, individual members of Congress face at least two collective action problems. First, it is much harder to achieve policy goals working independently. Second, because they operate in a partisan-based legislative body, their prospects for reelection – another individual priority, if the not the primary one – are dependent on public support for their party label. For these reasons, caucus leadership is an organizational necessity in Congress. Serving as agents on behalf of the caucus members who elected them, each party's leaders will use every tool available to promote the party's position. This leads me to expect that following hypothesis will hold:

H1: House caucus leaders will actively promote their party's position in the media.

If reelection is the primary goal of members of the House of Representatives, then it follows that they will expect their caucus leaders, as their agents, to serve their needs. Failure to do so often results in caucus leaders being held accountable. Indeed, leaders will often be challenged or step down from their high position following disappointing electoral results (e.g., Speaker Newt Gingrich in 1998, Minority Leader Richard Gephardt in 2002).[209]   This leads me to expect that following hypothesis will hold:

H2: House caucus leaders will promote their party's position in the media because they believe it is part of their job description as leaders, and that their caucus members expect it of them.

The cartel theory of congressional leadership suggests that a party's reputation has a significant impact on the electoral prospects of its members.[210] In large part, this is because voters will often use the party label as a heuristic when making a voting choice. Furthermore, a party's reputation can help shape the national conditions that have such a strong influence on whether its "ambitions careerists" and weaker incumbent choose to run for the House. The stronger the roster of candidates, the more likely a party will increase its numbers in Congress. This leads me to expect that following hypothesis will hold:

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[209] Davidson, Oleszek, and Lee, 2010, 166, 168.
[210] Cox and McCubbins, 1993.

H3: House caucus leaders will consider media coverage important because they believe it makes a difference in shaping party image, and therefore will result in more positive electoral results.

House caucus leaders are motivated not just by their desire to be reelected by their district, but to also be reelected by the caucus. Because these central leaders think that they are being judged, in part, by their effectiveness in developing and disseminating messages on behalf of their caucus, they have invested time, resources, and personnel into this effort. Their internal assessment of these investments, as well as those of their caucus members, takes place within a competitive environment. Doing well is relative to how the other side is doing. Therefore, over time, leaders have responded to changes in the political and media landscape by increasing their investment of time, resources, and personnel to improve their messaging capabilities. This leads me to expect that following hypothesis will hold:

H4: House caucus leaders will act to make their media promotion efforts more effective.

Assessment of Hypotheses on House Caucus Leadership Behavior

To test these four hypotheses of congressional behavior, 19 former members of communications staff for House caucus leaders were interviewed. The process began by identifying those members of Congress who served as speaker, majority leader, majority whip, minority leader, minority whip, and minority caucus chair beginning with the 97th

Congress (1981–1983) and extending over a thirty-year period to the 111th Congress

(2009–2011).[211] These core leaders were chosen because they had a different set of

responsibilities than other congressional leaders. More specifically, these particular

leaders, at any given time, were charged with acting on behalf of the entire caucus.

Committee chairs, ranking members, and others had narrower job descriptions often

focused on the jurisdictions of their committees or, in the case of deputy whips, an

assigned region or constituency. The six core leadership positions are augmented in this

dissertation by the inclusion of the House campaign committee chair for each party. As

this study aims to examine the links between media outreach and the electoral objective,

it was appropriate to add those individuals charged with coordinating their congressional

party's victories every other November.

With a grid of all those who served in these leadership roles over a thirty-year

period, congressional staff directories were utilized to identify anyone who served in any

communications staff role for the targeted leaders. Those with titles such as

Communications Director, Press Secretary, Press Assistant, Press Aide, Communications

Aide, and similar sounding designations were noted. To measure if the list would be

reflective of the broad time period being covered, communications staffers were broken

down into one of five House leadership eras: 1981 – 1986 (O'Neill); 1987 – 1994

(Wright and Foley); 1995 – 1998 (Gingrich); 1999 – 2006 (Hastert); 2007 – 2010

(Pelosi).[212] Those who worked across multiple eras were assigned to the era when they

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[211] See Appendix A for complete list.
[212] While these leadership eras allowed me to ensure that my interview subjects were appropriately diversified across the 30-year time frame of this dissertation, my work in Chapters 5 through 9 merge the O'Neill era with that of Wright and Foley. Taken together, it was a period of steady Democratic control and therefore lends itself to better analysis.

first began working for caucus leadership. A total of 127 leadership communications staff members were identified.

Recognizing that it was important to narrow the list of targets for potential interviews, each identified staffer was first given an "employer score," reflecting the hierarchy of the leader for whom he or she worked. A score of 1 was given for those who worked for the speaker or the minority leader, a 2 for those who worked for the majority leader or the minority whip, a score of 3 was assigned to a communications staffer working for the majority whip or the minority caucus chair, and 4 used for those who worked for either of the two campaign committees, the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) or the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), or their respective chairs. While this dissertation argues that, collectively, the eight people serving in these positions are most responsible for the messaging efforts on behalf of the entire caucus, it also assumes that there is an internal pecking order of power and influence. Even among the core leadership of a caucus, there is a hierarchy. These scores attempt to reflect that dynamic.

Each identified communicator was also given a "title score," to better reflect the importance of the person within the communications staff and the leadership office at large. Though job titles can be somewhat arbitrary, a research design decision was made to delineate each title as if it had been taken off the same defined list. Thus, anyone listed as a communications director – considered here to be the highest ranking title – would receive a 1. A score of 2 was given to those listed as deputy communications director or press secretary. An identified staff member with a job title of deputy press secretary, spokesperson or director of a sub-section of communications (i.e., director of new media)

attained a score of 3. Finally, a host of other titles were given a score of 4. These included communications or press coordinator, assistant or specialist, as well as press advisor and deputy communications coordinator. A person who had more than one title over the course of a career was graded by their highest rank.

A final list of targets for interviews was determined by combining the total of one's employer score with one's title score. Thus, the communications director for the speaker of the House would receive a 2. The DCCC's press specialist would receive an 8. Using these employer-title scores, hereafter referred to as "emp-title scores," the original list of 127 names was reduced to 49 by focusing only on those who had an aggregate score of 2 or 3. Using 3 as the cutoff point came about because it provided a manageable number of interview targets and ensured that those individuals on the list had positions of significant authority while working for the top people in House caucus leadership. These would be the people most likely to have strong insights into the dynamics between House leadership and the media. Future research can certainly expand this list to see if similar results are generated.

As seen in Table 3a, the 49 names included 21 Democrats and 28 Republicans and representation from all five eras. As previously stated, though several interview targets had careers that covered more than one era, the designation here was made based on when the individual began working for a House caucus leader.

Table 3a
Breakdown of Priority Targets Among House Communicators

Era (during which the communicator **began** working for House caucus leadership)	# of Targets with Emp/Title Scores of 2 or 3	Party Breakdown	
		Democrats	Republicans
O'Neill (1981 – 1986)	5	3	2
Wright / Foley (1987 – 1994)	8	5	3
Gingrich (1995 – 1998)	10	1	9
Hastert (1999 – 2006)	19	10	9
Pelosi (2007 – 2010)	7	2	5
TOTAL	**49**	**21**	**28**

With these targeted names, various search engines, including Google and Yahoo, and databases such as Lexis/Nexis Academic, were used to track down their current whereabouts. A general search might bring up the person's profile on the website of a current employer. Sometimes an article mentioning the target would direct one towards a particular employer. Of the 49 total names, 30 were located in the Washington, DC area. An additional seven were identified as working outside "the Beltway." The remaining 12 included those who had died, were in jail, or were simply unable to be found.

Letters seeking interviews were mailed, faxed, and emailed – depending on the level of contact information. Follow-up phone calls were made. These efforts resulted in 17 in-person interviews that took place in the Washington, DC area over July and August 2012, one phone interview in August 2012, and one in-person interview taking place in New York, also in August of that year. The 19 interviews represent 38% of the targeted names. Table 3b breaks down the eras and partisanship of the interviewees.

Table 3b
Breakdown of House Communicators Interviewed

Era (during which the communicator began working for House caucus leadership)	# of Interviewees	Party Breakdown	
		Democrats	Republicans
O'Neill (1981 – 1986)	2	--	2
Wright / Foley (1987 – 1994)	5	3	2
Gingrich (1995 – 1998)	6	--	6
Hastert (1999 – 2006)	5	4	1
Pelosi (2007 – 2010)	1	--	1
TOTAL	**19**	**7**	**12**

Though it would seem that Democrats in some eras are not represented, this is not really the case. Of the three Democrats who worked on the communications staff of House leaders in the Wright / Foley era, one worked in the Gingrich era as well. Further, among the four Democrats who began as leadership communications staffers in the Hastert era, two continued through the Pelosi era.

The 19 interviews were conducted using an introductory script and a set list of questions that served as a guide for the discussion (Appendix B). All of the interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed.

Assessment of Press Coverage of House Caucus Leadership

House caucus leadership, on both sides of the aisle, dedicated more time, resources, and personnel in pursuit of media coverage between 1981 and 2010.[213] What has been missing from the current scholarship is a robust assessment that shows whether or not those leaders accomplished that goal, and under what conditions they were more or less successful.

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[213] Gary Lee Malecha and Daniel J. Reagan, *The Public Congress: Congressional Deliberation in a New Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 74.

This analysis begins by inserting an additional layer of division on the data: breaking apart majority leaders from minority leaders. Past scholarship rarely makes this important distinction. This is unfortunate because, as this dissertation will demonstrate, the majority and the minority parties in Congress are covered differently. One reason for the lack of much research into the House minority is because its members have so little power, and therefore their actions seemed unworthy of much serious scholarship. The rules of the House, of course, contributed to this dynamic. Unlike the Senate, the House offered no filibuster power to the representatives. That authority provides even the most isolated minority members of the Senate with incredible power to influence events. Lacking any similar ability, the House minority could easily be dismissed by scholars. Further, between 1955 and 1995, there was largely little doubt about which party would control the House. The Democrats, ensconced in power, in effect, became synonymous with congressional leadership itself. The study of the House minority didn't matter because there seemed so little chance of the Republicans becoming the majority. Any change in how congressional leaders operated was going to come from congressional Democrats, as they were the only ones in charge. Finally, majority and minority caucus leaders in the House have different objectives. The House majority leadership is ultimately responsible for governing the nation, while the Minority has no such obligation. This difference shapes the messages and the messaging effort of each.

I expect that the power bias of the media – the preference of reporters and editors to cover those who have an ability to affect outcomes – will be a steady and constant dynamic in the data results. The idea of a power bias is not new, but it is nonetheless important towards establishing a baseline for additional inquiry. To best understand the

effect of each of the conditions on House leaders and their efforts to promote messages in the media, making a distinction between the Majority and the Minority is a necessary first step.[214] As a result, the past scholarship highlighting the power bias leads me to expect that following hypothesis will hold:

> *H5: Media coverage of House caucus leaders will be better for the Majority than the Minority.*

A secondary task was to identify the specific conditions under which House caucus leaders would be actively promoting their national messages, and which might have the strongest effect on the leaders' effectiveness as communicators. Eleven such conditions were chosen, broken down into five categories. Each condition generated its own hypothesis / hypotheses.

CATEGORY: TIME

Condition 1: Year – The passage of time may well shape the coverage that was generated. This dissertation covers 1981 to 2010, an era of significant changes in Congress, campaigns, partisanship, and the media. Fundamentally, these changes can be broken into three areas: (1) an increase in resources dedicated to national messaging by caucus leaders, (2) a rise in partisanship within the Congress, and (3) a more competitive media landscape.

As House leaders devote more time, resources, and personnel towards shaping media coverage, one would expect to see better coverage over time. Increased

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[214] In some cases, I pursued this inquiry even further and separated Democrats from Republicans in both the majority and the minority.

partisanship would also support the expectation of better coverage for congressional leadership, especially for the majority party. When the relations between the parties become more divisive and bitter, there is less likelihood of bi-partisan agreements. The Minority in the House, which already suffers under the burden of the power bias, is further handicapped because they are unable to get "in the mix" as they might have been in previous, less partisan, years. Finally, the more competitive media landscape has been highlighted by the expansion of outlets and forums for political commentary. In this emerging marketplace, the drive to put out a story before one's competitors becomes a major concern for reporters and editors. Today, breaking news breaks immediately and constantly throughout the day. What was once a 24-hour news cycle has collapsed into one lasting just a few minutes. This dynamic strengthens the likelihood of better coverage for the House majority leaders, who have the most influence on congressional action and are therefore in a better position to break a story before anyone else. Thus, reporters seeking to report these new stories first will continue to prioritize coverage of the majority leadership. In sum, under this condition, it is assumed that over time, the majority House leadership will receive better coverage. This leads me to expect that following hypothesis will hold:

> *H6a: Over time, there will be better coverage of House majority caucus leaders.*

> *H6b: Over time, there will be worse coverage of House minority caucus leaders.*

Condition 2: Election Year – It has been argued that the primary mission of any elected official is to be re-elected.[215] Therefore, House leaders are more motivated to shape coverage the closer they get to election day, and the media becomes more interested in covering Congress because the upcoming election provides a new storyline with which to engage the public. The Majority/Minority distinction is an important factor here. As the calendar moves closer to the election, the media is more interested in the competition around the country. Such interest is likely to help the House minority leadership because they have a new chance to garner coverage, unlike during non-election years when the focus is largely about legislative process, on which they have little influence. At the same time, the approaching election is likely to contribute to a worsening of coverage of the Majority. There are only so many column inches that will be devoted to covering Congress, so while the Majority should still generate more media attention than their counterparts in the minority overall, majority leaders should also see less coverage in an election year because they have to share the space in a different way. For these reasons, I expect that following hypotheses will hold:

> *H7a: Media coverage of House caucus leaders in the majority will be worse in election years than non-election years.*

> *H7b: Media coverage of House caucus leaders in the minority will be better in election years than non-election years.*

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[215] Mayhew, 2nd ed., 2004.

Condition 3: Margin – The ability of House majority leaders to exert control, and thereby generate media coverage, can be shaped by the relative power of each caucus to the other.[216] The margin of seats between the Majority and Minority helps determine this comparative power. The closer the two parties are in terms of seats in the House, the more exciting debates will be because the defection of only a few members from either side could swing the outcome.

A larger margin between the Majority and the Minority would presumably include a broader ideological coalition within the majority caucus. Such diversity could conceivably allow the minority leadership in the House more, not less, opportunity to cut their own deals with sub-groups within the larger majority caucus. Such deal making could enhance the Minority's chance of receiving coverage because its leaders would be more likely to influence the final outcome on any given congressional action. However, I would argue that when the Majority holds a larger margin over the Minority, its ability to pass legislation is enhanced precisely because it can routinely absorb defections without disruption of the legislative objective. With a greater margin, the ability of the majority caucus leadership to influence outcomes becomes greater.

At the same time, a larger margin can make the House of Representatives, as an institution, much less exciting and newsworthy. This would counter the power bias, to a degree. The majority leadership will still receive more coverage than minority leaders, but both sides should see less coverage than when the margin between them is smaller.

This leads me to expect that the following hypothesis will hold:

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[216] Davidson, Oleszek, and Lee, 2010, 170.

H8: Media coverage of House caucus leaders will improve when the margin of seats between the Majority and Minority gets smaller.

Condition 4: Isolation – The House does not operate in a vacuum. It is part of a larger governing interplay involving the White House and the Senate. Together, these are the three power centers in Washington, DC, and all three entities compete for a finite amount of daily media coverage. House caucus leaders who are pushing their own national messages into the press are therefore affected by who controls the other power centers. If one party is in power in the White House, the Senate, and the House of Representatives, it allows greater opportunity to pass a legislative agenda. Ironically, the opposite it true as one pursues media coverage, which is more likely to be disjointed when there is one party control on Capitol Hill and at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.[217]

This dissertation builds on past scholarship and predicts not just mixed messages under unified government, but a hierarchy of who gets covered. Overall, the House, with its large size, short terms, and the limited powers given to the Minority, should expect to see its leaders receive less coverage than the White House and Senate. When there is unified control, the quantity and quality of the coverage of the House majority should be at its lowest level, for they are least isolated and therefore, least newsworthy. At the same time, unified control for one party should allow for greater coverage of the Minority. For example, under this condition, Rep. John Boehner, as the head of the House GOP from 2009 to 2010 when the Democrats had unified control, should receive better coverage and Speaker Nancy Pelosi should receive worse.

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[217] Groeling, 2010.

Of course, there is not always unified control in Washington, DC. When the House majority party does not have fellow partisans in charge of the White House and the Senate, it can be considered "most isolated" and therefore will receive the greatest amount of coverage. A historical example of this would be Speaker Thomas "Tip" O'Neill who led the Democratic majority from 1981 through 1986 when Republicans controlled the White House and the Senate.

Under this condition, coverage of minority leadership in the House should move in the opposite direction of the Majority. Using a scale of "isolation" – the relative distinctiveness of the majority or minority House leadership from their fellow partisans in other power centers in Washington – this dissertation hypothesizes:

H9a: Media coverage of House caucus leaders in the Majority will be better when their caucus is most isolated among other power centers in Washington, DC.

H9b: Media coverage of House caucus leaders in the minority will be better when their caucus is most isolated among other power centers in Washington, DC.

Table 3c provides a graphical representation of how "isolation" was operationalized and leads to different predictions of coverage:

Table 3c
Isolation of House Majority and Minority with Media Coverage Expectations

Coding in Data Set	White House Controlled by	Senate Controlled by	For <u>majority</u> House leadership, this results in	For <u>minority</u> House leadership, this results in
1 (least isolated)	House majority party	House majority party	**Lowest mention for majority House leaders** (ex. Pelosi under unified Dem control in 2009-10)	**Highest mention for minority House leaders** (ex. Boehner when D's had unified control in 2009-10)
	House majority party	House minority party	The only times when this condition was satisfied was for brief periods during 2001 – 2002, when control of the Senate switched within the session. Therefore, this category was coded as 2 – "somewhat isolated"	
2 (somewhat isolated)	House minority party	House majority party	**2ⁿᵈ highest mention for majority House leaders** (ex. Wright, when D's controlled H & S, but not the WH – 1987 in 88)	**2ⁿᵈ lowest mention for minority House leaders** (ex. Michel when D's controlled H and S, but not WH in 1987-88)
3 (most isolated)	House minority party	House minority party	**Highest mention for majority House leaders** (ex. O'Neill, when R's controlled the WH and the S, but not the H in 1981 – 82)	**Lowest mention for minority House leaders** (ex. Michel, when R's controlled the WH and the S, but not the H in 1981 – 82)

<u>CATEGORY: PARTY</u>

Condition 5: Party Label – A basic and still critical independent variable in examining press coverage of House leaders is which party they represent. The accusations of a pro-Democratic bias among the mainstream media continue to be made.[218] This condition considers such accusations and expects that the party of a given House caucus leader will <u>not</u> have a significant impact on the coverage received. Throughout this dissertation, I expect that the power bias will overwhelm any alternative

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[218] Bernard Goldberg, *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2001); Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo, "A Measure of Media Bias," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 120, no. 4 (November 2005): 1191-1237; Glenn H. Reynolds, "Spin of the Times: Bias cloaked as front-page news," *New York Post*, May 6, 2012, Opinion section. http://nypost.com/2012/05/06/spin-of-the-times-bias-cloaked-as-front-page-news/ Accessed May 26, 2015.

bias. However, as the allegations of partisanship among the media continue to be part of political culture, the working hypothesis will be:

> *H10: Media coverage will be better for Democratic caucus leadership in the House than Republican caucus leadership in the House.*

Condition 6: Economy – Different issues might be owned by one party of the other. Because voters link parties to certain issues and – depending on the issue's saliency at election time – reward or punish the owning party, issue ownership is one of the biggest variables faced by House caucus leaders pursuing an effective media outreach strategy.[219] The assumption made is this dissertation is that the Republican Party largely owned the issue of the economy during the years 1981 to 2010. Therefore, the question generated under this condition is whether or not coverage improves for GOP House leaders when the subject is the economy, regardless of whether or not they are in the majority or the minority. Given issue ownership theory, this leads me to expect that following hypothesis will hold:

> *H11: Media coverage of House caucus leaders will be better for the Republicans than the Democrats when the subject matter is the economy.*

Condition 7: Foreign Affairs – Like the economic issue, this dissertation assumes that between 1981 and 2010, the public considered the Republicans as owning the issue

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[219] Campbell et al., 1960; Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Petrocik 1996.

area broadly defined as "foreign affairs."[220] The three-decade time period began with

Ronald Reagan's transformative foreign policy shift involving a massive military buildup

and a much more aggressive posture vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and others around the

globe. Reagan's actions put Democrats in a reactive posture when it came to

international relations. The broad issue area belonged to the GOP. This leads me to

expect that following hypothesis will hold:

> ***H12: Media coverage of House caucus leaders will be better for the***
>
> ***Republicans than the Democrats when the subject matter is foreign affairs.***

Condition 8: Scandal – Scandals involving members of the House of

Representatives can completely upend the expected coverage. The party that is <u>not</u> being

accused of ethical impropriety has a chance to push its messages into the press. When

the scandal involves the minority party, it should not make much difference, as the

Majority was already getting covered. However, a scandal involving the House majority

holds out great potential for the House minority leadership to generate coverage because

they so seldom have such an opportunity. There are clear examples from the time period

of this: Newt Gingrich, a back bencher-turned-minority-whip, used allegations of

Democratic ethical breaches to lead his party to their first House majority in 40 years.

Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi led her party back to power by pushing the message that

the Republicans had created a "culture of corruption."[221] This condition considers

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[220] Petrocik, 1996; Jeremy C. Pope and Jonathan Woon, "Measuring Changes in American Party Reputations, 1939-2004," *Political Research Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (December 2009): 653-61
[221] Gail Russell Chaddock, "Nancy Pelosi Puts Her Stamp on the House," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 13, 2010.

whether non-scandal party leaders, in fact, receive better coverage than the leaders of the scandal party. This leads me to expect that following hypothesis will hold:

H13: When the subject matter is a congressional scandal, media coverage of House caucus leaders will be better for the non-scandal party.

CATEGORY: NATIONAL DYNAMICS

Condition 9: Presidential Approval – There is no balance when it comes to who gets more coverage, the president or the leadership of the House. The power and singularity of the presidency allows its occupant to dominate the media's reporting. The popularity of that individual can also shape political press coverage for House leadership. When his approval ratings are high, the president's fellow partisans in the House should be emboldened to trumpet their support through aggressive media outreach. And when the president is unpopular, House leaders of the same party may shy away from press availability and active national messaging. The president's partisan opponents in the House would logically pursue the opposite strategy, becoming more aggressive in national messaging when the president is unpopular and shrinking when he has high approval ratings. This condition considers such possibilities and leads me to expect that following hypothesis will hold:

H14: When the president is popular, media coverage of House caucus leaders will be better for those in the president's party.

Presidential popularity was operationalized on an annual basis by looking at the presidential approval number, as measured by the Gallup Poll, for every month over the 30-year period of 1981 to 2010. Of the 360 months included, there were seven that had no Gallup presidential approval number. For January 1981, the first month in the dataset, the number from February 1981 was used. For the other six months that had a missing number, the score from the previous month and the subsequent month were averaged. In this way, each of the 30 years was able to generate a 12-month average.

Condition 10: GDP Growth Change – A robust economy may provide better coverage for the majority leadership in the House for they can take credit that it was "on their watch" that growth was strong. Similarly, a weak economy should provide better coverage of the minority House leadership, whose critiques would seem to have more resonance. This independent variable is designed to see if that is so. This leads me to expect that following hypothesis will hold:

> *H15: When economic activity is strong, media coverage of House caucus leaders will be better for those in the majority.*

There are various ways to measure the strength of the economy. The determination made by this dissertation was to focus on what citizens experience in their daily lives, assuming that such reactions will have the greatest impact on voting behavior. Therefore, the emphasis in operationalizing this condition was on the <u>change</u> in economic activity over time. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is a broad-based measure of economic

activity. Using data provided by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, the growth level

in the GDP was determined for each quarter of a given year. By focusing on the change

from one quarter to the next, it was assumed that the overall number would better reflect

how the electorate experienced the state of economy. Simply looking at the GDP for a

given year flattens out these dynamics. A yearly average was produced by taking the

GDP growth change from each quarter each year and dividing by four.

Condition 11: Unemployment – The national unemployment rate is another way to

measure the impact of economic conditions on the media coverage of House caucus

leaders. It is a number that is widely reported in the press and perceived to be understood

by the general public. Therefore, the rate can be assumed to be well retained by the

electorate, making it more likely to impact voter decisions than other economic data.

A smaller unemployment rate is a sign that people are working, and should result in

better coverage of the House majority leadership, who are likely to take credit for job

growth. In a growing economy, the House minority is not expected to see much

coverage, even if their policies were part of the nation's economic strategy. However, a

higher unemployment rate is likely to result in the opposite: Improved coverage for the

minority leadership who now has additional ammunition to use in its critiques of the

majority's leadership.

> *H16a: As unemployment falls, media coverage of House caucus leaders will be*
> *better for those in the majority.*

H16b: *As unemployment rises, media coverage of House caucus leaders will be better for those in the minority.*

The unemployment variable was generated by taking the national unemployment rate for each month of the calendar year, as published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and producing an annual average.

Operationalizing Other Key Variables

Prior to collecting data, additional decisions had to be made regarding how to operationalize "better coverage." Articles from the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* were designated as the sources for the data. They are industry leaders in covering Congress and their reporting will often drive the reporting of others. Other scholars have referred to the "trickling down" of news stories.[222] Coverage of a given topic starts in national outlets, such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and then is picked up by more local newspapers: "This trickling down is abetted by the attentiveness of local and wire service reporters to national coverage, especially to papers of record that provide cues on newsworthiness."[223] Television news follows the same lead: "You start out with an idea for the story of the day…. by looking at the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Times*, *USA Today*," explained one television network reporter.[224] It was therefore suitable to use these two outlets as a proxy for all others.

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[222] Cook 1989, 85. See also Johnson and O'Grady, 2012.
[223] Cook 1989, 85; Sinclair, rev. ed. 1998, 268.
[224] Cook 1989, 48.

In an effort to provide a fuller assessment, this dissertation operationalizes "coverage" in five different ways. Mentions – often used by scholars because they are the easiest to count – are but one measurement to consider.[225] Media coverage can also be understood and measured by counting actions taken or messages actively promoted, the location within the article of a leader's action, the tone of the article towards House caucus leaders, and finally, the overall quality of the article, a unique compound variable used here that measures the product of the number of paragraphs citing a leader's action and the measurement of the overall tone of the article towards that leader's party. A more specific breakdown, with the question posed by the coder, is presented here:

Mentions – Does the article mention House leaders by name or as a collective group? Mentions have to connect the leader(s) with official or political actions as caucus leaders. Therefore, coverage of leader(s) participation in a constituent matter or a social gathering (such as inaugural balls, cocktail parties, etc.) was not counted. Mentions do include the comments of official spokespersons, such as press secretaries, of the leaders, as well as top staff for congressional campaign committees and other campaign consultants clearly described as working for House caucus leader(s).

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[225] Among those who look at mentions of members of Congress in daily newspapers are Tidmarch and Pitney, Jr., 1985; Sellers, 2000; and Arnold, 2004. Stephen Hess, *The Ultimate Insiders: U.S. Senators in the National Media*. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1986) measures coverage by reviewing mentions in several newspapers, but also looked at mentions and appearances on both network evening news shows and network Sunday interview shows and Cook, 1989, examines mentions and quotes in the *New York Times*, but also reviewed mentions and quotes on the network nightly news. Harris, 1998, similarly looked at mentions on the nightly news and added an examination of the guest roster for NBC's *Meet the Press*. Johnson and O'Grady, 2012, counted mentions in both the *Washington Post* and the Associated Press, along with mentions on CNN. Malecha and Reagan, 2004, focused exclusively on the three networks' evening news and assessed coverage by reviewing mentions, statements, appearance on film (with not mention in the text) and location within the 30-minute broadcast. Finally, Sellers, 2010, and David C. Kimball, "Priming Partisan Evaluations of Congress." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (February 2005): 63-84, measure press coverage by using computerized content analysis.

Use of a leader's name as the sponsor of a bill (e.g., Kemp/Roth tax cut) is included, as are passive mentions of the leader(s), such as comments from a lobbyist, department secretary, White House, etc. This dependent variable does not include mentions of non-caucus leaders in the House who are described as "an ally of the leader" or "close to the leader", etc.

Message Paragraph – Inclusion – Does the article include a message paragraph? To qualify as a message, the leader(s) cannot be passive (e.g., a comment from the White House about congressional Democratic leaders), but must be <u>portrayed</u> as actively pushing a message through a comment or legislative / political action. "Portrayed" means a message is from a reporter or leadership spokesperson explaining the action of a leader, or the message is directly from the House leader, such as an on-the-record comment.

Message Paragraph – Quantity – How many paragraphs in a given story include a message from a House leader or leaders? This variable was assessed for the Majority and the Minority separately. The number of message paragraphs conveys the quality of the coverage. When a House caucus leader is repeatedly quoted in an article, it makes the coverage a much more positive piece. Operationalizing the dependent variable this way gives scholars a better appreciation of the scope of the reporting.

Location of First Message Paragraph – Exact – In which paragraph is the first message from the leader(s) located? Messages that are closer to the headline are

considered to be better than those which are buried near the end of the article because they are more prominent and therefore more likely to be read. Having one comment buried at the bottom of an article should not be considered the same as having one placed in the lead. Studies that exclusively look for "mentions" fail to measure this important distinction. Likewise, when reporters – as per the industry norm – provide a token comment from "the other side" – usually the minority leadership – at the tail end of an article, it's hardly the same quality of coverage as a majority leadership comment in the first paragraph. Therefore, this variable was assessed for the Majority and the Minority separately.

Tone – Lots of coverage might not mean as much if the tone of the article towards one party or the other is particularly negative. Similarly, less coverage that is overwhelmingly positive can be seen as a real accomplishment for House leaders.   This variable was assessed for the Majority and Minority separately using a five-point scale: mostly negative, somewhat negative, neutral/mixed, somewhat positive, and mostly positive.

Generating the articles to code required the use of Lexis/Nexis Academic database. A variety of search terms were used for both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. The initial search would be done for each of the 30 calendar years for each newspaper. The terms included all variations of "Congress," such as Congress, Congressman, congressional, etc., variations of "Democrat" close to variations of "leader" or variations of "Republican" close to variations of "leader."[226] The search also

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[226] "Close to" was operationalized as being within four words of the next search term.

included the specific names of each of the four caucus leaders for each party in the House.

In odd-numbered years, the search ran from the first day the new House came to order through December 31st. For even-numbered years, the time frame was from January 1st through that year's election day. This dissertation is examining the link between messaging efforts by leaders and their electoral objectives. Therefore, articles that appeared during the lame duck period at the end of a legislative session or just prior to a new session commencing were excluded. In those cases where multiple members served in a core leadership position during a given calendar year, the search was broken down by the time period containing each different constellation of caucus leaders so that the proper array of leadership names could be included.[227]

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[227] The *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* have different standards for referencing the names of members of Congress. After some initial coding of articles over several years using the Lexis/Nexis Academic database, it was discovered that 13 years of *New York Times* stories and two years of *Washington Post* stories that had been coded included search terms that were not in line with the usage of the newspaper. For example, the initial search might have included "Richard Gephardt" but the newspaper referred to him as "Richard A. Gephardt." Therefore, for these specific lists of articles, an additional search was done, as explained below. (The correct names were used for the remaining 45 years' worth of searches.)

After determining the correct way that either paper referred to a House caucus leader's name, the original search terms were used again. The number of stories that came up was noted. Then a new search was done that added the correct names to the original search terms. A larger total of stories were generated and this number was noted. The total from the initial search was subtracted from the expanded search. The remainder was divided by the total from the expanded search, producing a percentage. This percentage was then applied against 50, which was the total number of stories initially intended to be randomly selected for each year at each newspaper. Thus, if the search using the correct names and the incorrect names produced 10% more articles than the initial search using only the incorrect names, and 10% of 50 is 5, it was determined that 5 additional stories were needed.

At this point, the search was re-done using the correct form of the leaders' names and specifying "and not" for the incorrect form of the leaders' names. The total number of stories generated was equal to the difference produced earlier when the two searches were compared. The total was divided by the amount of new stories required, and the result was then used to randomly select the required number of additional stories. For example, if the revised search using the correct names (and eliminating the incorrect names) produced 100 stories and five new stories were required, then every 20th story was randomly selected. These additional stories were then coded as all the others were. For this reason, in the data set, some years have a larger set of stories than other years. The annual average of stories to be coded was intended to be 100. It ended up being 103.2.

Once an initial list of stories for (a) one of the newspapers and (b) for a specific calendar year was generated using the search terms, the total number was divided by 50. The result allowed for the random selection of every Nth story until 50 were selected. For example, if the search produced 400 articles from the *Washington Post* in 1991, then 400 was divided by 50 (400/50 = 8) and every 8th story was selected for coding. It if was clear from the list of headlines and location information generated by the Lexis/Nexis search that the selected story was inappropriate, it was eliminated and the immediate next story on the list was selected. From there, the random selection continued. Stories that were discarded include:

- Editorials

- Book reviews

- Opinion pieces

- Letters to the editor

- Magazine pieces

- Obituaries

- Weddings and entertainment news

- Travel and sports articles

- Lists (such as a sidebar that listed the members of a congressional committee)

- Transcripts of speeches

- Corrections

- Repeated articles

- Headlines that mentioned the Senate only.[228]

These stories were considered inappropriate because they did not go to the essence of this dissertation's research question about the coverage of House caucus leadership messaging. When the random selection of articles from the list produced two different versions of the same article, often because of different filing times, the one with the larger word count was used. During the coding process, if it was determined that a selected article should be eliminated, it was discarded with no replacement made.[229]

Ultimately, a dataset of 3,096 articles was created; just over 103 articles per year. The range went from 87 total articles for 2010 to 135 in 1990. Those from the *New York Times* included 1,676 (54.1%) and those from the *Washington Post* included 1,420 (45.9%).

Each of these articles was read and coded. The full codebook can be found in Appendix C. Some of the key coding decisions included the following:

- Stories about the "economy" referred to issues involving national economic conditions and policy, including the federal budget, jobs, the minimum wage,

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[228] As this dissertation is focused on House leadership, articles that had a headline that referenced Senators or the Senate exclusively, with no mention of the House or its leaders, were eliminated.

[229] During the 101st Congress (1989 – 1990), Washington, DC Mayor Marion Barry was investigated, prosecuted and convicted of using illegal drugs. The *Washington Post* gave wide coverage to this case. One of the co-defendants in the case was Charles Lewis, a city employee. He too was subsequently convicted. At this time, a member of the GOP House leadership was Rep. Jerry Lewis (R-CA). A search using Lexis/Nexis Academic would bring up many of the Barry stories because the system appears to confuse one Lewis with the other. Thus, in articles that mentioned Charles Lewis in the text, Jerry Lewis was listed as one of the "key words" at the bottom of the page. These key words were not party of the article itself, just a part of the coding listed at the end. These articles did not mention congressional leaders of either party, individually or as a group.

I recognized this as a suspicious pattern after going through and marking every Nth story from the initial search. Therefore, when it came time to reading and coding the 50 randomly chosen stories, I opened each one on Barry and confirmed that it did not mention Rep. Jerry Lewis or any other congressional caucus leader as an individual or as a group. When this was the case, I selected the next appropriate article for my data set. As this additional selection was completely random, the selection process should not impact the overall results.

taxes, and overall federal spending. Stories that did not qualify included articles on general defense spending, foreign aid, federal salaries and benefits, international trade, and individual spending items, such as health care spending. Many press reports about congressional action involve some kind of discussion of federal spending. It was therefore important to include those that best reflected the broad economic debate.

- Articles about "foreign affairs" encompassed those relating to international trade, including free trade agreements, as well as nuclear arms negotiations, foreign military operations, and foreign aid, such as support for the Nicaraguan Contras. This category also includes coverage of the Iran-Contra scandal. That particular scandal focused on behavior by members of the executive branch, and therefore would not be included in the "scandal" category found in the codebook. Congressional involvement was not in the scandal itself, but rather in the investigation and debate over the policy implications that came after the scandal was discovered. For these reasons, coverage of Iran-Contra was included in "foreign affairs."

"Foreign affairs" does not include articles on domestic military base closings. It also doesn't include articles about funding of specific military programs, unless the article relates to an international response or political behavior. For example, the MX missile funding debate is not included unless the article covers the USSR's response as well.

- In the examination of stories involving congressional scandals, this dissertation considered specific allegations, trials, and investigations of members of the House of Representatives relating to ethical issues. "Scandal" does not include articles on ethics reform. The idea is to focus on the alleged infraction, not attempts to ensure it doesn't happen again. The scope of the scandal category also does not include stories about alleged mistakes by members of the House that are not ethical in nature, such as poorly worded comments that might be construed as bigoted. These might be called "scandals" in some of the coverage, but they do not meet the threshold established here. Further, this category limits itself to scandals involving members of the House, and not the Senate or White House. Therefore, coverage of Iran-Contra and any of the Clinton scandals, including Whitewater and the Monica Lewinsky affair, are not included in this category.

- Periodically, a member of the House leadership would represent a district in the metropolitan New York or Washington, DC areas. It was determined that the additional coverage for these "hometown" representatives was negligible and therefore the articles were all included during the random selection. Further, by using both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* in the data set, any potential impact of such localized coverage by one paper would be further diminished.

In sum, the dataset includes 3,096 randomly articles that, at a minimum, mention Democratic or Republican House caucus leaders by name or as a group. The articles come from the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, used here as proxies for all media coverage. Unlike many other studies, this data set covers an extended period of time – 30 years – encompassing a wide range of political eras in the House, along with changes in leadership, the media landscape, and politics in general.

Twelve independent variables were developed, each reflecting a part of existing scholarship or popular assumptions about media behavior and the conditions under which coverage is generated. The dependent variable – the quantity and quality of coverage – was operationalized five different ways to reflect the broad diversity of how one can understand "media coverage." The results contribute to the field by providing a more robust assessment of how the press covers congressional leadership. In combination with the qualitative research, this dissertation offers a broader understanding of how collective communications in Congress happens and the results of those leadership efforts under various conditions.

CHAPTER 4

THE PROCESS OF LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATIONS:

FIVE CONTEXTUAL ELEMENTS

Introduction to Qualitative Research

In terms of Congress and the press, the three-decade period that transpired

between January 1981 and November 2010 might most appropriately be described using

the words of Charles Dickens: "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times."[230] It

was a period of newfound competition among the two parties. Press coverage expanded

to include televisions in the chamber of the House, with footage suddenly available to an

entire nation that may have only seen such images in portrayals by Hollywood in *Mr.*

Smith Goes to Washington or *Advise and Consent*.[231] Talk radio began to engage the

public in new ways that traditional newspapers could not, and eventually social media

lowered the barriers for almost anyone to become a pundit and prognosticator. It was an

era that unleashed the most open exchange of information and news about Congress in

the nation's history.

And yet, over this same time, the American electorate grew more cynical and less

engaged. Congress itself, as either a cause or consequence of the public's increasing

hostility – and perhaps both – became much more partisan with countless representatives

citing the bitter tone as a reason to leave elected office. Scandals enveloped two speakers

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[230] Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001).

[231] The House began gavel-to-gavel coverage of its floor proceedings on March 19, 1979. The Senate allowed similar coverage beginning June 2, 1986. http://radiotv.house.gov/about-the-gallery/broadcast-milestones-in-the-house-of-representatives.
http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/live_television.htm Both items accessed July 14, 2015.

of the House directly, and several other members. In June of 1981, Congress had a 38% approval rating according to the Gallup Poll. That rose to a high of 57% in February 1998. A mere twelve years later, in November of 2010, Congress's public approval stood at 17%, foretelling the historic low of 9% that was to come a few years later.[232] For American citizens, the openness and public accessibility that was expanded in this 30-year period was only matched by the growing disdain they had for the institution itself.

The story being told in this dissertation covers January 1981 through November 2010. What transpired in those years had its roots in the decades leading up to its start and continues to have an impact on our nation in the years since. Utilizing 19 interviews with former communications staffers for top House officials, conducted during the summer of 2012, I tell the story of how House caucus leaders acted as communicators for their respective party caucuses in Congress, and for the parties as a whole.[233] Over these three decades, House leaders had to navigate the shifting political and media terrain, adapting with alacrity. They embraced new thinking about the role of communications from a national level, and they adopted new procedures to take advantage of the new media formats that were becoming available to them. The staff interviews that provide the data for this chapter help explain this process.

Interestingly, in both the process of developing a message and, even more so, in the process of evaluating the message's effectiveness, House caucus leaders went for 30 years largely doing the exact same thing. There was always some small group of leaders and staff, frequently augmented by other members of Congress and outside consultants,

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[232] http://www.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx Accessed on July 18, 2014. This example leaves out the historic and meteoric rise in approval ratings in the immediate aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, that I consider an outlier.

[233] The schedule of interviews, along with the script for my guided interview questions can both be found in the Appendices B and B1.

who developed the key national messages that would then be pushed out through the media. When it came time to assess whether a message worked or not, it is surprising to see how many senior communications staffers simply had a "gut check" basis for their answer. The metrics that many ex-aides use today in the private sector were either not available to them or were ignored at the time. In the end, leaders in the House put a huge amount of time, resources, and personnel into national communications efforts and yet no one seems to have figured out, systematically, when it made a difference and when it did not.[234] The investments in national messaging relied upon another shifting assumption held by House caucus leaders: they, by virtue of being in the senior leadership positions, had an obligation to be national spokespersons for their party, and their caucus in particular. This assumption about themselves was reinforced by the widespread belief they had about their constituents in the House caucuses: the members expected House caucus leaders, because of their positions, to aggressively engage in communication activity on behalf of all of them.

The next several chapters tell the story how House caucus leaders developed their communications operations over this time period from several different angles:

Chapter 4 – Focusing on the shifting terrain, in politics and the media, as expressed in five contextual developments that took place during this 30-year period;

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 – By examining the process of message development, dissemination, and evaluation employed by House caucus leaders;

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[234] Part of the effort behind this dissertation is to answer that very question: Under what circumstances did House caucus leadership receive better or worse coverage?

Chapter 8 – Through the assumptions that the primary House leaders held about themselves, their duties, and what they believed their fellow partisans in their respective caucuses expected of them; and

Chapter 9 – By digging deeper into the nature of majority and minority status in the House, and the influence on communications when the White House was controlled by the same or different party.

The descriptions in this chapter comes from first-person accounts of senior level communications staffers who worked for House caucus leaders at some point over the thirty years, supplemented by information from existing scholarship and press accounts. The interviews the former communications staffers for House leaders were structured with the same set of questions, but open to long responses and follow-up questions.[235] These interviews focused on five key areas:

- How they developed a national message when working for a House caucus leader;[236]

- How they disseminated a national message when working for a House caucus leader;

- How they evaluated their national messaging when working for a House caucus leader;

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[235] Leech, 2002.

[236] As my focus was on the senior leadership who represented the entire caucus, I was searching for communications staff who worked for the speaker, majority leader, whip in the majority, the leader, whip and caucus/conference chair in the minority, and the chair of each party's respective campaign committee – the DCCC (Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee) for the Democrats and the NRCC (National Republican Congressional Committee) for the Republicans.

- The assumptions held by the leaders themselves and by the caucus members about the communications and messaging obligations of the leaders;

- The effect of political isolation in Washington, both in terms of majority/minority status in the House, and vis-à-vis the other power centers, especially the White House.

Altogether, I spoke to seven Democratic communications staff and 12 Republican communications staff. Though some agreed to allow their names to be cited in the acknowledgments sections of this dissertation, the interviews were all conducted with the promise that they would be identified in the main text using terms that would not make it obvious as to their respective identities. To help tell the story over such a long period, I often group together sub-groups of my interviewees into one of four different general time periods. The story being told here has a number of different narrative arcs and therefore it is difficult to apply a hard date to the beginning or end of any era within the thirty-year period. In addition, there are some communicators whose careers cross between the time periods, as did those of their bosses. That having been said, the four basic time periods used here – again, as a general tool to coalesce the commentary about what was happening when – include:

1981 through 1989 – The period largely defined by unchallenged Democratic control of the house and dominated by the speakerships of Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, Jim Wright, and Tom Foley, along with the steady minority leadership of Bob Michel.

1989 to 1996 – The period that perhaps best can be described as the Newt Gingrich era. The eventual speaker had a profound influence on House leadership communications, as will be discussed later.

1996 to 2004 – This was the post-Gingrich period, distinguished by the speakership of J. Dennis Hastert along with the heavy influence of majority leaders like Dick Armey and Tom DeLay, as well as the aggressive communications efforts of the minority Democrats led by Dick Gephardt.

2004 to 2010 – A period of great change and partisanship in the House where key leaders included Democrats Nancy Pelosi and Steny Hoyer and Republicans such as John Boehner and Eric Cantor.

My 19 interviews included as least four people who were working for House caucus leaders in each of these four eras.

Five Contextual Elements

Any effort to study how House caucus leaders dramatically expanded their communications efforts between 1981 and 2010 necessitates an appreciation of the shifting terrain in both politics and media that took place during this time period. It is within this context that the House caucus leaders operated and it was not a period of stability. Significant variables affected all of the dynamics involved with political communications and I have chosen to highlight five of them. Like story arcs in a nighttime television drama, there was a great deal of overlap with these variables,

allowing for a kaleidoscope of new situations into which leaders were thrust. They are the storylines that underlie the larger one being told in this dissertation.

The five contextual elements consist of:

(1)   The aftereffects of the 1970s reforms, which brought a more diffuse committee system in the House along with stronger central leaders, especially the speaker.

(2)   Critical personalities and ambition. As much as the House of Representatives is an institution, with its own norms, inertia, and path dependent activities, one cannot ignore the variable of personality. Individual leadership skills are, by definition, exclusive to each person, and therefore each situation is handled differently depending on who is in charge. House leaders such as O'Neill, Michel, Gingrich, Gephardt, and Pelosi shaped the functions of caucus leadership in profound and particular ways.

Further, within each party, "House caucus leadership" is not a not a monolith. The top four leaders on each side of the aisle in the House are frequently at odds over with each other over strategy, tactics, and plain ambition. While they all had the obligation – both self-imposed and expected by their fellow partisans in the House – to develop and deliver a strong, effective national message on behalf of the entire caucus, these efforts were often affected by the rivalries among the leaders themselves. Even if

not formally challenged, the perception of a threat to one's position would sometimes alter communications activity.[237]

(3)   **Increasing sophistication in messaging**, by which modern polling, and later focus groups, and even more sophisticated dial groups – instant response focus groups allowing participants to adjust their "approval/disapproval" at the moment they see or hear something –were used to shape messages to maximize their impact. Public opinion was, as the Constitutional framers intended, an exogenous force on the activities of House caucus leaders as measurement of it became more sophisticated.[238]

(4)   **Changing media landscape.** In the 1970s, the forums for congressional leadership messaging were dominated by just a handful of players. Over the next three decades, a whole new media landscape emerged, including the launch of the first national newspaper (*USA Today*), the creation of C-SPAN, then CNN and eventually the myriad of cable networks providing 24/7 news coverage, thereby effectively destroying any sense of a defined "news cycle."   In an America increasingly filled with what Joel Garreau famously coined "edge cities," in which there were fewer downtown neighborhoods, just sprawling suburbs, highways, and office parks, talk radio emerged as the new, universal town hall, the place for people to connect with each other.[239] While there had always been radio call-in shows, it was during this period that talk radio

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[237] As others have noted, the political outcome of institutions begins with an individual's cognitive process. How an individual inside an institution reasons and chooses a path dictates what happens before other structural restraints come to bear. See C. Mantzavinos, Douglass C. North and Sayed Shariq, "Learning, Institutions, and Economic Performance" *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 1 (Mar 2004): 75-84.

[238] See Francis G. Wilson, "The Federalist on Public Opinion," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (Winter 1942): 563-575. "In the government there must always be a clearly Democratic element, in this case, the House of Representatives which would stand in close sympathy with the people." (567-568).

[239] Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life On The New Frontier* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992).

became a political powerhouse, in particular with conservatives who found the venue to

be a good alternative to what they viewed as the mainstream media's liberal bias.[240]

Finally, the emergence of an online world recreated the entire media landscape all over

again. The Internet, in all its forms, offered a democratization of the news gatekeeper

role traditionally played by elites.[241] Others suggested that social media would open up

new worlds of political organization among like-minded individuals who could now

communication with each other much more easily.[242]

    (5)   Rise in partisanship. Other scholars have noted the reshaping of the

House as conservative Democratic districts largely came to be represented by

Republicans and moderate Republican districts were frequently taken over by

Democrats.[243] The resulting homogeneity of each side's caucus has been offered as

evidence that partisanship has risen dramatically in Congress over the last few decades.

However, in considering the rise in partisanship, there is much more to that story. The

1994 Republican takeover launched a new era of a competitive House, thereby enhancing

the partisan incentives for each side. This was especially true in the years when the GOP

majority had the slimmest of margins (as low as seven seats in the 107th Congress of

2001 – 2002). Furthermore, the bitterness over presidential elections, with partisans

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[240] Donna St. George, "Talk Radio Often Has Washington's Ear; The Medium Has Become a Powerful Source of Public Opinion," *Philadelphia Inquirer,* October 20, 1994.

[241] Bruce A. Williams and Michael X. Delli Carpini, "Monica and Bill: All The Time and Everywhere: The Collapse of Gatekeeping and Agenda Setting In the New Media Environment," *American Behavioral Scientist* 47, no. 9 (May 2004): 1208-1230; Ivan B. Dylko, Michael A. Beam, Kristen D. Landreville, and Nicholas Geidner, "Filtering 2008 US Presidential Election News on YouTube by Elites and Nonelites: An Examination of the Democratizing Potential of the Internet," *New Media and Society* 14, no. 5 (Aug 2012): 833-849.

[242] Joe Trippi, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Democracy, the Internet, and the Overthrow of Everything* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

[243] Drew DeSilver, "The polarized Congress of today has its roots in the 1970s," Pew Research Center, June 12, 2014. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/12/polarized-politics-in-congress-began-in-the-1970s-and-has-been-getting-worse-ever-since/ Accessed April 25, 2015.

routinely questioning the legitimacy of the opposite party's president, rose to new heights in this era.[244] Indeed, such vitriol became easier to disseminate, and profit from, under the changing media landscape, thereby providing a good example of how these narratives overlap and often enhance each other.

Aftereffects of the 1970s reforms

There were two primary functions of the House reforms of the 1970s.[245] First, reflecting a growing frustration with long-standing and entrenched committee chairmen, the changes limited the ability of those chairs to act on their own. The caucus members demanded more accountability to the larger House membership. This was accomplished by requiring that committee chairs be elected by the entire Democratic caucus in a secret ballot, rather than simply attaining the position by virtue of seniority. Additional reforms forced committee chairs to share power with subcommittee chairs as well.

The reformers recognized the need for strong organization and therefore, while pushing for a weakening of the committee chair system, they simultaneously advocated for and won a stronger central caucus leadership. The speaker would now be allowed to name all of the majority party members of the crucial Rules Committee, the body that determined the parameters (e.g., time of debate, permissible amendments, etc.) under which legislation would be brought to the floor. In addition, the speaker was also given

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[244] As the disputed 2000 presidential election was being adjudicated, Americans on both sides of the aisle were prepared to question the legitimacy of the either side, depending on who eventually was determined to be the "winner." http://www.people-press.org/2000/12/01/many-question-bush-or-gore-as-legitimate-winner/ Accessed on July 14, 2015.
    Barack Obama's election in 2008 did not dissuade numerous top Republicans, including Obama's 2004 U.S. Senate opponent, former U.N. Ambassador Alan Keyes and Donald Trump, from fanning theories that questioned the new President's legitimacy based on questions about his place of birth. http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0311/51473.html#ixzz1GsPWRHLL
http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/washington/2009/02/obama-birth-cer.html Both accessed on July 14, 2015.
[245] Davidson, Oleszek, and Lee, 2010.

the power to refer bills to more than one committee, thereby providing additional paths

for legislation to reach the floor and stifling the ability of one committee chair to

blocking any initiative with which he or she disagreed.

Providing powerful tools only brings about powerful leaders if those tools are

used, and used effectively. On the eve of the time period considered in this dissertation,

Democratic members saw that the enhanced subcommittee system "had hampered their

ability to accomplish policy and political goals" and therefore pushed for the top

leadership "to use their new power to overcome institutional fragmentation."[246] Thus,

entering the 1980s, in an outgrowth of the reforms of the 1970s, the speaker and central

leadership team were expected to do more to enhance the political and policy goals of the

caucus. Such expectations resulted in a newfound central messaging effort that was,

according to a Democratic communications staffer from the 1980s, "pretty coordinated at

least among the top leadership: speaker, majority leader, whip, even the caucus chair.

They were, in fact, reading from the same script."[247] Of course, "even if the leadership

was coordinated, [that] did not mean that everybody was going to buy into the same

message."[248] The Democrats in the House were going through significant changes in the

ideological diversity within their caucus and despite their large, and at the time,

seemingly endless, majorities, there was still great difficulty in unifying a plurality

around any given policy.

Congressional scholars sometimes fall into a tendency to use Democratic majority

leadership interchangeably with House leadership, and in the middle of nearly 50 years of

uninterrupted rule, it is not hard to understand why. However, one should recognize that

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[246] Davidson, Oleszek, and Lee, 2010, 163.
[247] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.
[248] Ibid.

these reforms were specific to the Democratic Party. Republicans did not have to follow it and indeed, when they came to power in January 1995, they imposed their own set up rule changes.[249] Both sets of reforms reinforced a distinction between general congressional leaders – such as committee chairs – who saw their position weakened, and caucus congressional leaders – such as the speaker – who saw their position enhanced. This delineation in leadership encouraged caucus leaders to apply themselves in different ways when it came to messaging. No longer was the leadership exclusively an "inside game," as Speakers John McCormack and Carl Albert had played. Central leadership was enhanced and that meant that Speaker Thomas "Tip" O'Neill would be expected to take on a different role, one involving more of an outside game, that of national spokesman.[250] Said one scholar, "We've created a situation where the real way you drive the legislative process is by influencing public opinion, rather than by trading for votes."[251] In the aftermath of the Reagan landslide of 1980, an election that left O'Neill as the top elected Democrat in Washington, he accepted this role and "transformed the speakership into an office of high national visibility."[252]

<u>Critical personalities and ambition</u>

Congressional history is not pre-ordained. The House of Representatives, despite its norms and routines, is still 435 individuals, each of whom has their own background, ideology, and motivations. While this dissertation argues that House caucus leaders, as a group, are frequently motivated to serve their fellow partisans with national messaging

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[249] Michael Wines, "Republicans Seek Sweeping Changes in House's Rules," *New York Times,* December 8,1994.
[250] Hedrick Smith's *The Power Game: How Washington Works* (1988) elaborates on this shift from an inside game to an outside game among political players in Washington, DC.
[251] Ronald M. Peters, Jr., quoted in Steven V. Roberts, "Speaker O'Neill: Hardball or Hand Grenades?" *New York Times*, June 7, 1984.
[252] Davidson, Oleszek, and Lee, 2010, 163.

efforts that adapted and grew over a pivotal 30-year period, it is also true that the story

being told here would be different if the leaders themselves were different. The impact of

select personalities, how they handled leadership roles and how they interacted with each

other, made the story happen as it did.

The End of an Era: O'Neill and Wright

O'Neill did more than any speaker before him in transforming the role of the

office when it came to messaging. He had led the Democratic majority through four

often difficult years of the presidency of Jimmy Carter, a period of a rising conservative

movement, and economic unrest. Facing the brave new world of a Ronald Reagan

presidency, including a Republican-controlled Senate, O'Neill ramped up his

communications efforts. "With Ronald Reagan in the White House, somebody had to

look out for those who were not so fortunate," said O'Neill. "That's where I came in."[253]

He hired a young congressional aide named Chris Matthews, who had previously served

in the Peace Corps and as a journalist, as his Press Secretary. At the time, most members

of Congress did not have anyone on staff with a similar title.[254] The speaker relied on

Matthews to help him challenge the popular Reagan brand through the media. Matthews

was soon promoted to the top staff position in the speaker's office. It was a tremendous

endorsement of the importance of press relations for House leadership.

Republican staffers working for leadership at the time were astonished to see how

O'Neill and Matthews were transforming the office. The young aide was the speaker's

mouthpiece and fiery advocate for the House Democrats. It was a veritable redefining of

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[253] Thomas P. O'Neill with William Novak, *Man of the House: The Life and Political Memoirs of Speaker Tip O'Neill* (New York: Random House, 1987), 331.
[254] Cook, 1989.

the role of press secretary.[255] In 1984, for example, more than 30 House Democrats

coordinated a campaign attack on Reagan economic policies in an appeal for young urban

professionals. The effort was not coordinated by the DCC but rather by Matthews,

operating out of O'Neill's office.[256] "Basically, press secretaries," explained a senior

level House communications staffer from the 1980s, "were there to field requests, to draft

responses, to kind of deal with constituent communications, and to be kind of the

gatekeeper to the member of Congress, to make sure that reporters' phone calls were

returned, et cetera, et cetera."

Another recalled that, while working for O'Neill, Matthews "made dramatic

changes in the O'Neill persona and how he presented himself to the media, just

revolutionary. Not particularly extraordinarily creative stuff but just smart stuff he did,

and Matthews was his own engine [when it came to generating press coverage.]."[257]

Following Democratic leadership meetings, the Republican staffer continued,

> "Chris Matthews would come back down the hall and plop in my office, and we'd talk for 15, 20 minutes, half an hour, after every one of those meetings.
>
> We still have a great relationship to this day because of that, but I have been in Chris's presence when he's introduced me to people and he talks about these great conversations we had. He goes on and on about them, and I just stay quiet and I laugh, because Chris would come into my office and he would talk for 20 or 25 minutes. I would only nod. I very seldom if ever expressed my opinions, and he would walk away saying, 'Great conversation.' That was Chris, and that was how he just kind of dominated communications, both his own personally and professionally with O'Neill."

The ascension of Rep. Tony Coelho from California to the leadership, first as a

three-term chairman (1982 – 1987) of the Democratic Congressional Campaign

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[255] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.
[256] James F. Clarity and Warren Weaver, Jr., "Today is Yuppies Day," *New York Times*. October 30, 1984.
[257] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.

Committee (DCCC), which was responsible for recruiting, training, and financing the party's congressional candidates, and then as the party's whip, further allowed O'Neill to move ahead with a new communications agenda from his perch in the leadership. According to one leadership aide at the time, Coelho "got it" – that is, he understood the investment necessary to build a national message based on constant polling.[258] Moving ahead with this new focus was not a simple decision because the investments necessary required a diversion of funds away from Democratic House members who had come to expect regular financial support.[259]

The brash, young Coelho ignored the critics and – with O'Neill's backing – pushed forward. It is clear that upon entering the leadership circle himself, only a few years after entering the House, Coelho had a very strong agenda to modernize and exploit modern communications tools. He revived the Democrats' fundraising and used much of the money to employ pollsters outside of the campaign seasons to help the Democrats generate a winning message.[260] This task that was given greater importance because of the effectiveness of Reagan – soon to be referenced as "the Great Communicator" – promoting the new GOP perspective from the White House.[261] The importance of this shift to national messaging should not be dismissed, for it appeared to be counter-intuitive. "Home style" was what congressional scholars referred to as the primary ingredient of an incumbent's ability to win every two years in their districts.[262] The idea

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[258] Harris, 2005, 137.
[259] Dudley Clendinen, "New Center Moves Democrats From Machine Age to TV Age," *New York Times,* February 3, 1984.
[260] Thomas B. Edsall, "Democratic Fund-Raising Strong; House Losses Are Held Down Despite Reagan's Landslide," *Washington Post*, November 12, 1984.
[261] Harris, 1985.
[262] Fenno, 1978, repr. 2002.

that national messaging made any difference for these members in their home districts surely seemed alien to many observers.

But O'Neill clearly bought into the new thinking and gave Coelho the freedom to begin creating the apparatus that would help the party as a whole. By 1984, under Coelho's leadership, the House Democrats built the Democratic Media Center, a Washington, DC townhouse retrofitted into a full-scale television production student solely focused on serving the needs of caucus members. "It's understanding that [television] is the future that is the future of politics," Coelho said at the time. "Those who are able to project their image on the tube are the ones who are going to be successful in politics. Whether you like it or not."[263] House caucus leadership communications efforts would never be the same.

O'Neill's rise in Democratic leadership coincided with that of his eventual successor as speaker, Rep. Jim Wright (TX). In 1976, with Speaker Carl Albert retiring, Majority Leader O'Neill was widely expected to move up to the top spot. The fight over who would replace O'Neill was largely centered on Caucus chairman Burton, Majority Whip John McFall, also of California[264] and Rep. Richard Bolling of Missouri. Wright wasn't giving much thought to jumping into the contest until it was suggested to him by a colleague. There was an opening for a "good-old-boy and a moderate" among the declared candidates and Wright chose to seize the opportunity.[265] He started behind as the others had been campaigning for months. Wright was also hampered because he was

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[263] Dudley Clendinen, "New Center Moves Democrats From Machine Age to TV Age," *New York Times,* February 3, 1984.

[264] The California delegation at the time contained about 10% of the entire Democratic caucus, thereby providing a geographic edge to anyone who could marshal and unify them. Decades later, Rep. Nancy Pelosi was able to exploit the same dynamic in her successful bids for leadership.

[265] John M. Barry, *The Ambition and the Power: The Fall of Jim Wright: A True Story of Washington* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989), 15.

not already in a major leadership position, only serving as one of several deputy whips at the time and as a member of the Public Works Committee. But he was ultimately successful by offering himself as someone different than the others, both geographically and ideologically. In addition, Wright was very effective at maximizing his personal relationships with members that he had cultivated since 1946 when he first was elected to the House.

Once in leadership, it was widely assumed that Wright would assume the speakership whenever O'Neill chose to retire. Until then, Wright's ambitious plans for the speaker's office were largely held in check by O'Neill. The Texan's vision revolved around aggressively and dramatically strengthening the office, and thereby congressional power vis-à-vis the presidency. Upon taking the gavel himself in January 1987, the Wright set out to revive the office with powers unseen in three-quarters of a century.[266] Not only would he rule with an iron fist, but he would lead the Democratic majority with a yearly agenda, including issues, such as foreign policy, that had been dominated by the White House at least since World War II. But Wright believed that Congress was a true co-equal branch of government and therefore, deference to the presidency was not part of his game plan when he was in charge.

Indeed, deference to anyone was not a big part of the Wright leadership program. One Democratic aide explained that "the contrast between O'Neill, sort of the grandfatherly come-on-sit-down-let's-just-talk-about-this, and Wright was stark."

> "Speaker Wright really drove a hard agenda. Hard enough so that he was beginning to sort of lose sympathetic support of some of the members of his own

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[266] Barry, 1989, 66.

caucus and when he got into ethics problems, he couldn't rely on the backing the way you might have [seen in the past with other leaders]."[267]

The growing antagonism among members against Wright was especially exploited by a relatively junior Congressman from Georgia, Rep. Newt Gingrich. Fearful of what an unchecked Wright speakership would look like, and eager to transform congressional Republicans into a majority party, Gingrich pursued an accusatory strategy that he explained this way:

> "Wright's a useful keystone to a much bigger structure. I'll just keep pounding and pounding on his ethics. There comes a point where it comes together and the media takes off on it, or it dies…. He's from Texas. He's been in politics over thirty years. An aggressive investigator with subpoena powers might find something."[268]

Thus, while O'Neill began transforming Democratic caucus leadership in terms of communications efforts, Wright did not make it nearly as large a personal priority. He was more focused on the legislative agenda, the inside game. Power, for Wright, was not necessarily expressed in high approval ratings for Congress but in legislative accomplishments, especially if the new laws demonstrated that the Congress was as strong as the White House.[269] Ignoring the movement to take national messaging more seriously would take its toll as Wright would eventually be undone by the efforts of Gingrich, a partisan opponent who elevated congressional communications strategy and tactics to an entirely new level.[270] To best understand the Gingrich communications

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[267] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.
[268] Barry, 1989, 6.
[269] Barry, 1989, 66.
[270] In 1988, the efforts of Gingrich and others led the House Ethics Committee to investigate allegations of potential violations of House rules by Wright. The committee, unanimously, accused the speaker of five counts of ethics infractions, totaling 69 separate violations, the following year. On May 31, 1989, Wright announced he would resign from his leadership position and as a member of Congress.

phenomenon, it is important to understand the nature of Republican leadership that came

before him, that of House Minority Leader, Rep. Bob Michel.

The Gentleman from Illinois: Michel

The importance of Bob Michel and how he shaped the development of House

leadership communications is driven by two factors. First, the election of Reagan gave

the Republican Party its greatest communications tool in years. From the bully pulpit of

the White House, the president was able to reach far beyond the corridors of power in

Washington to mobilize public opinion on behalf of his aggressive agenda, especially in

his first term. Michel, a combat veteran from World War II, was elected in 1956 when

Congress was a very different place from the one that was emerging when he assumed

leadership of the House in 1981. To become leader, he faced off in a furious battle

against Rep. Guy Vander Jagt of Michigan, who was fresh off his keynote to the 1980

Republican National Convention and a very successful term as head of the House GOP

campaign arm, the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC).[271]

Described by the Washington Post as, "a younger, flashier midwesterner," Vander Jagt

embraced the characterization and openly suggested that he "would be a more forceful

spokesman" for the party than Michel.[272]

But the need for a dynamic public face-of-the party who could play the outside

game didn't resonate with enough GOP caucus members in the winter of 1980. Michel

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[271] The Republicans picked up 36 House seats riding the Reagan coattails in 1980.

[272] Margot Hornblower, "Reps. Michel and Vander Jagt Battling Fiercely to Lead House GOP," *Washington Post*, December 8, 1980.

won 103 to 87, a victory for his "easygoing style" over the "hard-driving partisanship" of

Vander Jagt.[273] According to a former Michel aide.

> "One of the many reasons [why the Republican members] chose Bob was that
> they understood that for the next eight years, the Republican role in the House
> was going to be to enact the Reagan agenda, and in order to do that, you have to
> have a work horse, a legislator, and not a pontificator. They knew that Reagan
> was going to be the Republican messenger and nobody, nobody, was going to
> change that."[274]

By most accounts, this was fortunate for Michel, who was not viewed as an

especially adept communicator. "He was just more comfortable as a legislator," added

the former aide.[275] "His passion was on the policy side of it," explained another Michel

communications staff member.[276] Michel himself, in the heat of the leadership battle,

described his own personality traits to the media: "I don't crave the spotlight. I get more

joy and fun out of trying to orchestrate the talents of the others and trying to extract the

best. I don't have this insatiable lust to be 'Mr. Speaker.' I just want to be Bob."

[Emphasis added.][277] In hindsight, his words reveal a great deal about the contrast and

conflicts he would eventually have with Vander Jagt's successor at the NRCC, Rep.

Newt Gingrich.

It is not that Michel didn't communicate with the press or understand the

importance of it. The second factor in how Michel influenced the future of House caucus

leader communications was his policy of largely deferring those efforts to others, both

staff and in the caucus. According to leadership staff from the time, it was under Michel

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[273] Martin Tolchin, "Michel of Illinois Elected House's Republican Leader," *New York Times*, December 9, 1980.
[274] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.
[275] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.
[276] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.
[277] Margot Hornblower, "Reps. Michel and Vander Jagt Battling Fiercely to Lead House GOP," *Washington Post*, December 8, 1980.

that the Republican conference chair was charged with the responsibility for party

communications, largely through the creation and distribution of talking points that

Republican members could take home to their districts for use with constituents. Michel

wanted to be kept abreast of what was being communicated and how staff proposed it be

communicated, but he understood that the party spokesperson role was President

Reagan.[278]   Had Reagan not been elected, Michel might not have made it past Vander

Jagt in the leadership fight, and if he had, he certainly would have had to stretch his skills

as the party's 'default' communicator.[279]

Michel was facing a new generation of aggressive members of his caucus, much

like Democratic leaders in the 1960s and 1970s had to deal with the demands of the

Democratic Study Group (DSG) and, subsequently, the large freshman class of 1974,

including their insistence on House committee and leadership reforms. They were

certainly more media-savvy than their party's leader, and on their own initiative, they

pursued – sometimes individually, sometimes working together – their own media

strategies. In addition to Gingrich, this group of younger generation members, included

Reps. Scott Klug (WI) and (future Speaker) John Boehner (OH), who were leaders in the

very public effort to attack Democrats for their role in the House Bank scandal of the late

1980s. Reps. Trent Lott (MS) and Dick Cheney (WY) served as top leaders under

Michel and simultaneously pursued a more public, outside game, communications

agenda. Michel and his staff worked to accommodate them all. Because of their concern

with media attention, the younger members "were not traditional legislators," said one

former Michel leadership aide, who added that it may have been part of a generational

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[278] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.
[279] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.

disconnect between the older Michel and his deputies. "Some of the efforts that we made to be more inclusive were responding to that environment in dealing with someone in his 60s versus someone young and good looking, in their 30s, trying to position themselves as a spokesman for Republicans."[280] [281]

For Michel, creating institutional mechanisms for GOP House communications and not just deferring to, but welcoming and accommodating younger, aspiring leaders to step up as national spokesmen for the House Republicans, allowed him to pave the road for newer, telegenic, and media-savvy leaders. It was a logical step, given his skill set and the role he believed he needed to play. But as the Reagan presidency was winding down, many younger generation Republicans were still not satisfied with the party's leadership. They became increasingly agitated and pushed for a reframing of the party's congressional goal to include taking control of the House.[282] Of course, gaining the majority was always the stated goal, but few believed it to be realistic.[283] According to one GOP aide at the time:

> "Through most of the Reagan years, it was nice thinking about a Republican majority, we're working that way, yeah, yeah, yeah, but it wasn't real, and there were still a lot of the old bulls around who frankly didn't give a shit whether we got the majority or not, because they were comfortable doing what they were doing and winning by 70 percent."[284]

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[280] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.

[281] It should be noted that House Democrats faced a similar generational divide in their caucus. See Esther B. Fein, "Rangle's Charm an Ally in Race for Whip," *New York Times*, August 8, 1986.

[282] Don Phillips and Tom Kenworthy, "Gingrich Elected House GOP Whip; Increased Partisan Polarization Foreseen," *Washington Post*, March 23, 1989.

[283] Michel's comment in 1980 that he did not have an "insatiable lust to be 'Mr. Speaker,'" seems emblematic of the generational divide that confronted the House GOP. Gingrich and his allies wanted that title very much, and, according to Republican staff from the era, believed that the older members had grown too comfortable to do what was necessary to achieve it. (Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012)

[284] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.

The new wave of GOP thinking was driven in part by the ending of the Reagan presidency and partially by the intense dislike for the Wright agenda. In many ways, it made no difference to the House Republicans once Tom Foley was elevated to speaker following Wright's resignation. Foley's leadership style was more like O'Neill than Wright, but by then, the proverbial well was already poisoned. "Once Reagan was… leaving, that opened a whole Pandora's box of different kind of thinking and a much greater impatience now for winning the majority," recalled a senior Republican communications staffer.

> "The Macintosh / McIntyre thing [sic][285] was a pivotal historical event and just put those House Republicans on a whole new path. They now lusted after majority status, and Newt built on that. He fed it and turned it into something that was considered real."[286]

The Movement Leader: Gingrich

First elected to Congress in 1978, following two unsuccessful attempts in 1974 and 1976, Newt Gingrich was committed to reforming the Republican Party's efforts to win control of the House. The fact that this was his goal made him an iconoclast from the outset. Democrats had controlled the House since January 1955 and many Republicans had accepted the inevitability of their minority status. Gingrich thought otherwise and described himself as a leader of a political "movement" to transform both

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[285] The staffer quoted here referred to Mackintosh and McIntyre, when in fact the situation involved individuals named McCloskey and McIntyre. In November 1984, the candidates for Indiana's 8th district – incumbent Democrat Frank McCloskey and GOP challenger Richard D. McIntyre – fought to a virtual tie. While the Indiana Secretary of State, a Republican, issued a certificate of election to McIntyre, the House Democrats sent the matter to the House Administration Committee, which then oversaw a recount conducted by the federal General Accounting Office. The committee then voted, along party lines, to not count about 30 absentee ballots that were in dispute, thereby declaring McCloskey the winner. House Republicans vehemently protested the Democrats' actions, blocked House business from being conducted and upon the official seating of McCloskey, walked off the House floor en masse.

[286] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.

the Republican Party and the nation.[287] His primary tool was communications. "Nobody embodied the efforts to get across the Republican message and to strategize on the Republican message better than Newt," said one former communications aide who worked for him. "Even though he wasn't [originally] part of the leadership, he was very much focused on message development and communication and definitely was part of some groups that met regularly to do that."[288]

As the head of GOPAC, a political action committee founded in 1979 by Gingrich and some other conservatives, the Georgia representative augmented his congressional duties with efforts to educate and train current House members, along with state and local Republican activists who then might run for Congress. Its goal was "to both create and disseminate the doctrine of a majority Republican Party."[289] GOPAC helped fund the production and distribution of cassette tapes featuring Gingrich lecturing about how to most effectively use language to frame issues in debates and political discourse. As some of those who listened and absorbed these very popular recordings eventually got elected to Congress, they joined others who were already there who saw Gingrich as their leader and top communicator, and understood the role communications could play in their efforts to win a majority.[290]

> "A lot of members thought of Newt in that spokesperson role because he was at GOPAC. He did [audio cassette] tapes that they would put in their cars. They would ride around their districts and they would learn the language to use in discussing these issues. He's always kind of been about communications and teaching others what words to use and how to frame things. A lot of them came

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[287] Lois Romano, "Newt Gingrich, Maverick on the Hill: The New Right's Abrasive Point Man Talks of Changing His Tone and Tactics," *Washington Post*. January 3, 1985.

[288] Republican staffer B, July 30, 2012.

[289] Charles R. Babcock, "Use of Tax-Exempt Groups Integral to Political Strategy," *Washington Post*, January 7, 1997.

[290] Sam Walker, "GOPAC Role in GOP Revolution," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 15, 1995. http://www.csmonitor.com/1995/1215/15012.html Accessed July 14, 2015,

to Washington saying this is the guy that taught me everything I know about how to communicate on this issue or a message that would resonate or messages that would resonate.

"He not only taught people. Basically, he was telling them, 'You can do this. Here's a tape, I'm going to walk you through the process. I'm going to walk you through these issues, and I'm going to educate you about these issues and tell you how to talk about them. You can tailor them in your own way.'

"As many people would pop these tapes into the car they became supporters. They looked to him for guidance on these issues, because he was sort of their first mentor, if you will, on this journey of running for elected office."[291]

A second way that Gingrich transformed the use of communications in the House was through the use of special order speeches. Most of what goes on in the well of the House is time-restricted. A defined set of minutes are allowed for any given debate or legislative activity on the floor. Special orders were developed to have a "non-legislative debate." It was a way for members to speak on any topic. Routinely, these speeches are done at the end of the day following the conclusion of legislative business. Representatives can speak on any topic they wish for up to an hour.

Typically, just a handful of people were present to hear these remarks, often delivered before a nearly empty chamber.[292] But in March 1979, C-SPAN – a joint effort by American cable television companies – began providing a live feed of House proceedings. Gingrich began to use that time to attack the Democratic majority and now was beamed into hundreds of thousands of homes.[293] Though initial discounted as a firebrand with little support, he provided red meat for conservatives with colorful attacks

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[291] Republican staffer B, July 30, 2012.
[292] While it is true that all such remarks, regardless of the size of the crowd, would be placed into the Congressional Record, it is doubtful that that official document was widely read outside by the general public.
[293] T.R. Reid, "Congress: The Best Little Soap Opera on Cable," *Washington Post*, April 29, 1984.

on Democrats, including at one point in May 1984 accusing the majority of being "blind to communism."[294]

In the following days, O'Neill was furious and insisted that Gingrich had attacked the patriotism of members of Congress. C-SPAN, at the direction of the House Democrats who controlled the cameras, were soon required to periodically pan across the floor of the chamber in an effort to show that the special orders speaker was talking to a virtually empty room. Gingrich was only more emboldened and later that month repeated his attacks on Democrats and foreign policy while O'Neill presided over the full House. In an unprecedented move, O'Neill stepped down from the rostrum to speak. Gingrich was more than happy to stand toe-to-toe with the speaker. The debate, full of interruptions and raised voices, was a shocking display, given the House's typical decorum in all forms of debate. The confrontation, recorded live, made the nightly news on all three networks. In a speech to an outside group some months later, Gingrich elaborated on his strategy and the defining episode of the O'Neill confrontation. "The number one fact about the news media is they love fights," he said.[295] His special orders speeches had been,

> "organized, systematic, researched, one-hour lectures. Did CBS rush in and ask if they could tape one of my one-hour lectures? No. But the minute Tip O'Neill attacked me, he and I got 90 seconds at the close of all three network news shows. You have to give them confrontations. When you give them confrontations, you get attention; when you get attention, you can educate."

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[294] David Osborne, "The Swinging Days of Newt Gingrich" *Mother Jones*, November 1, 1984. http://www.motherjones.com/politics/1984/11/newt-gingrich-shining-knight-post-reagan-right Accessed August 22, 2015.
[295] Quoted in Osborne, *Swinging Days of Newt Gingrich*, 1984.

The ultimate value of television cameras recording congressional action can certainly be debated,[296] but what is unquestioned is that, unlike any Republican before him, Gingrich was using communications to mobilize and re-shape the GOP House membership in his own image. When Minority Whip Dick Cheney left the House to become Secretary of Defense under President George H.W. Bush, Gingrich immediately entered the race to replace him. He faced off against Rep. Ed Madigan, who, like Michel, was from Illinois. The Georgia congressman beat him 87-85.[297] Gingrich now had more standing, resources, and leverage with which to continue his efforts. Of course, by virtue of being in leadership, he was less free to do everything or say anything. According to one of Gingrich's aides,

> "it was like suddenly to have the power to implement the things that he wanted, having more power to be able to implement the communications efforts that he had worked on when he didn't have the same platform. So yes, it was definitely, it was a learning process for both him and for the party because of course he was used to not having such power and such a platform and having to, he had both more freedom to act in ways that he knew would get attention or directions he thought the party should be going on.

> "But then that also came with, I want to say, maybe 'constraint' is the right word. Once he joined the leadership, he wasn't just speaking for himself anymore or a small subset of the House Republicans. He was representing the entire Republican Party. So that was a learning process for him that took a few incidences where he had to learn, 'oh gosh I can't just go out there and say whatever I feel like. I'm speaking for the whole body of the Republicans.' So it was certainly a great advantage to him to be able to have this platform and have this new power but he had to learn to use it on behalf of the whole House Republican Party."[298]

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[296] One Republican leadership aide from the 1990s lamented that, "real debate stopped in Congress…. when they put TV cameras in the chamber. There's no real debate anymore. It's all show. Newt was one of the guilty reasons for that because he used to go on the floor and scream at night when no one was there." Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.

[297] Don Phillips and Tom Kenworthy, "Gingrich Elected House GOP Whip; Increased Partisan Polarization Foreseen," *Washington Post*, March 23, 1989.

[298] Republican staffer B, July 30, 2012.

Having taken on O'Neill and then Wright, Gingrich had set a new standard for the use of communications in the House. Now the number 2 member of the House minority and claiming a mandate for an end to the "go along-get along attitude" he and his supporters assigned to Michel's leadership, Gingrich pulled together the elements that led to the perhaps the single most dramatic moment in politics in the last 25 years: the 1994 Republican takeover of the House, which included, it should be noted, the toppling of yet another Democratic speaker, Tom Foley.[299] Here again, Gingrich used communications in a way that would thereafter affect how House leaders handled messaging, with the most prominent example being the Contract with America.

The Contract with America consisted of 10 promises that Republican candidates – incumbents and challengers – vowed to enact if they were given the majority in the 1994 elections. The items fell into three categories: core conservative issues, internal congressional reforms, and oversight.[300] At the time of its introduction in the fall of that election year, Democrats publicly welcomed the new-fangled manifesto, arguing that elections were won in local election districts, not with national agendas.[301] They also believed that some parts of the Contract were too extreme for the voters in pivotal swing districts.[302] Republican leaders in the House scoffed at this argument. The Contract had been polled and tested extensively and "designed to resonate with the public."[303] Majority Leader Dick Armey (TX) noted later: "I guess it never occurred to [the

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[299] John Harwood, "GOP Takes a Feisty Approach," *St. Petersburg (FL) Times*, March 26, 1989.
[300] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.
[301] Katharine Q. Seelye, "Clinton and Allies Rediscover Their Voice in Writing the Epitaph for Congress," *New York Times*, October 9, 1994.
[302] R.H. Melton, "'Contract' May Cut Two Ways; Hopefuls on Both Sides Seize on GOP Pledge," *Washington Post*, September 29, 1994.
[303] Ben Pershing, "10 Years Later; Lessons to be Learned from GOP's '94 takeover Republican Revolution Evidence that Change is Decade-Long Process," *Roll Call*, September 8, 2003.

Democrats] that we had checked that out."[304] Public polling at the time also showed that

– though the individual items might be popular – very few Americans even knew about

the Contract or its contents[305] and even Republicans who worked as House leadership

communications staff at the time believe that the Contract itself didn't make the critical

difference that year.[306]

Nonetheless, the 1994 GOP victories reinforced a popular image at the time that

the Contract was a brilliant communications strategy and this myth surrounding the

Contract had a major impact on congressional behavior for years to come.[307] As with

many things in Washington, it is the perception that shapes decision-making. After 1994,

the idea that communicating an agreed-upon national agenda, developed by caucus

leadership, helped you win elections was given credence. This only served to further

strengthen the demand for messaging developed and initiated by the top leaders in the

House. As one GOP communications aide expressed:

> "It was kind of a fundamental belief that communications was critical. That maybe was different from previous generations because Newt and [Texas Rep. Dick] Armey put together the Contract with America and went out and talked about it all over America, went on talk radio, and did interviews. It was such a big part of getting the majority in the first place, that automatically, we just assumed [House leadership communications] was a critical part of being able to do our jobs going forward and maintaining the majority."[308]

The education efforts on messaging and communications strategies, the use of

special orders speeches, and the Contract with America were three ways in which

Gingrich changed House leadership communications. However, in an ironic twist,

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[304] Ibid.
[305] George F. Bishop, *The Illusion of Public Opinion: Fact and Artifact in American Public Opinion Polls* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2005), 145.
[306] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012; Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.
[307] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.
[308] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.

several mistakes involving communications and messaging contributed to his eventual

downfall. "It was innate in who he is and how his brain works that he wants to get out

there and tell you what he is thinking or how he is thinking and how he thinks it should

be said or that type of stuff," explained a Republican aide from the time.[309] Many staffers

believed that the pontificating he could do at any given moment on virtually any issue, a

unique communications quality, was part of his success and there was a general attitude

among staffers that they had to "let Newt be Newt" and they would clean up whatever

mistakes were made later. By 1996, that strategy was proving to be a political liability

for Republicans. As much as House caucus leaders deliver for their members by

creatively, aggressively, and effectively using communications, those same members will

turn on their leaders if those efforts are not working. Gingrich came under investigation

for ethics violations, and would eventually be fined $300,000, and though he seemed to

survive that scandal, he was certainly weaker on the very issue – congressional ethics –

that had helped his rise to power.[310]

In addition, reporters found the speaker so accessible and quotable that message

discipline was hard to come by, according to leadership staff at the time. On the flight

back from the funeral of slain Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, the press

described a visibly upset Gingrich complaining about the placement of his seat on Air

Force One. The episode was widely portrayed as the actions of a spoiled and petulant

leader.[311] House Republicans had had enough and Conference chairman John Boehner

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[309] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012.

[310] Jeanne Cummings, "Gingrich's Future Role Debated as Probe Ends." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 21, 1997.

[311] Lars Erik-Nelson, "Gingrich Shows Pique & Volleys Crisis Reveals Newt Depths of Pettiness," *Daily News (NY)*, November 16, 1995; Mercury News Wire Services, "Democrats Capitalize on Gingrich's Claimed Snub," *San Jose Mercury News*, November 17, 1995; Mary McGrory, "Newt-mare Come True," *Washington Post*, December 10, 1995.

faced his speaker and demanded that he "shut up."[312] New staff was brought in who imposed, and Gingrich accepted, severe discipline on his communications activities.

In the following two years, there was an attempted – but failed – coup attempt against Gingrich by some House Republicans, including several in leadership. Despite his survival, when the conference embarked on an ill-fated impeachment strategy related to President Bill Clinton's testimony in the Monica Lewinsky case, House Judiciary Committee chairman Rep. Henry Hyde (IL) was very purposefully placed as the face of the effort, not Gingrich.[313] The 1998 election results saw the Republicans lose five seats, and the speaker accepted the blame.[314] It was the worst midterm performance by a party that was not in control of the White House in more than 60 years. Holding their leader responsible for the strategy and messaging that led to the poor electoral showing, internal support for the speaker collapsed and Gingrich resigned from the speakership and the House in January 1999.[315]

Though his impact on shaping what and how House caucus leaders communicate was historic, it also appears that it was messaging – the undisciplined riffs, the tantrum on Air Force One in front of the press, and the choice to push the Monica Lewinsky scandal as a major theme in the 1998 campaign – eventually led to his undoing.[316] The Democrats, still smarting from their historic loss only four years before, burned with a desire to get back to the majority and hoped that the GOP strategy initiated by Gingrich

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[312] David Maraniss and Michael Weiskopf, *Tell Newt to Shut Up: Prize-Winning Washington Post Journalists Reveal How Reality Gagged the Gingrich Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
[313] Guy Gugliotta, "The Right Guard; Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde, the House's Unimpeachable Character," *Washington Post*, May 12, 1998.
[314] Mark Sherman, "Special Report: Newt Gingrich; History's Hard Knocks." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 8, 1998.
[315] Guy Gugliotta and Juliet Eilperin, "Gingrich Steps Down as Speaker in Face of House GOP Rebellion," *Washington Post*, November 7, 1998.
[316] Alison Mitchell, "The Speaker Steps Down: The Career; The Fall of Gingrich, an Irony in and Odd Year," *New York Times*, November 7, 1998.

would backfire.[317] But despite the party's historic gains in 1998, they would remain in

the minority for several more years.

The Leader in the Wilderness: Gephardt

When Rep. Dick Gephardt (MO) became majority leader in 1989 – replacing

Foley who had moved up to replace the resigning Wright – he was 48 years old, just 12

years junior than the new speaker from the State of Washington, but in terms of his views

on communications, he was eons away. Foley played the inside game of congressional

leadership, while Gephardt was not just younger and more telegenic, but far more

interested in modern communication strategies and tactics. He had already run for

president in 1988 and understood the role that national messaging could play for the

ambitions of his party, his caucus and himself. Foley was involved with trying to keep

unity among the often fractured Democrats and chose to give Gephardt wide latitude

when it came to developing and disseminating national messages from caucus leadership.

When it came to communications and the new speaker, "it didn't really interest them, I

think, all that much. They were happy to have someone else do it. They were very much

into the constitutional responsibilities of the job [of leader] and were happy to delegate to

Dick the political responsibilities of the job."[318]

The challenge for Gephardt was that many members of the Democratic majority

didn't care about national messaging. With so many of them safely ensconced in their

seats, and the Democratic majority enjoying a historic run as the majority, caucus

members weren't particularly interests in promoting broad-based themes stemming from

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[317] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.
[318] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.

the leadership.[319] Of course, they were always looking for local media coverage, but according to Democratic leadership staff from the time, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, few were ready to follow Gephardt's lead. Part of the significance of Gephardt as a leader was how he gradually educated his fellow partisans in the House to understand and appreciate the modern use of national messaging, and upgraded the caucus's ability to implement it. He did this at a time when the Democrats went from majority to minority status, a stunning development that left Gephardt, as the new leader, with the heavy responsibility of holding his congressional party together when it easily could have fallen apart, torn asunder by regional and ideological factions.

Initially, Gephardt worked with Democratic National Committee (DNC) chairman Ron Brown to rally the caucus around the idea of winning the presidency in 1992. The DNC's involvement allowed for the more aggressive use of polling and additional briefings on what the pollsters were learning. "This was a degree of collaboration," explained one Gephardt aide,

> "that had not previously taken place and it helped up the game of the members of Congress in the area of communications because they were getting more immediate feedback on the public opinion environment and not necessarily their individual efforts but the party's efforts, if you will, of moving the needle in any way."[320]

The push to use communications to attack the presidency of George H.W. Bush was important because it was argued that only with a Democratic president would many of the legislative objectives shared by a majority of the caucus be enacted. However, even this appeal often fell on deaf ears.

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[319] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.
[320] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.

"At that stage of the Democratic Party's history and at that stage of the Congress's history, there was a real indifference among some Democrats as to whether it was important to elect a Democratic president because they had their jobs; they had their committee assignments; they could send pork back to their districts. For them, life was good regardless of the direction of the country and regardless of who served in the White House."[321]

One anecdote from a senior Gephardt aide offers an insight into the mindset that Gephardt was trying to change. In 1989, the House was debating a controversial piece of legislation relating to the massive savings-and-loan crisis facing the country at the time, when hundreds of local banks were facing bankruptcy, as were their depositors, because of failed investments in a real estate market that had subsequently collapsed. There was little unity on the bill despite the crisis.[322]

"Dick was watching amendment after amendment that he favored be defeated…. It was just carnage on the floor.

"At one point, as he's watching this thing unfold, he's getting poked from behind and he turns around and it's Congressman Frank Guarini of Hudson County, New Jersey.
"Dick says, yes Frank, what's up?
"Frank Guarini says, Dick, I'm really angry.
"Dick says, oh no, what's wrong?
"He said, you know those commemorative coins that are being given to members of Congress? How come Senators are getting gold coins and members of the House are getting bronze coins? It's not fair."

The aide then explained:

"You cannot overestimate the amount of housekeeping and creature comfort for attending members of the leadership do as routine parts of their jobs, as qualifications for getting the job and as for minimums for retaining the job…. I want a better office. I want an additional staff person. I'm getting crap because of my rental car bill, whatever it is. There's a lot of things that we would regard as babyish. Needs that they feel that must be attended to, by the way. There are times for some of these people when communicating a national message couldn't be further from their minds because the issue at that particular moment is not

[321] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.
[322] Nathaniel C. Nash, "Politics and the Crisis in the Savings and Loan Industry," *New York Times*, June 21, 1990.

whether the savings-and-loan bill goes up or down but whether they're getting a gold or a bronze commemorative coin."[323]

Thus, Gephardt faced a challenge similar to that which faced Gingrich. Each had a caucus filled with a large proportion of members who were content with how things were. Both Gephardt and Gingrich had to work to break through their colleagues' complacency and lethargy. Gingrich got started earlier and therefore it is not surprising the efforts of the Gephardt team, in many ways, mirrored those of Gingrich and his supporters. Indeed, Democratic leadership aides admit that they were trying to catch up to the still-minority Republicans, in terms of communications activity. Gingrich's tactics had put Democrats on the defensive and Gephardt's team wanted to respond in kind. It was under Gephardt that the Democratic caucus initiated messaging meetings and began to use special orders speeches, along with "one-minutes" (another form of non-legislative debate) on a consistent basis, as the Republicans had been doing for a several years. He also initiated an annual "message retreat" for the top House leaders and especially those members who were most active in the national messaging operation. It was a two-day, off-site conference with pollsters and analysts, designed to think broadly about what Democrats are trying to say and the best way to say it.[324]

In 1992, the Clinton victory did lead to several pieces of long-stifled Democratic legislation being passed, including the Family and Medical Leave Act and the Brady Bill.[325] The new administration also embarked on an ill-fated two-year effort to establish national health care. Among the many mistakes made in this failed initiative was a lack of

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[323] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.
[324] Tom Kenworthy, "House Retreats Proliferate; Democrats Go Underground Twice This Year," *Washington Post*, January 19, 1990.
[325] The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) provided 12 weeks of unpaid leave, with job protection, for certain medical and family reasons. The Brady Bill required a 5-day waiting period before one could purchase a handgun.

effective communications from both the White House and the Democrats in Congress.

Democrats began to recognize the damage that such poor national messaging had done to

their caucus too late. The election of 1994, with the widespread losses of Democrats who

had been considered institutional players on Capitol Hill, including Speaker Foley,

shocked the remaining members of the caucus. Gephardt, the first Democratic minority

leader in four decades, had to rebuild from scratch. Many of his fellow partisans in the

House drew lessons from the effective communications of the Gingrich-led Republicans

on the health care initiative and the Contract with America. "From that point on,"

explained on Gephardt staff member,

> "there was a greater sense that there had to be a national message, and that
> Congress, and Congressional leadership, could play that role…. There were a lot
> of things that went on when Mr. Gephardt became the Democratic leader to try
> and develop some systems to be able to do that. I think there was probably more
> staff attention paid to communications at that point. More people were assigned,
> not just to do sort of press, and the traditional press secretary role, but to do some
> bigger picture communication strategy."[326]

The post-1994 world for the House Democratic communications effort was not

only distinguished by a far greater acceptance of the role that national messaging needed

to play in the future success of the caucus, but also by new strategies that the Gephardt

team began using. Given what was perceived as the Republicans' dominance in the

emerging format of politically-oriented talk radio, Democrats sought to use local media

as a channel for themselves. "We felt like we could do more with local media,"

explained one Democratic communication aide from the 1990s, "do more with sort of

having a lot of individual members coalesce around certain messages and fan out across

the country and back in our home markets. And I think there was [after 1994] a

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[326] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.

willingness among members to try and take a national message and localize it for the greater good of winning the House back."[327]

Other efforts involved the caucus leadership accepting and using the new technology that was suddenly available. One example was the newfound ability to engage in electronic town halls in multiple districts. The new medium allowed members to communicate and engage with constituents even when they were still in Washington. In one instance, House and Senate Democratic leaders came together to pledge their continued support for Social Security and Medicare at the Truman Library in Independence, Missouri. The event was transmitted via satellite to several other cities and key venues across the country, including the Democratic National Committee headquarters in Washington. DC.[328] Members of Congress in those areas were able to participate in the Missouri "conversation" even though they might have been thousands of miles away in their own communities. It was a clear sign that Gephardt was transforming the attitude and capabilities of his caucus when it came to modern communications.

Among the responsibilities incumbent upon House caucus leaders are tasks involving attaining or maintaining one's majority status. (In the Gingrich case, of course, failing to meet expectations is one way the caucus judges leaders.) These leaders are therefore expected to lead on national fundraising, candidate recruitment, and strategy, including national communications strategy. For Gephardt, it went beyond that. He was trying to keep his remaining incumbents inspired to stay in Congress and to excite the most attractive candidates to run against incumbent Republicans. In the aftermath of

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[327] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.

[328] William H. Freivogel, "Democrats Laud Medicare, Blast GOP at Town Meeting," *St. Louis (MO) Post-Dispatch*, July 31, 1995.

1994, neither was an easy task. Events like the Truman Library teleconference generated

coverage, and the coverage helped with these other tasks. One former Gephardt aide

explained:

> "It was not only just getting the message out, which I think was effective for that
> moment, but it was also about conveying a sense of confidence in terms of both to
> candidates, to members, you know, members thinking about retiring, people
> thinking about running, that we actually had, you know, something to say as a
> congressional party….

> "In the end, it was one event, [the Truman Library event] was 48 hours of media
> coverage, highly effective. But it was actually about all of the members that you
> touched, all of the candidates that you touched, the projection out of, you know,
> that we were saying something coherent together, you know that I think had more
> of a lasting impact…..We hadn't really done stuff like that before. People felt like
> they were part of something."[329]

Another former Democratic communications staffer added that "the one central

goal… was to take back the House," and then continued:

> "It was, how do we communicate best in a way that will help us take back the
> House. That was the organizing principle. How you do that? You have the
> national press corps that you have to convince that you know what the hell you're
> doing, that you have an agenda, that you're aggressive, that you're doing all the
> things you need to do to keep the majority off balance. You're getting a broader
> message out that you absolutely want to filter down to Topeka's first district about
> this is what separates us, this is why they stink and this is why we're good, and it's
> mostly about why they stink because that's much easier to get everyone interested
> in than the positive agenda."[330]

In the immediate aftermath of the 1994 elections, with a completely stunned

caucus, Gephardt chose to use his new position as minority leader to reshape the national

messaging operation for the congressional Democrats. His efforts put the party on a new

trajectory, and he found a much wider internal acceptance of what kinds of coordinated

messaging was needed to win. Though ultimately he fell short of his personal goal of

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[329] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.
[330] Democratic staffer, July 31, 2012.

becoming speaker, Gephardt made a significant difference at a critical juncture for his party. As one former aide said: "I think, in some ways, the genius of Gephardt's leadership at the time was that he made members and staff and activists and donors feel like it was worth sticking around."[331]

Leading with New Media: Nancy Pelosi

The failed coup against Gingrich in 1997 broke down because the leaders of the rebellion could not agree on who would become the next speaker. The emergence of Rep. Dennis Hastert (IL) was the compromise but top Republican leaders continued to work as much on their own as together. During these days in the first decade of the 21st century, Rep. Nancy Pelosi (CA) emerged as the new face of congressional Democrats, still wallowing in the minority. Born into a political family – her father and her brother served as Mayors of Baltimore and her father also was elected to Congress – she was first elected to the House in 1987.[332] Part of her political success was a careful cultivation of financial donors across the country. She became the party's most prolific fundraiser and regularly held events in nearly 100 cities in the run-up to the campaign.[333] This network became part of her national political organization that led to her raising over $50 million for fellow Democrats in the 2005 – 2006 cycle.[334]

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[331] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.
[332] https://pelosi.house.gov/biography/biography. Accessed July 21, 2015; David Von Drehle and Hanna Rosin, "The Two Nancy Pelosis; New House Leader Stresses Her Political Skills," *Washington Post*, November 14, 2002.
[333] David Von Drehle and Hanna Rosin, "The Two Nancy Pelosis; New House Leader Stresses Her Political Skills," *Washington Post,* November 14, 2002.
[334] Davidson, Oleszek, and Lee, 2010, 168.

As one of the few women in House leadership, she inevitably was perceived as something "new" every time she walked into a room, helping her generate coverage.[335] And "new" was the operative word when it came to the national media environment that she would face. Where once there was a set schedule for evening news and morning news, by the mid-2000s, everything suddenly seemed to be moving instantaneously. The rolling headlines at the bottom of news shows were no longer a sign of an attention-grabbing, breaking story, but were now ubiquitous, promoting whatever the producers wanted to highlight at that moment.[336] Pelosi's contribution to the history of House caucus leader communication was that she adapted to the radically changing media environment and put resources into the emerging social media unlike anyone had ever done. Under Pelosi, staff members were hired and assigned to handle Internet outreach with like-minded "communities" that were also communicating online. By 2008, she would proudly claim, "I have a blog, YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, Digg, and other new media to communicate with constituents."[337]

After becoming speaker with the Democratic takeover in the 2006 election, it was Pelosi who had to adjudicate questions about appropriate usage of social media, which was increasing dramatically for nearly all members of Congress. For example, when the office of Rep. Ed Markey (MA) wanted to embed YouTube videos on his government-sponsored webpage, he had to receive permission of Pelosi because such usage of private sector material was a technical violation of House franking rules, which governed the use

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[335] Focusing on what's new and different is not uncommon among Washington reporters. See Kuklinsky and Sigelman (1992); Stephen Hess, *The Ultimate Insiders: U.S. Senators in the National Media* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1986).

[336] Paul Farhi, "'Crawls' March Across TV Territory," *Washington Post*, October 20, 2001.

[337] Michael Falcone, "In House, Tweets Fly Over Web Plan," *New York Times*, July 13, 2008.

of federal resources to communicate with the public.[338] Both the Senate and House quickly updated their regulations on franking.

Further, the growth in social media affected Congress and national messaging far beyond the creation of new vehicles for dissemination. The democratization of new media effectively allowed for the elimination of virtually any barrier to entry for political prognostication and reporting. Pelosi and her staff were suddenly in a position – in the midst of one of the most bitter, partisan, political environments in recent history – that required them to respond almost immediately to countless charges from political opponents, regardless of their truthfulness or credibility.[339] Pelosi recognized the new realities of political life and gave her staff the freedom and resources to handle it. For example, on the day she was sworn in as speaker in 2007, Pelosi's team set up Blogger Alley, which offered "desk space, coffee, doughnuts, and interviews with Democratic House members for more than a dozen bloggers and liberal radio hosts."[340] In turn, they promoted the Democratic message nationwide.

Gingrich staffers remarked how, in their day – just a few years before – they could take the news cycle to fix whatever statement their boss gave that required more nuance. But for Pelosi, there was no down time. Political consultant James Carville's advice to fellow staffers in the 1992 presidential campaign that "speed kills"[341] – a motto designed to remind staff that every attack had to be rebutted immediately – suddenly seemed more appropriate than ever. "When something happened, we'd be responding

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[338] Emily Yehle, "Member Web Sites Stuck in the Past; Posting YouTube Videos, Flickr Photos Often Against Chambers' Rules" *Roll Call*, December 6, 2007.

[339] John Harwood and Gerald F. Seib, *Pennsylvania Avenue: Profiles in Backroom Power: Marking Washington Work Again* (New York: Random House, 2009), 164.

[340] Harwood and Seib, 2009, 165.

[341] Mary Matalin, James Carville with Peter Knobler, *All's Fair: Love, War and Running for President* (New York: Random House, 1994), 224.

very quick," explained one former Pelosi aide. "When something happens – boom! – right away, get a statement out, get a quote out, pounce on it…. [Pelosi] was the first one to hire a full-time online person…. Blog postings, Facebook right away before anyone else. Twitter. All of that. She was the first one to deal with that."[342]

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In sum, one key narrative to the growth in House caucus leader communications efforts was the role played by several of those leaders. Each of the aforementioned House leaders affected how those who followed them would do their jobs. O'Neill and Wright represented the end of an older era, and their contrasting leadership styles helped feed the growing unrest among Republicans. Michel's deference to those younger, media-savvy Republicans further allowed them to secure positions in leadership, unbridled by any senior member of their conference. Gingrich was preeminent among these Republicans and as a back-bencher and then eventually as a leader, he transformed how members viewed national messaging efforts. In a bit of irony, it was his mistakes in national messaging that ultimately brought Gingrich down. Gephardt was critical to convincing an entrenched Democratic caucus of the importance of communications efforts beyond those directed at one's district, and following the 1994 turnover, rallied his party's depleted forces with a special focus on national messaging. Finally, Pelosi oversaw the explosion in social media and embraced it possibilities, while also handling the challenging side-effects such as the democratization of political punditry and the virtual elimination of a news cycle.

Increasing sophistication in messaging

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[342] Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012.

Part of understanding what happened between 1981 and 2010 in terms of House

leaders and national messaging efforts involves the development of new forms of

messaging. New tools kept arriving on the scene and they were used both by advocates

to communicate with Congress and by members to communicate with the public. In the

era of O'Neill, members still took the pulse of the public based on how many and the

content of phone calls that came in to one's congressional office following an event. The

speaker would remark on the effectiveness of Reagan as a communicator by telling

reporters about how many constituents called Democratic congressional offices following

one of the president's speeches, most of which were urging support of the Reagan

agenda.[343] Despite the growing ability of organized groups to manipulate those phone

calls with targeted campaigns, members still used them as a "gut check" on how what the

public was thinking.

Communicating with constituents during a trip back to the district was another

traditional member activity that shaped communication efforts by Congressional leaders.

A Michel aide told the story about a Democratic representative from Louisiana who

returned from a weekend trip to his congressional district and walked up to O'Neill, who

was presiding in the House at the time, and told him that he would no longer be voting

against any part of the Reagan economic agenda. "He essentially said," recalled the aide,

> "the Reagan message, the Reagan brand, was so strong that in his Congressional
> district as a Democrat, he could not resist it and could not vote against it. That
> said an awful lot about how powerful Reagan was. He had the coalition. He had
> the message. He had the confidence and trust. He had it all, but most of it was
> message. Most of it was his image."[344]

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[343] Hedrick Smith, "Taking Charge of Congress," *New York Times Magazine*, August 9, 1981.
[344] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.

Phone calls and mail, along with feedback from constituents met during trips back home, were the starting point for assessing national messaging efforts by House leaders at the start of the 1980s. Increased sophistication for the leadership with both parties came about as polling became a more widely accepted form of measuring the public's concerns and then testing hypothetical messages prior to dissemination.[345] Led by Rep. Tony Coelho, who served as DCCC chair and then as majority whip, the Democrats began welcoming a steady stream of advice from the party's top national pollsters.[346] On the Republican side, Gingrich aligned himself with a brash, young pollster named Frank Luntz to help formulate the Contract with America after he "market tested the message like breakfast cereal."[347] Over time, the use of polling, focus groups, and eventually the micro-targeting of voters allowed House caucus leaders to develop and deliver messages with a level of sophistication far beyond anything O'Neill might have imagined.

National messaging, in and of itself, is not new to American politics. National party platforms have existed at least since 1840.[348] But members of Congress found it relatively easy to develop their own home styles that inoculated them from voter anger over anything that might result from a party's national messaging.[349] This is why the Gingrich-initiated Contract with America, market tested by pollsters like Luntz, was such a seminal moment in House communications: it was seen as a successful nationalizing of

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[345] Harris, 2005.

[346] Adam Clymer, "Some Coaching for House Democrats," *New York Times*. March 23, 1982.

[347] Michael Weisskopf, "Playing On the Public Pique; Consultant Taps Voter Anger to Help GOP," *Washington Post*, October 27, 1994.

[348] The American Presidency Project at the University of California–Santa Barbara offers access to all major party platforms since 1840. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/platforms.php Accessed August 22, 2015.

[349] Fenno, 1974.

the election.[350] For those in Washington, including the communicators interviewed for this dissertation, its positive impact on behalf of Republican candidates became part of Capital Hill lore. Certainly Democrats, still reeling from the loss of power, felt they were falling behind the advances of the communicators across the aisle. "Whatever the real impact it had," said one Democratic communications aide from the time, "psychologically it had a huge impact…. People felt like they had to have a response to that."[351] Twelve years later, for example, the idea of nationalizing elections around a particular theme – relentlessly repeated in the media so as to penetrate the voting public's consciousness – was still popular: Pelosi pushed for and garnered significant media attention, and soon the majority, as she rallied her caucus and candidates around the charge that the GOP had created a "culture of corruption."

The increasing sophistication in developing messages was eventually matched by the explosion in Internet-driven distribution vehicles. Faxes usurped traditional print mail, and then email overcame faxes. The creation of web sites, followed by social media such as YouTube, Facebook, and Reddit, increased the ability of leaders in the House to push the messages they were developing in entirely new ways. These new communications vehicles also allowed members to target specific communities of like-minded individuals, thereby maximizing their chances of effectiveness. Over the 30-year period covered in this dissertation, the tools used to develop and disseminate national messages on behalf of the House caucus leadership changed dramatically. This narrative is fundamental to understanding the context in which House caucus leaders did their jobs.

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[350] Not everyone views Luntz's role with the development of the Contract as significant. See Ed Gillespie, *Winning Right: Campaign Politics and Conservative Policies* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2006), 45-46.
[351] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.

The changing media landscape

Perhaps most obvious to the casual observer of the elements that affected

Congressional leadership and their communications efforts between 1980 and 2010 is the

massive restructuring of the media landscape. For O'Neill and Michel, "the media" was

dominated by the three major television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC), three weekly

news magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News & World Report*), three national

newspapers (the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*) and

two wire services (Associated Press – AP – and United Press International – UPI). Flash

forward 30 years and the three major networks compete nightly with cable networks such

as Fox, MSNBC, and CNN, *Time* is the only remaining serious weekly newsmagazine,

USA Today reaches more people than any other daily paper in the country, and UPI is out

of business. In addition, political radio personalities such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean

Hannity are syndicated nationally, with millions of daily listeners, and the entire

blogosphere – a reference to the myriad of blogs, e-zines, RSS feeds, websites, Twitter,

and Facebook accounts, etc. – produce 24/7 coverage and opinion every day. For House

leaders, adapting to this new environment was critical to their success or failure as

communicators.

There were several impacts resulting from the changing media landscape. The

competition among the media for viewership/readership became intense. One needs only

to look at the three major networks – ABC, CBS, and NBC – to see the results. In 1980,

more than 50 million people watched one of the three evening news broadcasts each

night. Thirty years later, than number had been cut by more than half.[352] *USA Today*,

established in 1982, had a circulation of more than 2 million within a decade. But its

pivotal role was less about its reach and reporting than its style. Using color, easy-to-

read graphics, and very short articles and even shorter factoids[353] (a term that doesn't

seem to have existed prior to *USA Today's* launch), the newspaper offered a new way to

absorb the news for a busy consumer, increasingly inundated with opportunities to absorb

information. Television networks gradually produced their own version of *USA Today*-

style news: briefer stories, shorter sound bites from the principals, and an aggressive use

of colorful graphics. The sound bite – the amount of time a politician would be allowed

into a story speaking uninterrupted – stood at 43 seconds in 1968 and had dropped to just

under 8 seconds by 1992.[354] Any leader who wanted to be on the news had to

accommodate the new standards.

As with any private sector industry, the changing media landscape brought about

economic winners and losers among the competitors. Syndicated conservative talk radio

hosts, led by Rush Limbaugh, became household names and generated millions of dollars

for themselves and their companies.[355] With so much money at stake, a reciprocal

relationship developed. According to one former Republican leadership communicator:

> "After Reagan's term, the whole attitude changed. You're beginning to see the
> growth of talk radio and a lot of other different dynamics. In one sense, it's all
> very similar and consistent in that, whether it's somebody on talk radio or a

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[352] Emily Guskin and Tom Rosenstiel, "The State of the News Media 2012." Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. http://stateofthemedia.org/2012/network-news-the-pace-of-change-accelerates/network-by-the-numbers/ Accessed on July 20, 2014.

[353] Jonathan Yardley, "A Paper for a U.S.A. On the Go," *Washington Post*, September 20, 1982.

[354] Craig Fehrman, "The incredible shrinking sound bite," *Boston Globe*. January 2, 2011. http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2011/01/02/the_incredible_shrinking_sound_bite/ Accessed August 22, 2015.

[355] It is interesting to consider, though not as part of this dissertation, why liberal / progressive talk radio hosts never quite found a similar, profitable spot in the marketplace.

politician in the House or somebody in the media, they all saw a great marketing opportunity, a great opportunity to sell a product and make a profit off of it. For the House guys, the profit was majority status. For the talk guys, it was money and real profit, so it just kind of fed on itself."[356]

With so many millions of dollars at stake, and the clear success of talk radio with a political bent, it was only a matter of time before a similar partisan format was extended to new media; in this case, cable television. Fox News was launched in October 1996 and could immediately be seen in more than 17 million homes.[357] Though promoting itself as "fair and balanced," it provided Republican politicians a very hospitable home to market their message, especially with its primetime lineup of conservative commentary programming.[358] Using cable television was certainly not new to Republicans or Democrats. Following the O'Neill/Gingrich showdown on the floor over the Republican's special orders speeches, C-SPAN became "the go-to place" to get one's message out in an unfiltered way. CNN was a fledgling news network until it established itself with its coverage during the first Iraq war in 1990,[359] but even then it was perceived by some Republican communicators as not the most welcoming for their members:

> [In the latter part of the 1990s] "CNN was it, at that time. There was no MSNBC and so on. You had basically, the cable was still a CNN operation and then C-SPAN was a factor, so you try to use C-SPAN as much as possible, and were aware of what things C-SPAN was going to cover and how to get your message across through that vehicle.
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> "I know they don't keep track of their viewership, but there was always a sense of the viewers who routinely turn in to C-SPAN were like talk radio people. They were disproportionally right of center, Republican in orientation, and if can reach them, you're reaching your audience. I don't know how that's evolved over time. I think because of the proliferation of outlets, it's probably different today, but at

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[356] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.

[357] Paul Farhi, "Murdoch Joins Crowded Cable News Field," *Washington Post*, October 3, 1996.

[358] See Lawrie Mifflin, "At the Fox News Channel, the Buzzword is Fairness, Separating News From Bias," *New York Times*, October 7.1996.

[359] Bill Carter, "CNN Sees Its Concept Paying Off," *New York Times*, February 11, 1991.

the time CNN was 'theirs.' We didn't really have any cable network that was 'ours,' and all the others were essentially enemy territory and had to be managed in various ways and used as well as possible, whenever the opportunity presented itself."[360]

Thus, as new vehicles for news were established, challenging the old guard, there were new opportunities for any profit-making enterprise. Fox News was the first to seize this opportunity and has proven itself to be very successful.[361] In recent years, MSNBC has taken up the challenge of offering a channel geared towards left-of-center viewers.[362] Media, which at one time was seen as a unifying institution in a diverse nation, was now profiting by splitting voters apart. Those operating in new niches were almost a throwback to the party-funded papers of urban machines.[363]

The competition among outlets, and the money at stake for the winners in this ongoing competition, resulted in a third dynamic emerging from the new media landscape: the bitter partisanship that was emerging in the House itself was finding a home in the media as well. For a media that routinely ignored the House minority, Gingrich, in particular, played to their latent desire for conflict and made himself, and his causes, newsworthy. In an interview with *USA Today* editors following the 1994 election, he readily admitted his strategy:

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[360] Republican staffer August 2, 2012.

[361] Jim Rutenberg, "The Right Strategy for Fox; Conservative Cable Channel Gains in Ratings War," *New York Times*, September 18. 2000.

[362] Kevin D. Thompson, "The Growing Pains of a Cable News Network," *Palm Beach (FL) Post*, October 31, 2004.

[363] Instead of "Our Boys Take Albany!" as the headline might have read in the 1800s, cable television coverage today provides hour after hour exploiting or highlighting the issues faced by the opposition or the triumphs of one's favored party. A prime example of this was MSNBC's exhaustive coverage of the developing Bridgegate scandal involving the administration of New Jersey Governor Chris Christie in January 2014. Over the same few weeks, Fox News barely mentioned it at all. Viewers of each network didn't seem to mind.

"Part of the reason I use strong language is because you all will pick it up…. You convince your colleagues to cover me being calm, and I'll be calm. You guys want to cover nine seconds, I'll give you nine seconds because that is the competitive requirement…. I've simply tried to learn my half of your business."[364]

Competing had other effects as well. Fox too had to supply round-the-clock coverage if it was to compete with CNN and MSNBC. This critical mass of coverage began to shrink the news cycle to the point where today many of the communicators interviewed for this dissertation argued that it had all but disappeared. In the 1980s, House leaders would time the release of their comments for the evening news, offering something newsworthy at the last moment so that reporters and producers would have enough time to put it on the air but not enough time to filter it or get the other side of the story. "Frequently," said one former aide to Michel, "we would try to negotiate getting things on the floor, getting a vote completed and getting Bob up to the radio and TV gallery in time to give the editors enough time to get it onto the first feed of the evening news."[365]

With the new reality of 24/7 coverage, leaders faced both new opportunities and new challenges. Certainly, cable television was an exciting and powerful vehicle for disseminating a party message. At the same time, producers had to keep the content fresh, which meant that any given sound bite would disappear quickly and needed to be replaced. One GOP communicator remarked that in those early days of cable news coverage, "I think people were in such a hurry to do things just to make the news…. because it was [continuous coverage for] 24 hours, it was – poof! – we're on to the next

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[364] Jessica Lee, "Ball is in Gingrich's court / House speaker walks and talks like a candidate," *USA Today*, July 7, 1995.
[365] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.

topic."[366] The pressure was on House leaders and staff to anticipate what the channels

would be covering in any given hour so that they could insert their messages into the

story.

The advent of the Internet and all of the resulting communications vehicles sped

the news process up even more. There was no longer even an hour-long news cycle.

Now everything was instantaneous, which dramatically altered the options for building

public support through the media. In today's environment, explained on former GOP

leadership aide, "you can watch the whole day's news cycle trending on Twitter," with

the aftereffect being that it's no longer really possible to say, "'Let's hold the press

conference so we can dump this idea.' 'Let's go on the Sunday shows so we set the

week's narrative.' That stuff is gone on Capitol Hill. It's not even relevant really."[367] A

former Gingrich staffer lamented the loss of any ability to provide context, as would

sometimes be needed when journalists would announce they heard Gingrich say

something controversial. "You had an opportunity to say, 'You know what? I was in

that meeting. Let me tell you. Let me provide context…. You could actually go back

and forth to the reporters," noted the aide. "In today's world, some of the things maybe

Newt said back then would have just… gone viral. Every day it would have been sheer

craziness."[368]

An additional impact that came about because of the changing media landscape

was the newfound ability of citizens, organized and unorganized, to spread a message.

The idea that anyone could "forward" information to an entire network with a click of a

mouse is a transformative one. Understanding what goes "viral" – to use the parlance of

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[366] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012.
[367] Republican staffer, August 2, 2012.
[368] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012.

the current day – would now be critical to House leaders as they moved forward with communications efforts.[369] This development was a further weakening of the mainstream media's gatekeeper role that it had traditionally played. Now, political discourse was imbued with a "rumor mill" that could spread news – factual or not, misleading or not – to hundreds of thousands instantaneously.

The mobilization effect resulting from the growing interconnectivity of citizens was perhaps first recognized in 2004 during the short-lived, but technologically advanced for the time, presidential campaign of Democrat Howard Dean. Meetup.com, a community-building website that was virtually unheard up a year before, became a vehicle for Dean supporters to find other like-minded people.[370] They shared information, passed along news clips and stories, all before the Dean campaign even knew they were doing it. In early 2003, Dean's campaign manager, Joe Trippi, had been convinced to attend a Meetup gathering in New York City and was stunned to find hundreds of supporters, most of whom were not on the campaign's radar at all, lining the street to get in.[371] Dean himself admitted: "We fell into this by accident. I wish I could tell you we were smart enough to figure this out. But the community taught us. They seized the initiative through Meetup. They built our organization for us before we had an organization."[372] In the elections of 2008 and 2012, the Obama campaign would build on Dean's early success and empower millions of citizens to disseminate the campaign's messages – speeches, images, talking points, video clips, etc. – on their own.

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[369] Katharine Q. Seelye, "YouTube Passes Debates to a New Generation," *New York Times*, June 14, 2007.
[370] Lisa Napoli, "Like Online Dating, With a Political Spin," *New York Times*, March 13, 2003.
[371] Micah Sifry, "From Howard Dean to the tea party: The power of Meetup.com," CNN.com, November 7, 2011. www.cnn.com/2011/11/07/tech/web/meetup-2012-campaign-sifry Accessed July 21, 2014.
[372] Gary Wolf. "How the Internet Invested Howard Dean." *Wired Magazine*, January 2004. http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/12.01/dean_pr.html Accessed July 21, 2014.

The House congressional leaders were not blind to these developments and while they did not universally adopt Meetup as a vehicle itself, they did begin to utilize person-to-person communication as a way of spreading their key messages. One of the most effective ways of doing this, according to staffers from that era, was through ongoing cultivation of specific groups with extensive membership lists. Of course, building coalitions with outside groups have been a part of Washington organizing for years. What was different was the ease with which leaders could now to talk to members of different groups, and even establish and communicate with individuals without having to go through organizational leadership. In the House, leader on both sides rapidly upped their efforts to engage people this way. One Republican aide noted that this form of national communication effectively required that there be "coalition outreach people in all the various leadership offices."[373] A Democratic aide from the 2000s echoed similar sentiments: "We had other people who were dealing with outreach groups…. whether with Latino groups or women's groups or labor or any one of these other groups, Jewish groups, you name it."[374] A further distinction in this kind of community outreach from that which had taken place before was that each individual contacted was a potentially dynamic communicator, a result of the changing media landscape and the technology that was suddenly in the hands of regular citizens. House leaders had to adapt, and if they could, maximize it to their benefit.

The rise in partisanship

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[373] Republican staffer August 2, 2012.
[374] Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012.

By virtually every accounting, the House of Representatives was a much more partisan institution in 2010 than in 1980.[375] The story of how House caucus leaders came to increase their national communications efforts cannot be understood without reviewing the charged – and often bitter – political atmosphere that grew at the same time. As previously noted, the rise of the Republican Party in southern states moved towards a tipping point following the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. The "solid South," as the Democratic control of the former Confederate states was historically known, was moving to being solid once again, but for Republicans.[376] The increasingly strident conservatism adopted by the GOP in its party platform in the years to come contributed to the isolation of moderate Republicans, many of whom were based in the northeastern part of the country. By the 21st century, northeast Republicans were having trouble representing a party brand that had become quite unpopular and many lost their seats to Democrats in 2006 and 2008.[377] So sweeping was this regional and ideological re-sorting that when Barack Obama was sworn into his first term, there was not a single Republican member of Congress representing any of the New England states. With so much more unanimity and ideological cohesion among each party's caucus, leaders had a bit of an easier time rallying support among their caucus for a given message.

Feeding the changing media's seemingly insatiable appetite for conflict and colorful characters, House Republican leaders such as Gingrich, pursued an aggressive

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[375] Nelson Polsby, *How Congress Evolves: Social Bases of Institutional Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Sarah A. Binder, Thomas E. Mann, Norman J. Ornstein and Molly Reynolds, "Assessing the 110th Congress, Anticipating the 111th," in *Mending the Broken Branch* 3 (January 2009) (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2009). http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/papers/2009/1/08-broken-branch-binder-mann/0108_broken_branch_binder_mann.pdf Accessed August 22, 2015.

[376] Dan Balz, "Democrats Sift '84 Rubble, Assess Rebuilding in South," *Washington Post*, January 20, 1985.

[377] Ben Pershing, "Across the Northeast, GOP's Hold Lessens; Party's Decline Could Worsen as More Areas Lean Democratic," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2008.

strategy against the Democrats in control of the House at the time. When Speaker Wright

was forced to resign, Gingrich's strategy of attacking the institution was given even more

credibility. Democrats began their own calls for an investigation into Gingrich's

finances, which resulted in the largest fine ever meted out by the House Ethics

Committee.[378] The growing list of charges and countercharges, while weakening the

sense of comity that had existed just a decade before with O'Neill and Michel, seemed to

be effective for those who were on the attack. When the House banking scandal broke in

1992, other junior members of the Republican conference were emboldened to pursue

similar tactics.[379] The generational shift on the Republican side was a very powerful

dynamic in furthering the growth of partisanship in the House. A conference that was

once considered by some to be a *de facto* permanent minority was now seriously

considering itself a potential majority party.

The 1994 election fundamentally altered the House leadership communications

landscape because, among other things, it ushered in an era of competitive elections, a

development that further contributed to the rise of partisanship. This is not to say that

every congressional election cycle saw control of the House at stake, but the chance for

that to happen was far more likely after 1994 than before it, as the majority-switching

elections of 2006 and 2010 demonstrate. Between 1981 and 1994, the margin between

the Democratic majority over the Republicans averaged 83.7 votes. From 1995 through

2006, when Democrats took control again, the average margin for the majority

Republicans was just 19.33 votes. The GOP takeover established a dynamic in which

each party had to worry that just a few votes could mean the difference between passing a

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[378] Ceci Connolly, "Reprimand, $300,000 fine urged," *St. Petersburg (FL) Times*, January 18, 1997.
[379] Judi Hasson, "GOP freshmen are in a class of their own; 'Gang of 7' wants to clean House," *USA Today,* March 26, 1992.

law or having it fail, and more importantly, between being in the majority or being in the minority. Despite the growing ideological cohesion among each party's membership in the House, GOP majority communication aides worried about buy-in from everyone because of the competitive margins in the House. One former communicator explained that the staff would constantly be taking the temperature of Republican members. "We never had a majority of more than, like, six or seven votes the whole time I was up there. I think at one point, it got up to 12, but if you've lost five guys on the vote, you're done."[380]

In a world in which control seemed to be in doubt, a newer generation of House leaders had little patience for the Michel approach of bipartisan initiatives and bipartisan votes. ("How quaint, those times of yore!" joked one former Michel aide.[381]) Leadership in the House had to become much more disciplined, by sheer necessity. The aggressive style of Gingrich – attacking the other side not only as wrong on policy, but corrupt as leaders – influenced his fellow partisans and moved a generation of upcoming Democratic leaders such as Pelosi and onetime DCCC chair Rep. Rahm Emanuel to do the same.[382] Though the swing election of 2006 was as much about the growing unpopularity of the war in Iraq as any other issue, Democrats also took advantage of the news that several Republican members were being indicted for various crimes. Pelosi began describing it as a "culture of corruption."[383] Alliterative qualities and simple-mindedness aside, it proved to be quite effective.

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[380] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.
[381] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.
[382] Mike Allen, "GOP Leaders Tighten Their Grip on House," *Washington Post*, January 9, 2005.
[383] Philip Shenon and Carl Hulse, "DeLay Is Indicted in Texas Case and Forfeits G.O.P. House Post," *New York Times*, September 29, 2005.

"Pelosi was the one who just pounded away [on the 'culture of corruption' theme] and other people weren't…. and she just kept on saying it and saying it and saying it. Howard Dean picked it up when he was DNC chairman. It took him a while but he started saying it and then more and more members started picking it up and using it.

"She was just relentless in saying it. … she just liked it. I know that, because she felt it really captured them…. That's the old thing about messaging: you have to say it so many times until you're so sick of saying it, and then it's just starting to break through."[384]

It is hard not to see the connections between the O'Neill-Gingrich confrontation that was so stunning to watch in 1984 and the back-and-forth charges and counter-charges, including investigations of all types, a few decades later. Between 1981 and 2010, shifting demographics had re-shaped each party's caucus and the traditional restraints on bitter partisanship had dissipated. House leaders had more unified coalitions and yet a smaller window with which to accomplish anything. Their communications strategies, in the era of a competitive House, took on the added role of a permanent campaign and reflected the growing partisanship of the institution.

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Five contextual elements, often overlapping, frequently influencing each other, underlie the larger story of how the top caucus leaders in the House of Representatives developed their commitment to, and implementation of, national messaging. First, the aftereffects of the House reforms implemented by the Democrats in the 1970s weakened committee chairs and provided caucus leaders, especially the speaker, with new responsibilities and power. It was a dramatic shift away from the system that had developed since the revolt as the Cannon House in 1910. As much as they wanted to see more diffuse power among the committees and subcommittees, members also recognized

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[384] Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012.

the need for central leadership to both manage the House as an institution, and to lead on its behalf of its majority party.

Second, under these new rules, different personalities emerged as leaders and reshaped the perceptions of what leaders needed to do in terms of communication, as well as how they should do it. O'Neill, Wright, and Foley reflected an era of Democratic dominance that was slipping through their fingers. Michel also reflected the end of an era, that of the fierce but loyal opposition. His inability to be an effective communicator himself opened the door to much more aggressive Republican leaders, such as Gingrich, who saw their opposition to the Democrats as being less about loyal opposition and more about open warfare intent on breaking down the pillars of what they believed to be a corrupt system. It was Gingrich who most significantly altered the way both parties viewed the role of House caucus leaders as communicators. Leading a moribund, and then decimated and devastated, Democratic caucus into a new era of national messaging efforts was Gephardt. His long tenure in leadership did not result in him becoming speaker, but his modernization of the caucus's communications efforts paved the way. And finally, it was Pelosi who fully grasped the changing media world driven by Internet communications, and therefore greatly expanded her communications staff to handle it.

Third, over the three decades being studied here, Congress shifted its understanding of communications from the inside game, focused on internal communications on the Hill, to an outside game under which public opinion was the ultimate target. "Home style" politics might have gotten a member elected in one's district, but starting in the 1980s, leaders began to recognize that there were larger, more national, forces at work and those forces needed to be understood and manipulated, if

possible, for partisan, political benefit. Polling became more prevalent and provided House leaders with a larger array of metrics with which they could develop a national message.

Most obviously to even the most casual observer, what was understood as the media landscape changed dramatically. This is the critical fourth narrative. There was consolidation among wire services and news magazines while, at the same time, an expansion of competition among television news with the advent of cable news channels. The competition helped feed a new style of round-the-clock news that was briefer and more colorful in both language and graphics. The surge in success for conservative talk radio showed that partisan-oriented media could succeed in a way not seen since the turn of the century and the party-funded newspapers. Fox News and then MSNBC were obvious outgrowths of this new thinking. Finally, 24/7 television news coverage reduced the news cycle from roughly half-a-day to about an hour. The widespread acceptance of the Internet and social media reduced it further leaving almost no time for the providing of context until after a story had gone out.

Fifth, the efforts by House caucus leaders to upgrade their communications efforts have to be understood in the context of the steady rise in partisanship in Congress and the nation as a whole. More homogeneous congressional parties helped shift the center point for each side's communication further away from the ideological center. The decorum of previous generations of members of Congress gradually gave way to all too frequent ethical charges and counter charges being lodged by members against each other. Such tactics often helped build the case in the public's mind to shift majorities from one party to the other. After 1994's historic election, the House became competitive in a way it had

not been for decades, and thus raised the intensity level – including the bitterness and

animosity – among all forms of House caucus leader communications.

CHAPTER 5

THE PROCESS OF LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATIONS:

DEVELOPING THE MESSAGE

In his 1957 work, *Professional Public Relations and Political Power*, Stanley Kelly, Jr. reviewed the decline of party bosses and the ascendancy of the public relations expert in modern politics.[385] The publicist was an outsider brought in to determine campaign strategy, allocate resources and design advertisements using the array of mass media venues, ranging from newspapers to television, from post cards to sound trucks. Just over a quarter century later, Larry Sabato updated the scholarship on these people, now known as political consultants.[386] In both cases, the focus was on the how these experts were influencing campaigns for office. Once one got to Congress, it was a different story. Modern public relations, with its assumptions about national public opinion and how to shape it, did not seriously impact the thinking of congressional leadership until the 1980s when O'Neill reimagined the speakership in ways completely different than his predecessors. House leaders began to understand their role to include serving as national spokespeople for their parties, a role that members expected them to fill as well.

When it came to communications efforts for the offices of the top House leadership positions, the fundamentals involved with messaging remained the same

[385] Stanley Kelly, Jr., *Professional Public Relations and Political Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956)

[386] Larry J. Sabato, *The Rise of Political Consultants: New Ways of Winning Elections*, (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

throughout the period of 1981 to 2010. First, messages needed to be **developed** in such a way as to provide a national theme under which all (or mostly all) of the party's incumbents would feel comfortable. The theme could either be articulated within a heading – Contract with America, New Direction for America, etc. – or it could simply be a thematic link that tied together a series of daily messages. Once it became accepted that these national messaging efforts were the responsibility of the top House leaders on both sides of the aisle, those individuals were active in creating a structure for it to take place. Even leaders such as Foley, Michel and Hastert, who were less inclined to be front-and-center as communicators themselves, encouraged the process along by allowing for more media-savvy members of leadership (e.g., Gephardt, Gingrich, Armey, and DeLay, for example) to take the lead. In either case, this era in Congress is distinguished because of national communications efforts began to emanate routinely from the top echelons of caucus leadership.

The second fundamental part of the process was that messages needed to be **disseminated**. The time period being studied here spans the development of a huge number of new communications devices suddenly available to the House leaders to deliver their messages, including faxes, emails, and Internet postings, along with institutional devices such as special orders, one-minute speeches and other forms of non-legislative debate. While they were always concerned with utilizing the main television networks and key newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, House caucus leaders had to adapt to other venues such as talk radio, cable television, and eventually, the wide world of the Internet, including everything the entire gamut of social media sites.

The third aspect of this House leadership-initiated process was an **evaluation** of whether all the effort being put into developing and disseminating national messages on behalf of those leaders was actually being seen and heard, and perhaps more importantly, whether it made a difference. Most every communicator interviewed for this dissertation asserted that evaluation might have been different had today's modern technological tools been available. That shared lament, coming from both sides of the aisle, masked the fact that message evaluation was almost always cursory during the period examined here. According to leadership staff involved with communications at the time, there were certainly moments when a junior staffer or intern was assigned to counting mentions in articles, or the total number of articles that included a reference to the leadership, but overall, they used a "gut" feeling as to whether one was getting their message "out there." They'd read the clips of articles covering Congress – regardless of whether anyone was counting – and would come away with a general sense of whether they were doing well or not. This is one of the most surprising aspects of my research. Even as House caucus leaders were building up their national messaging capabilities, no one was measuring if it mattered on a consistent and methodological basis.

This and the next two chapters will use my interviews with former House leadership communications staff to tell the story of the process of House caucus leader communication. This chapter will focus on how the messages were developed during the four generalized eras outlined earlier. National message development was, and continues to be, a collaborative process that frequently involves multiple meetings, with combinations of leadership, members, staff, and consultants. Chapter 6 will examine the process of dissemination, including legislative staples such as floor speeches and pen-

and-pad meetings with reporters along with strategies designed to place each party's best communicators front and center before the press. All of these efforts were affected by leaders' and staff willingness to be either proactive or reactive at certain times. Finally, Chapter 7 will review how staff viewed their goals in engaging in all of the communications effort and then assessed those efforts over time, most frequently by relying on highly non-quantitative metric of a "general sense" they had that they were doing well or not.

1981 to 1989 – The Democrats

The ruling Democrats were entrenched in every sense of the word throughout the decade.[387] Speaker O'Neill, at the tail end of the 1970s, had started putting himself into the media limelight in a much broader way, appearing much more frequently on evening news broadcasts than either of his predecessors.[388] The willingness to engage in communications on behalf of the caucus was there, but the process of developing a message was less organized than those that would come in later years. "There were message meetings," said one Democratic aide of the time, but they were "much more informal than now."[389] In 1981, Rep. Tony Coelho of California began a three-term stint at the helm of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), the caucus's campaign vehicle that had previously been plagued by debt and lagging behind its GOP counterpart in terms of fundraising and technology. Coelho revitalized the organization

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[387] David E. Rosenbaum, "Forecast of '89 Congress: The Democrats, Again." *New York Times*, May 15, 1988.
[388] Cook, 1989, 64.
[389] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.

in all aspects of its operations.[390] O'Neill was enamored with the effort, providing the

party with new weapons against a GOP campaign apparatus that was flush with cash and

a popular president: "The Republicans may have the political money in 1982, but Tony's

consultants give the Democrats the best political brains for 1982."[391]

Coelho's DCCC experience placed him in a unique position to offer national

polling data on the currents in the electorate and what kinds of messages would be most

effective to O'Neill and others in caucus leadership. In 1986, Coelho was elected

majority whip, placing him in charge of rallying votes for legislation from a very diverse

caucus, an effort that also required building public support. In this new position, he

began to impose a new structure on Democratic communication efforts. One Democratic

aide from the time explained that, as part of his whip duties, Coelho had a, "kitchen

cabinet of political advisors" including,

> "….pollsters with whom he worked at the DCCC. Campaign staff who he
> brought from the DCCC to the whip's office. And they understood, particularly
> in the end-stage of the Reagan years, the Democrats were behind the Republicans
> in communications. They worked, not that this was new, but they worked to kind
> of professionalizing up the game of Democrats, and for using the House floor as a
> communications platform."[392]

Partially due to his own initiatives and partially due to the desire among many

Democrats to respond to the use of non-legislative debate by Gingrich and others, Coelho

linked the majority's legislative agenda with specifically-designed national messaging

and broad communication strategies for the most significant bills or issues. The effort

was to generate some positive press while doing their work as the majority, "so that there

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[390] David Hoffman, "Rep. Coelho: Democrats' Fund-raiser Extraordinaire," *Washington Post*, August 26, 1982.

[391] Adam Clymer, "Some Coaching for House Democrats," *New York Times*, March 23, 1982.

[392] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.

was some yield from the debates that we were having on the House floor, some yield

from the use of one-minute speeches, some response to the Gingrich crowd that used one-

minute speeches and special orders after legislative business to get their message out."[393]

Coelho helped initiate weekly "message meetings" that were held early Monday

morning each week the House was in session. As the majority, the legislative agenda for

the week drove the meeting's agenda. "You're looking at the news of the week past, but

particularly the week ahead," said one former leadership aide. "What are the issues that

are likely to come up? How would the Democrats best handle those issues, and others?

You are looking at both sides of the same coin. It was not just how you defend a

Democratic position but how do you respond to a Republican critique."[394] While some of

the caucus leadership was in the meeting, it was not limited to them, and members such

as Rep. George Miller (CA) would attend and even chair the meeting occasionally.

About 15 members would participate on average and, with a 7:30 Monday morning start

time, "you dealt with whoever happened to show up. This was pretty free-form. This

was not as bureaucratically orchestrated as it might be today."[395]

Leadership staff that dealt with the media recall participating as well. Though

there was not always a set agenda, assignments would be meted out on a regular basis.

Members of the group would be charged with calling key columnists such as George Will

or Charles Krauthammer, despite their conservative leanings, to talk about the

Democratic position on an issue. Others were tasked with reaching out to top political

reporters at mainstream daily newspapers and weekly news magazines, as well as

producers and reporters from the three major networks. Most of the outreach came from

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[393] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.
[394] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.
[395] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.

members themselves, as the idea of using staff to proactively speak to reporters – and not just respond to requests – was still a relatively new concept. At that time, press secretaries "were still not considered senior staff members in Congress."[396]

Coelho, under whose whip office these meetings were organized, would eventually be forced to resign from his leadership post and his seat in 1989 because of a developing ethics scandal. His departure came within days of Speaker Jim Wright doing the same thing, though for a completely different set of ethical circumstances. Tom Foley, as the new speaker, came out of the Albert / McCormack mode, and was much more concerned with the inside game than new the majority leader, Rep. Dick Gephardt (MO), the former caucus chair, who eagerly took up the mantle of driving the Democratic leadership's message operation. Communications strategy didn't really interest Foley and his staff, according to a Gephardt communications aide.[397] With Gephardt's office taking the lead, messages were largely coordinated among the top Democratic leadership at the time, a period marked by relatively little friction among those key players.

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1981 to 1989 – The Republicans

On the Republican side, the process of developing a message on behalf of the caucus leadership during this period was affected by three major personality-driven dynamics. First and foremost, there was Ronald Reagan. "He was the ultimate communicator for the Republican message," said one former aide to GOP House leader Bob Michel. "Much of the message was defined by him and defined by the Reagan

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[396] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.
[397] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.

administration. We echoed that [in the House GOP]."[398] Indeed, it was in recognition of

this tremendous spokesman for the party in the White House that helped make Michel the

minority leader in 1980. The party wanted a legislative leader to carry forth the fight for

the Reagan agenda, as opposed to another party spokesman, a label applied to Michel's

opposition for the top leadership post.[399]

Second, by 1980, a new crop of ambitious, young Republicans had been elected to

Congress. While Michel reflected "the greatest generation" that had fought and won

World War II, the emerging crop of baby boomers – including but not limited to

Gingrich, Jack Kemp (NY), Trent Lott (MS), Connie Mack (FL), Lynn Martin (IL) and

Dick Cheney (WY) – generated a new "spark" in congressional GOP thinking.[400] If

nothing else, simply because of their relative youth, they presented a few face of the

party. But they were not lightweight politicians and all of them went on to fill other

major positions in government, including U.S. Senator, Vice President, cabinet secretary

spots, speaker of the House, and majority leader of the Senate. As this core group began

to win leadership spots, the upgrade in both talent and aggressiveness was apparent

immediately to Michel and his staff. Said one Republican aide: "It was like a centrifuge

of ideas and messaging and thought, divergent thought. You couldn't get Jack Kemp and

Dick Cheney to agree on an awful lot, but they were both seated at the leadership table

with us. That atmosphere created a lot of messaging."[401]

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[398] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.

[399] Tony Kornheiser, "The Leader Lauded; Minority Leader Michel; Cheers & Chores for Bob Michel, The GOP's Pick of the House," *Washington Post*, December 9, 1980.

[400] Kathy Sawyer, "Jack Kemp: Galileo of GOP Economic; Reagan Backer Promotes Tax Cut – and His Own Political Fortune," *Washington Post*, May 20, 1980; Tony Kornheiser. "Rally for the Hung-Ho Freshmen Reps; 52 Newcomers Take a Whirl on the GOP Welcome Wagon," *Washington Post*, December 3, 1980; Margaret Hornblower, "Charging In: A Plucky New Wave of Republicans, Full of Idealism," *Washington Post*, December 22, 1980.

[401] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.

It also created some mixed messaging and conflicts among key players in the GOP conference. "There was a pretty active conflict between those who were messaging for policy purposes and those who were messaging for partisan political purposes, and the conflicts were real and they were difficult to deal with," recalled one senior GOP aide of the time.[402] Part of Reagan's success in Congress came from his ability to attract the occasional support of conservative Democrats. Without their support, the entire presidential agenda might have been stopped in its tracks.[403] From a messaging standpoint, Michel and his strongest supporters were looking to communicate themes that would not alienate their fellow members across the aisle, even those representing conservative districts that voted strongly for Reagan, because they were the keys to legislative victories for the Reagan agenda. Rep. Guy Vander Jagt, the chair of the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) pushed Republicans to take on the conservative Democrats, since those districts were the most hospitable to a switch to the GOP, and argued for a leadership communications agenda that emphasized the choice in stark terms.[404]

The third personality-driven variable that shaped the messaging efforts of House Republican leadership in the 1980s was the fact that, "Bob Michel was a lousy messenger and did not care a great deal for that role."[405] He served as minority whip, the second top position among his party's caucus leaders, for years before hiring a full-time press secretary. It was not that Michel didn't appreciate a need for communications, but "he

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[402] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.

[403] Lou Cannon, "Reagan Sees Dawn of 'New Coalition'; Triumphant President Praises Lawmakers," *Washington Post*, June 26, 1981; Martin Tolchin, "House Gives Reagan Victory on Budget By Approving Cuts," *New York Times*, June 27, 1981.

[404] Dan Balz, "GOP Group Attacks Democrats Voting Against IMF Rider," *Washington Post*, August 16, 1983.

[405] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.

was prone to speaking in 'legislative speak.'"[406] Of course, the Illinois Republican

understood the importance of communicating through the media in his congressional

district, and was experienced with news conferences and news briefings, so is staff

worked with him to "translate that into the national responsibility and the national role he

needed to play."[407] It was a slow process. At this time, the Republican leadership held

no organized message meetings. Communications staffers were brought into larger staff

meetings, but were considered a secondary and subservient piece of the overall legislative

effort. "It was ad hoc," recalled one senior aide from the time.

    Another former aide explained that Michel "had kind of a firmer footing in the

legislative space than in the larger policy space" where communications was perceived as

more important. The aide added that,

> "I read these things all the time, you know, when they make references to Bob as a get-along, go-along guy and all this other kind of stuff. I mean it's a bunch of crap…. He has always been a man of very strong convictions and [had] a great deal of loyalty to his members who elected him to that position, to the party, and obviously to his country. Country was number one to him."[408]

    For the communicators on his staff, their admiration for their boss was clear, but it

also evident that they had huge challenges in terms of building a modern communications

effort because of those same qualities that they so admired. As Michel viewed himself as

someone who would serve his country first and not be concerned with public opinion,[409]

it was a challenge to convince the Leader to use modern polling to help create a national

message, according to former GOP staff. Into this communications void emerged

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[406] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.
[407] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.
[408] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.
[409] Margot Hornblower, "Reps. Michel and Vander Jagt Battling Fiercely to Lead House GOP," *Washington Post*, December 8, 1980.

Gingrich, elected to whip over Michel's preferred candidate, Rep. Ed Madigan, also from Illinois, by two votes in 1989.[410] The Georgia representative, already known as a "bomb thrower" for his persistent use of aggressive language, had very different ideas about the role of caucus leadership should have with the media.[411] According to a former aide to the minority leader:

> Michel "certainly didn't necessarily embrace the media in the same way that Newt Gingrich did…. [Michel] was very deferential to the institution, very deferential to the speaker. He'd be tough when he had to be, but he wasn't … his first instinct was to be an institutionalist.
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> "Whereas his great challenge came from Newt Gingrich, who believed firmly in the use of bombastic language and really in the use of kind of drama and dramatic language, and would actually come up with a course through the Conservative Opportunity Society to teach people how to use more dramatic language. So he, in many ways, Newt was the first Frank Luntz.412 He would talk about corruption, how you had to really kind of nail … use this kind of dramatic language to frame the Republicans as being the heroes and Democrats as being the villains…. Michel was not really into that."[413]

Republicans openly spoke about Gingrich challenging Michel for the top spot within the conference.[414] According to several aides from the time, Michel's plan of action was to assign communications staff to be more aggressive on his behalf and, in 1990, in another response to concerns with Gingrich's tactics and ambition – Michel formally designated the Republican conference chair – a loyal ally, Rep. Jerry Lewis

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[410] Don Phillips, "Gingrich Elected House GOP Whip; Increased Partisan Polarization Foreseen," *Washington Post*. March 23, 1989.
[411] David S. Broder, "Revolution, Stage 2," *Washington Post*, July 28, 1985.
[412] Luntz is a Republican pollster who is credited with being among the first to test and then promote the use of certain words to frame the GOP in positive attributes while framing the Democrats with much harsher, negative qualities. His work, along with others, contributed to the designing of the Contract with America in 1994.
[413] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.
[414] Clifford Krauss, "GOP Success in House Splits Leadership," *New York Times*, March 20, 1992.

(CA) – as the person responsible for messaging and communications.[415] Despite the internal politics of the decision, it was not a major structural change for the conference. For much of the 1980s, Rep. Jack Kemp was conference chair. He was a tremendous communicator and widely considered the leader in the House in advocating for supply-side economic policies that eventually became the core of Reagan's economic plan.[416] While tax cuts-as-a-way-to-spur-the economy is widely accepted among Republicans today, Kemp was much more of a proselytizer trying to convince deficit-sensitive colleagues to jump on board. "We don't worship any longer at the shrine of a balanced budget," he declared in a floor debate with Democrats in 1981.[417] Such a perspective made Kemp's leadership of the Conference, with its new responsibilities for messaging, problematic for Michel. "Jack Kemp was his own messenger," analyzed one former Michel aide. "His message didn't often conform with what the leadership wanted to do, particularly when it came to deficit reduction. Jack just didn't believe in deficit reduction, so we had to do our own thing through the leadership structure on those kinds of things."[418]

With Michel's office taking a larger role in communications, his staff played to his strengths, and that meant messaging around the legislative calendar. As the Democrats set the agenda, managed the floor schedule, determined the rules for debate, etc., it placed the Michel-led Republicans in an almost exclusively reactive mode.

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[415] In December 1990, Michel backed Rep. Jerry Lewis (CA) in his successful re-election as chairman of the House Republican Conference. Lewis defeated Rep. Carl D. Purcell (MI), who was openly supported by Gingrich, 98 to 64.

[416] See Curt Suplee, "The Man Behind the GOP's Economic Revolution," *Washington Post,* August 11,1981; Kathy Sawyer, "Jack Kemp: Galileo of GOP Economic; Reagan Backer Promotes Tax Cut – and His Own Political Fortune," *Washington Post*, May 20, 1980.

[417] Helen Dewar and Richard L. Lyons, "Reagan Budget-Cut Plan Jolted As Panel Democrats Hold Firm." *Washington Post*, April 8 1981.

[418] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.

Reporters, according to Michel staff, went to their boss for "guidance on the things that were coming to the floor, the process, the committees, kind of the nuts and bolts of legislative passage, and less for those kind of grander, sweeping statements about what Republican policy was."[419] With a weak messenger and a weak party position as the minority in the House, the Leader's staff continually tried to jump into whatever stories were being pushed by the White House. "You'd follow where the President's people were headed," a former GOP leadership aide said. "Where were Jim Brady and Larry Speakes?[420] Where were they headed with their messaging, and coverage? What were they trying to do?"[421]

In addition, Michel's team established a much more formalized communications structure. Every week, there were four major meetings involving communications for the Republican conference. First, on Monday mornings, the Michel staff would gather and invite whomever they believed necessary to the planning for the week, such as the legislative counsel or parliamentarian. With Gingrich now firmly inside leadership, those working for Michel saw the need to elevate communications to a more significant part of this staff-only planning. This meeting was done so that Michel's team would be prepared for the full leadership team meeting, the second key communications meeting of the week. The GOP leadership met every Monday afternoon, and sometimes Tuesday mornings if members didn't arrive back to Washington in time. They used a broad definition of leadership and therefore the meeting included the top caucus leaders – minority leader, whip and conference chair – as well as the top deputy whip, and chair

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[419] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.
[420] Brady and Speakes both served the Reagan administration as White House spokesmen.
[421] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.

and vice-chair of the Republican Study Committee.[422] Staff for these members were also

invited.

On Fridays, the third key meeting of the week was organized. It consisted of

every ranking member on any committee, along with their chiefs of staff. (When the

Republicans took control in January 1995, this meeting continued; only now with the

committee chairs.) The room was a boisterous crowd of 30 to 40 people each week.

Michel's staff organized and led this meeting which would often take two hours each.

Being Friday, when the House was typically not in session, it became a convenient time

to bring everyone together. As explained by a Michel leadership aide:

> "Everybody would report around the table. What bill was coming up through their
> committee: what the problems were, what the issues that we were going to solve
> were, where the politics were around the issue, where the conference was.
>
> "It was informational first, so we all knew what was coming up the pike, no
> surprises. But then we would understand what the politics were and where
> different demographic groups, gender groups, or nationalities would fall
> depending on what the issue was. Then we would talk about whether or not the
> issue was ripe to talk about publicly. When the Leader held his weekly press
> conference, should he start to talk about a bill that was coming through the
> Energy and Commerce committee, or a bill that was coming through the Ways
> and Means committee? And what the Republican 'take' on it was."[423]

The final regularly-scheduled communications meeting of the week for the

Republicans would be immediately following the Friday meeting with committee chairs

and staff. This fourth meeting was run by Michel's press secretary and was specifically

for all the press secretaries for every House Republican. As recalled by those who led it,

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[422] Founded in 1973, the Republican Study Committee (RSC) was a sub-group of the Republican
conference catering to conservative members. It is intended to help develop and pursue conservative
legislation in Congress. The RSC maintains its own staff, including those focused on policy research,
outreach to other conservative groups, and communications. http://rsc.flores.house.gov/ Accessed July 30,
2015.
[423] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.

over two-thirds would attend typically. Polling data was occasionally shared when it was

available. The goal was to have every member on the same page – as much as possible –

with the messaging that had emerged from the previous three meetings. It was also the

place to try and work out communications challenges, such as disagreement among

members, or appropriate responses to attacks from Democrats. One of Michel's press

secretaries explained:

> "I had just been though my leaders meeting, through a week of legislation and
> floor activity, had just heard from all the committee members and then I was able
> to give them quite a bit of information to say, 'Here's what you should
> recommend your boss talks about this weekend. Here are the issues you might
> want to stay away from.'
>
> "We would talk much more about messaging there. Somebody would say 'this is
> in the news this week and we have legislation. So I'm going to write a speech on
> it.' I would tell them what my opinion was and then would open the floor. People
> would either talk about statewide issues, regional issues, issues where people
> were a little 'off the reservation' and how they were going to handle being "off
> the reservation" from the Republican leadership's position.
>
> "Or maybe give me an early warning sign of an issue that they felt was
> percolating up in their district, their state, their region; that I needed to bring back
> to the leadership on the following Monday and let them know.[424]

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1989 to 2006 – The Democrats

Democratic Speaker Jim Wright, and Whip Tony Coelho resigned in 1989 within

a week of each other. The party's caucus chair, Dick Gephardt, fresh off his failed bid in

1988 for the Democratic nomination for president, became the new majority leader.[425]

The campaign experience reinforced Gephardt's belief in the positive effect of national

messaging and tactics such as a "message of the day," which was popular among most

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[424] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.
[425] Michael Oreskes, "House Democrats Choose Gephardt and Gray to Lead," *New York Times*, June 15, 1989.

presidential campaigns of the time.[426] Given wide latitude by incoming Speaker Tom

Foley to coordinate communications strategy for the House Democrats, he and his staff

immediately set out to modernize the caucus's operation. The objective largely focused

on rebranding the party which had suffered significant blows during the 1988 Bush-

Dukakis presidential contest,[427] and then the embarrassment of seeing two of its top three

leaders in the House resign under the weight of scandals. "We knew from research that

there were a couple of needles on offense and defense that we needed to move," said one

former senior Democratic aide.

> "The Democratic Party at that time was viewed as creatures of Washington,
> overly identified with special interest groups and didn't have and had lost its clear
> identification with middle class families and kitchen table economics…. [In
> addition,] disassociating themselves from the mess in Washington, very hard for
> members of Congress to do, was a high priority. Pushing messages that identified
> with middle class kitchen table economics was a big priority and so finding those
> themes in the news of the day, once you knew what you were looking for, was not
> all that difficult."[428]

Gephardt established a "message team" of select caucus members, not exclusive

to leadership. Special attention was given to ensuring that the team was regionally and

ideologically diverse. "It wasn't just the hardy band of reliable liberals, but it was as best

as possible a cross section of the Democratic caucus," explained a Gephardt staffer.[429]

Leadership staff participated as well. Each morning on the day there was legislative

business happening on the Hill, message meetings were held in a conference room.

Gephardt convened the meeting, but his staff ran it. The agenda was anything but ad-hoc.

Staff handed out clips of that day's articles from leading newspapers to every participant.

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[426] Robin Toner, "Washington Talk; Congress," *New York Times*, July 4, 1989.
[427] Michael Oreskes, "After the Elections; Democrats Begin Quadrennial Debate: How to Win the White House Race," *New York Times*, November 11, 1988.
[428] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.
[429] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.

The top stories in the news that morning were reviewed followed by a discussion of what the floor agenda was for that day and how Democrats could aggressively message on it. The specific media targets were the three main evening news broadcasts. This was "when there were three networks and what was on the evening news mattered," laughed one aide who was involved with the meetings.[430] Occasionally, if one member was quoted in the press or garnered coverage on the evening news, it was highlighted to thank and congratulate the member as well as incentivize other members to participate in similar efforts.

As they discussed the day's messaging opportunities, volunteers were sought to give one-minute speeches on the floor in successive order, so that a larger point could be made and an overall theme established in a coordinated fashion. There would typically be eight to a dozen members as well as Gephardt in the message team meetings. A similar number of staff participated, largely drawn from leadership staff but also including personal staff to other members. Having their staff present made it easier on members who found themselves "instructed" to give a one-minute speech.[431]

At the time, as the Democrats were still in the majority, securing "buy in" from caucus members could be hard to come by, which is one reason why the message meeting was rather small. "Largely, people were doing their own thing," recalled a Democratic aide from the era. "Members were very focused on local political stuff. There were some big battles that required trying to coalesce around a national message."[432] The most

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[430] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012. As late as 1996, reporting on television coverage of the first presidential debate that October revolved about how many millions of people watched ABC, CBS, and NBC. No cable network was mentioned. See John Carmody, "The TV Column," *Washington Post*, October 18, 1996.

[431] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.

[432] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.

obvious of these was the pitched battle over the Clinton healthcare initiative in 1993 and 1994, which former aides to Democratic leaders admit, was "not a very successful effort at creating a national message."[433]

While still in the majority, the Gephardt team created an annual retreat for the caucus's leadership, along with other members involved with the messaging.[434] What little staff attended was largely limited to leadership staff. As staff revealed, it was a two-day event often taking place outside of Washington and funded by Gephardt's office. Friday night was highlighted by a speaker talking about the larger public opinion environment or "this time in political history," both of which help set the scene for more specific discussions later.[435] Several successive meetings filled up the Saturday agenda, mostly with pollsters talking about their own research. Speaker Foley and Ron Brown, chairman of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) at the time, would attend portions of the conference to thank the members for taking the lead on national communications and emphasizing how important their work was to the larger goals of passing legislation, combatting the Bush White House, and electing a Democrat as president in 1992, and thereafter, supporting him.

The 1994 election, of course, changed everything for the House Democrats as they saw their 40-year reign end. "From that point on," said one Gephardt aide, "there was a greater sense that there had to be a national message, and that Congress and congressional leadership could play that role." Collaboration among caucus members and the main Democratic leadership expanded dramatically. No longer beholden to the obligations of managing the House and, in effect, being responsible for helping run the

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[433] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.
[434] Bob Adams, "Key Democrats Plan Retreat," *St. Louis (MO) Post-Dispatch*, January 19, 1990.
[435] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.

country, Democrats found themselves with much more time to focus on communications.

It remained a "Gephardt-central message operation," according to those who worked on

leadership staff at the time. The new minority leader's office "was extremely strong both

in terms of control of the political operation, control of the message operation, control of

the legislative operation."[436] But while the message was still coming out of Gephardt's

office, efforts were made to open up the process, both for appearances – as a rebuttal to

those who chafed under the control of one leader's staff – and for the political necessity

of bringing in more members of a depleted caucus to encourage and promote caucus-

wide buy-on of national communications efforts.

It was at this time that Gephardt deferred the duties of heading the Democratic

Message Group to Reps. Rosa DeLauro (CT), later joined by Rep. Frank Pallone (NJ).[437]

Prominent Democratic pollsters, such as Geoff Garin, Mark Mellman, and Stanley

Greenberg – regulars at the caucus retreats – were also invited on a more regular basis to

join about 20 press secretaries and a few members who now attended the Message Group

meetings.[438] "There was definitely a steady stream of polling that was coming in,"

commented one former Gephardt aide. "Probably nothing like it is today, but I would say

it was always a factor. This is sort of before the era of daily polling."[439]

Gephardt also established a "strategy group" for leadership, led by his staff,

whose meetings would include messaging discussions. These staff members also had a

number of side conversations throughout the week. "We sort of would develop

messaging around all kind of legislative and political issues that were going on,"

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[436] Democratic staffer, July 31, 2012.
[437] Betsy Rothstein, "House GOP Theme Team vs. Democrats' Message Group," *The Hill*, March 31, 1999.
[438] Morton M. Kondrake, untitled column, *Roll Call*, April 1, 1996.
[439] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.

explained one aide who was involved at the time.[440] Handouts, talking points, charts and

graphs and other materials would then be created for distribution to the caucus. Gephardt

leadership staff would then coordinate with DeLauro and Pallone to bring members on

board for one-minute speeches and other opportunities for members to actually deliver

the messages that had been developed.[441] DeLauro and Pallone "facilitated distributing

some press material to get everybody in the caucus understanding what the message was,

and rounding up people to go out on the floor and talk on stuff if necessary," said the

aide. "It was really being driven out of the morning discussions that were taking place in

the [leadership] staff meeting."[442]

The Gephardt strategy group also coordinated, to a greater degree than before,

with other party organs. The DCCC was actively engaged and provided district-level

feedback on what messaging was working, or not working, from candidates across the

country. In addition, Gephardt staff would be invited to White House communications

meetings, though coordination depended on an alignment of interests.[443] When it existed,

"the messaging was sort of unified and united. When there wasn't, everyone went their

own way."[444] Another aide remarked, "We had to be doing something ourselves…. it

wasn't just about individual members and their districts in the presidential level contest.

We had to try to drive our own message as well."[445]

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[440] Democratic staffer, July 31, 2012.
[441] Betsy Rothstein, "House GOP Theme Team vs. Democrats' Message Group," *The Hill*, March 31, 1999.
[442] Democratic staffer, July 31, 2012.
[443] Ann Devroy and Kevin Merida, "President Hits GOP as Callous," *Washington Post*, February 23, 1995.
[444] Democratic staffer, July 31, 2012.
[445] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.

In the post-1994 world, the Gephardt operation to develop national messages was about creating "a whole sort of leadership communication structure" as a House minority "that was totally different than had been done before."

> "It was really about trying to create and galvanize the whole caucus to do more. You know, there had been message meetings and things like that. But it was really ... in the previous era.... it was much more about sort of insider Washington communications and this bill and that bill. It wasn't about this bigger communications platform…. It was really about, how do we maximize Washington media? How do we maximize local media? How do we maximize television in ways we've never done it before? How do we maximize, you know, travel and sort of galvanizing events. I mean, we did a bunch of big electronic town halls and things like that that were relatively novel at the time, and that was all part of this effort to try and present a unified message to the country."[446]

The Gephardt-led messaging operation was so strong and pervasive inside the caucus operations that it remained largely unchanged through the 2004 election when the minority leader retired and was replaced by Minority Whip Rep. Nancy Pelosi (CA).

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1989 to 2006 – The Republicans

Competitive tensions aside, the developing relationship between Minority Leader Michel and his new whip, Gingrich, was a partnership of necessity. Michel began to understand the appeal of Gingrich's aggressiveness and, though he never seemed to adopt it fully, he sought to bring it within his leadership circle.[447] Gingrich, now transformed into a leader, needed the prestige and institutional heft of the Republican conference infrastructure to take his "movement" to the next level.[448] This changing dynamic meant that the Conservative Opportunity Society (COS), a subgroup of the conference that had

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[446] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.
[447] Mary Jacoby, "The GOP Regroups: Lacking White House Guidance, Republicans Launch Regular Strategy Sessions, Theme Team," *Roll Call*, April 19, 1993.
[448] Newt Gingrich, *Lessons Learned the Hard Way* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 37.

been created and led by members like Kemp, Gingrich and Reps. Vin Webber (MN) and

Connie Mack (FL), was left in the hands of Gingrich's trusted supporter and fellow COS

leader, Rep. Bob Walker (PA),[449] while new focus and energy shifted to the Republican

leadership's message development and dissemination efforts. With Gingrich in

leadership, there was much less need for the smaller group of GOP advocates to push its

leadership for change.

According to Michel staffers, the minority leader maintained an ad-hoc message

group that would meet every few weeks. The gathering was Michel-centric and didn't

necessarily include Gingrich, despite his leadership position, in the discussion. Overall,

this group did not seem to have much effect on actual communications. Instead,

leadership embraced the use of one-minutes and special orders to drive home key

national messages. The long odds of generating coverage for the Minority in the House

were assumed and, taking the cue from Gingrich's success, Michel's staff sought to

exploit any chance to say something that would capture the attention of the press. The

one-minutes lent themselves easily to this, as they were one of the "few opportunities for

the Minority to actually control what was going on…. One-minute speeches were pretty

much fair game for everybody to get up and you had the same amount of time for the

Majority as the Minority."[450]

With the 1992 presidential campaign approaching, the Michel staff chose to

develop messages largely focused not on their agenda, but on helping George H.W. Bush

get re-elected. To accomplish this, they created what became known as "the Theme

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[449] Dan Balz and Charles R. Babcock, "Gingrich, Allies Made Waves and Impression; Conservative Rebels Harassed the House," *Washington Post*, December 20, 1994.
[450] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.

Team."[451] It included members who were most interested in short-term messaging,

largely "junior members who didn't normally weigh in on some of the big pieces of

legislation, but really wanted to get involved with doing stuff on the floor."[452] As no one

expected history-making rhetoric in 60-second remarks, great deference was given by the

members to leadership staff to come up with the themes and write the text. Although the

group would meet weekly to organize, staff recall being expected to speak frequently

with the Bush White House or the campaign to see what they were talking about and then

to mirror those same themes during the one-minutes. Republican members – some a part

of the Theme Team, some not – were lined up, each with a one-minute speech.

Staff strived to make each speech topical with a goal of trying to be mentioned in

the news of the day, typically by focusing on the presidential contest which, as it always

does, dominates the news media's attention every four years. The remarks were put

together each morning, sometimes as many as 10 in a day, and distributed a on the floor

or at different meetings of Republican members. Even if they didn't make the next day's

stories or that evening's news broadcasts, they proved effective in their own way. One

aide who was involved with the effort explained that under House rules, no member was

allowed to personally denigrate another member, a sitting U.S. Senator, or the President

of the United States. However, said the aide, "…you could say anything else about

anybody else," implying that Democratic presidential nominee, Gov. Bill Clinton of

Arkansas, was fair game. "But [then Speaker] Tom Foley changed the rules of the House

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[451] Betsy Rothstein, "House GOP Theme Team vs. Democrats' Message Group." *The Hill*, March 31, 1999.
[452] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.

so that [the rule] also included presidential candidates…. I was very proud of sparking that."[453]

Following Bush's loss in the 1992 election, the Theme Team continued but broadened its topics to issues beyond the presidential race. Chaired by Rep. Lamar Smith (TX), the group was informal in scope, with 15 to 20 various members coming in for a discussion on the themes for each week.[454] It was widely viewed as a leadership initiative and therefore members did not bring along, or rely on, their own press people for the remarks. That was almost exclusively the province of Michel staff. Those involved recall that polling was almost never used to develop the messages. Instead, it was driven largely by the previous day's coverage or some newsworthy legislation coming to the floor. Members would approach Michel communications staff on the floor each morning of a legislative session and simply ask, "What have you got today?" and would be handed one of the prepared one-minute speeches. They would then proceed to the rostrum to deliver it. Michel himself was not involved with approving the speeches. There was strong coordination with Rep. Smith's office, though again, clear deference was given to the leadership staff involved.

The 1994 election brought about the historic Republican takeover of the House, the retirement of Michel, and the speakership of Gingrich. Initially, the Contract with America, in effect, became the party's national message.[455] According to leadership staff, with control of the House floor for the first time in four decades, Majority Leader Richard Armey (TX), and to a lesser degree Majority Whip Tom DeLay (TX) sought

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[453] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.
[454] Mary Jacoby, "The GOP Regroups: Lacking White House Guidance, Republicans Launch Regular Strategy Sessions, Theme Team," *Roll Call*, April 19, 1993.
[455] Timothy J. Burger, "GOP Unveils Plan for 'First 100 Days,'" *Roll Call*, July 25, 1994.

their own influence on communications wrapped around the legislative agenda. Newly

installed Republican Conference chair Rep. John Boehner (OH) also sought to take a

significant role on national messaging for the new majority, as he was, by virtue of his

position, technically designated to do.[456] The challenge for all to them, as one GOP

leadership aide explained, was that "because he was so radioactive and such a rock star,

Newt kind of would trump whatever message that we were trying to drive."[457] The most

internal discipline that the party's leadership tried to impose upon itself came as they

developed their own federal budget, especially with the proposal to limit the growth of

the Medicare program.[458]

Thus, the House Republican majority under Gingrich was distinguished by a

number of eager communicators, including those in the top conference leadership

positions, resulting in a variety of overlapping efforts to generate a message. The media

provided a willing sponge for their words. Following 40 years in the Washington

wilderness, they were considered even more newsworthy than typical House

leadership.[459] While the Republicans found no rigid process could be put in place to

coordinate message development, the conference initiated a bi-annual retreat to at least

make an effort to unify people on the same page. Located off-site, it began with the GOP

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[456] Ibid.

[457] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.

[458] Katharine Q. Seelye, "House GOP to Face the Divisive Issues," *New York Times*, March 27, 1995. Gingrich was so focused on having Republicans avoid using the word "cut" when speaking about Medicare that for a time, everyone in party leadership was required to "put a dollar in a hat whenever they suffered a slip of the tongue." Jeanne Cummings, "A War of Words: The architect of the Republican Revolution admits he erred in so labeling the GOP takeover of Congress, but he still throws verbal punches," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 23, 1996.

[459] Jack Germond and Jules Witcover, "Gingrich Shouldn't Whine About Bad Press Coverage," *Baltimore Sun*, April 4, 1994. http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-04-04/news/1995094074_1_contract-miracles-gingrich Accessed July 16, 2015.

leadership coming together to coordinate their activities for the new session, and would then expand to the entire caucus.[460] The retreats would,

> "give us a sense of what we were going to do for the year, and mostly we would try to kind of get everyone's buy-in on what we were going to do with the budget… because the budget drives everything with communications. It drives how much you're going to cut retirement funding. It's going to drive your number on appropriations. It's going to drive your strategy on taxes. It's going to drive whether you're going to do a reconciliation or not…. [The retreat] was kind of setting in the parameters of the year."[461]

The obligations of being in charge forced the Republican leadership's communications efforts to be driven – on a level that had not been necessary before – by the legislative calendar. Former staffers recall that a long-term strategic communications committee was established for the caucus with a mix of members and leadership staff. The effort was to establish an admittedly "loose" schedule for themes that would drive the focus of House GOP communications over the next three to six months. Nonetheless, communication strategy meetings "became very bill specific because you can plan six months out but you never exactly know when a bill's hitting the floor. You never know that the White House is going to do to you."[462] Another leadership aide from the time recalled that execution of long-range communications plans "varied a lot because of events."[463] The Republican leadership would meet every Monday afternoon, allowing time for members to return from travelling to their districts or elsewhere over the weekend. Staff from the NRCC would come occasionally, as would other members of the broader leadership group. At the meeting, the speaker's communication director

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[460] Deborah Kalb, "House GOP Discuss Strategy, Conservative Dems Form Coalition," *The Hill*, February 15, 1995.
[461] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.
[462] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012.
[463] Republican staffer, August 2, 2012.

would have the specific role as the one who proposed the "theme of the week" and then

present whatever activities would be undertaken to promote that theme. Selecting the

message was not particularly challenging for the Republicans:

> "There are [messages] you're not going to go wrong on, whether it's lower taxes, less regulation, more charter schools … take your pick. A lot of these kind of things, you're not going to go wrong on because you got to have the consensus that you want. You have to hit it, or a version of it, week in, week out, week in, week out."[464]

As the quotation above might indicate, the use of polling was occasional and not a

regular part of the messaging efforts by the leadership or staff. Instead, it appears that

there was a widespread belief in the overall conservative agenda they had been elected to

deliver. "We always talked about what would resonate," explained a former Gingrich

aide. "You want messages that resonate. You want to touch people. You want values-

based messaging, not just facts, but what the facts mean to you."[465]

At the end of the business week, Republican communications staff, including the

press secretaries from all of the standing House committees, would come together to talk

about thematic issues in the speaker's conference room. "We used to walk through what

topics were coming up, what legislation was coming up, and how we were messaging

those things… that sort of thing… who was taking the lead," recalled one leadership

communications aide.[466] This was followed up by a number of additional meetings with

a few senior press people to discuss a given particular issue that might be coming up in a

committee or on the floor. "So for a certain part of the time," said one aide who was

involved, "we were working on issues like the Census, so you'd have Census meetings

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[464] Republican staffer A, July 30, 2012.
[465] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012.
[466] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012.

and then you'd have your general leadership meetings and then you may have a whole

other set of meetings to coordinate from."[467]

Because the majority leader's office was responsible for running the floor, his

communications staff took an aggressive position within the larger conference. "We all

kind of worked together to make it happen," explained one former aide to Majority

Leader Armey,

> "…to get everyone's input on what was happening. My piece of it every week was … because Armey was the majority leader and I always had to know what the floor calendar was and what was coming out of committee, my input was always, here's what we're going to be voting on and here's how we talk about that. Let's all talk about how we're going to talk about that. Here's what is coming. Here's the XYZ bill in Ways and Means committee that's going to make news, so let's make sure that we're ready to talk about that. That would be, sort of, the foundation"[468]

The Conference, led by Boehner at the time, would generate handouts –

frequently tracking what Gingrich was saying, but not always – at every meeting for

members to use in their home districts. The Conference meetings included very little

staff outside of a few from the leadership. As each issue was discussed, there would

always be a communications element brought up as well. Talking points were reviewed

and distributed again later on to the individual offices.

Despite the active role being taken by the majority leader's staff and the

conference chairman's staff, Gingrich remained a unique player in his party's loosely

coordinated communications effort. With every comment, he drew attention away from

whatever coordinated communications effort was being promoted by other leaders. His

"strong will and his typically good instincts," one former aide said, "would kind of lead

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[467] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012.
[468] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.

the charge and others would fall in to place typically."[469] He would "have a real strong opinion every once-in-a-while," added another former leadership aide, "about 'we must talk about X, and this is the way we talk about it.'"[470]

Over time, an effort was made to "dial back" Gingrich's role as the dominant spokesman for the House Republicans and to give opportunities for others in the media spotlight. The Theme Team process continued, again, largely as an effort to provide junior members of the conference with a chance to be involved with messaging. Working through the conference, an additional effort was made to show that the speaker was "not the only guy" who could represent Republicans, said one former aide.[471] Certainly, he remained front and center in those areas defined by the Contract with America, but on other issues, his staff had Gingrich agree to "divvy it up…. A lot of people have a lot of good ideas and good strategies. People want to talk about those things, and have their idea not see the light of day because someone else is sort of driving it."[472]

The efforts to limit Gingrich took on new urgency and discipline following a spate of bad publicity, including substantial charges of ethics violations, a widely reported, embarrassing episode on Air Force One while returning from the funeral of Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli prime minister who had been assassinated, and then an abortive coup by some of his closest deputies.[473] In an effort to resuscitate the speaker's image,

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[469] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012.
[470] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.
[471] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012.
[472] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012.
[473] For coverage of the Air Force One incident, see Lars Erik-Nelson, "Gingrich Shows Pique & Volleys Crisis Reveals Newt Depths of Pettiness" *Daily News (NY)*, November 16, 1995; Mercury News Wire Services, "Democrats Capitalize on Gingrich's Claimed Snub," *San Jose Mercury News*, November 17, 1995; Mary McGrory, "Newt-mare Come True," *Washington Post*, December 10, 1995.

perhaps the single greatest congressional communicator of the last century, his staff

demanded – and he acquiesced – that he "go dark; just not being around, not being

present, not being available to answer questions."[474] He would eventually be brought

back out into the media limelight with a positively reviewed trip to China,[475] but by then

Gingrich and the rest of the GOP leadership had made the decision to pursue the Monica

Lewinsky scandal (eventually leading to a presidential impeachment), and the subsequent

poor performance of House Republicans – despite the speaker's predictions of large gains

– in the 1998 elections cost Gingrich his job.[476]

In retrospect, the Republican majority under Gingrich had what Gephardt never

seemed to have: an engaged and active core group of talented communicators among

leadership and general membership. While the Contract with America helped keep

everyone in line for a short while, time passed and the impact of that agenda – intended to

be accomplished in 100 days – began to dissipate. Soon, an aggressive House conference

leadership communications strategy was being led by different members of the team,

often simultaneously and without as much coordination as before. Ideally, the messaging

would have been driven by whatever came out of the Monday meeting with the

conference leadership. But message development was never that easy, especially with so

many wanting a say. Each leader ended up doing their own thing, despite countless

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For coverage of the aborted coup, see Ceci Connolly, David S. Broder, Dan Balz, "GOP's House Divided; In Move to Oust Gingrich, Leaders' Shifting Allegiances Generated Layers of Deception and Misunderstanding," *Washington Post,* July 28, 1997; Adam Clymer, "Congressional Memo: Republicans Stumble Over Speaker's Chair," *New York Times*, July 19, 1997.

[474] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012; Alison Mitchell, "Gingrich Emerging From Self-Exile, Humbler, Wary and Thinner," *New York Times*, October 27, 1997.

[475] Dan Balz, "Gingrich Faces Uphill Battle With Division in the Ranks; Speaker Works on Bolstering His Right Flank," *Washington Post*, April 6, 1997.

[476] Dan Balz, "Ready, or Not? Newt Gingrich and the Republican Party see the prospect of a historic shift in power. But they're still struggling to make the whole exceed the sum of its parts," *Washington Post Magazine*, October 25, 1998.

meetings and layers of internal communications efforts. One former leadership

communications aide remarked: "If there's any kind of management, Harvard Business

School-critique of the world I was in, it was that we were siloed in, and you were in

multiple long and incessant meetings with different combinations of the same 50 or 60

people."[477] Another Gingrich aide admitted that the best laid plans of any communicator

in Congress often go astray when dealing with the realities of the personalities involved:

> "If I'm presenting the 'theme of the week" to the assembly of 21 leaders of the Republican leadership, I'm not going to vouch for how many of that 21 are paying any attention to me. Or vouch for how many of them had any serious intent of going out and participating aggressively in what the theme activities were and that sort of thing, and that's the nature of the institution."[478]

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1996 to 2004 – The Republicans

The ascension of Rep. J. Dennis Hastert (IL) to the speakership in the aftermath of

the Gingrich resignation in January 1998 was a challenging situation on several levels for

the 57-year old legislator.[479] During the same lame duck session, the Republican Party in

Congress was about to embark on a historic and controversial impeachment trial of

President Clinton over charges of perjury and obstruction of justice relating to his sexual

indiscretion with Monica Lewinsky, a former White House intern. Rep. Bob Livingston

(LA) had been chosen by the Republican Conference to take over for Gingrich, who had

already announced his intention to leave Congress early, but then abruptly resigned from

his seat following revelations that he too, similar to President Clinton, had engaged in

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[477] Republican staffer, August 2, 2012.
[478] Republican staffer A, July 30, 2012.
[479] Richard W. Stevenson, "Republicans Look to 'the Coach' to Heal the House's Wounds," *New York Times*, December 20, 1998.

infidelity.[480] The party seemed to be in turmoil, unable to stop the impeachment process

that had proven to be politically unpopular in the November election and unable to rally

around a leader to lead them forward. Into this tempest, Hastert emerged as the

compromise candidate.[481]

Hastert also had to deal with a leadership team, including Reps. Armey, DeLay

and incoming Conference chairman Rep. J.C. Watts (OK), a former collegiate football

star, ordained Baptist minister and the only African-American Republican in the House at

the time, all of whom were considered more effective communicators than the new

speaker. First elected to Congress in 1986, Hastert was largely a largely unknown entity

outside of his district and Washington. He seemed a bit of a throw-back to the "inside

game" of Washington politics. White-haired, stocky and barrel-chested, befitting his past

life as a high school teacher and wrestling coach, his reputation was of a back-room

legislator and deal-maker, not one who was constantly, or confidently for that matter, in

the press.[482]

But since the ability to develop and deliver national messaging was assumed to be

part of the job as leader, Hastert's staff employed pollsters and media consultants to assist

their boss. "They were trying to help Denny, media train Denny, help him kind of with

how he looked," said one senior communications aide at the time.[483] In addition to

training him as a communicator, the new speaker's staff set out to create his own public

image. The objective, according to former leadership staff, was to present Hastert to the

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[480] Jim Vande Hei, "House Impeaches President; Hastert Likely New Speaker; Livingston Stuns House with Plans to Resign from Congress; DeLay Mobilizes Forces to Pick Next House Leader," *Roll Call*, December 21, 1998.
[481] Robert Pear, Pam Belluck and Lizette Alvarez, "Man in the News: John Dennis Hastert; Humble Man at the Helm," *New York Times*, January 7, 1999.
[482] A.B. Stoddard, "Incoming Speaker Dennis Hastert: His Behind the Scenes Style Sped Improbable Rise to House's Top Job," *The Hill*, January 6, 1999.
[483] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.

public as the very opposite of the Gingrich: a self-described plain-spoken man who would lead simply by getting things done. Efforts were made to "show he was a man of the House" because "he had never been introduced, really, to the House of Representatives." The aide continued:

> "I remember having a conversation with [Hastert] where I said, 'what Newt's been doing is he's been trying to swim upstream. He's been trying to battle the streams of history. What we're going to do here is we're going to go back to regular order. We're going to go downstream. We're going to let the current take us, the currents of history, take us downstream, and we're going to be the regular order speaker.'"[484]

Renewed efforts to coordinate conference-wide messaging were initiated under the new regime, and the top leaders, for the most part, started off working together. As under Gingrich, Hastert led a leadership meeting at the beginning of each week with an agenda that was dominated by legislative calendar. According to staff members from the time, communications strategy and message development were interwoven throughout the discussion, but the varying personalities didn't always mesh. One aide to Watts encouraged the Congressman, the most junior among all those in leadership to engage on the messaging debates. "Every policy matter should have a communications component to it," advised the aide. "Don't leave your comments for the end because they won't get heard."[485] Following the leadership meeting, top staff would meet to refine key messages which would then be distributed to members and their aides. Continuing a practice launched under Michel, leadership communications staff would host meetings for all House Republican press secretaries at the end of each week. These meetings also helped develop new messaging.

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[484] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.
[485] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012.

Hastert, like Michel, deferred a great deal of the communications effort to staff and colleagues. Despite all the work to improve his communications abilities, Hastert didn't always see the need to follow though: "I don't think I have to be the head of every news release or press conference," he said.[486] In fact, one of his top communications aides was allowed to develop the messaging behind the speaker's legislative agenda, largely on his own.[487] To tie the various parts of the party's program together, "I kind of came up with the notion that we needed to talk about securing America's future," the former aide explained.[488] The messaging included a focus on economic security and national security, part of an orchestrated attempt to address what was perceived to be the unease and concerns of the electorate. Under the Hastert speakership, the "securing America's future" theme, following ample poll testing, was adopted by leadership[489], and:

> "kind of framed the debate…. Keep in mind what we were trying to do is we were trying to move past impeachment as quickly as possible. We were trying to show that we were going to get to work, we were going to put all this partisanship behind us, and we were just going to get our stuff done."[490]

The presence of Watts allowed for the Republicans to also develop new messages geared towards non-traditional constituencies such as African-American churchgoers and culturally conservative Hispanics.[491] It is not that there wasn't similar outreach in previous years, but the opportunity to have Watts become a new face of the GOP allowed the party to further move beyond the Gingrich era and the failed bid at impeachment. In

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[486] Eric Pianin and Helen Dewar, "GOP Leaders on Hill Find Unity Elusive; Politics and Policy Pull Lott, Hastert in Different Directions," *Washington Post*, September 30, 2000.

[487] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.

[488] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.

[489] Sam Dealey, "GOP and Dems Exploit Divisions in Other's Ranks," *The Hill*, July 21, 1999.

[490] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.

[491] Kerry Kantin and Noelle Straub, "Hill GOPers Target Hispanic Media Outlets," *The Hill*, February 27, 2002.

this situation, the uniqueness of the messenger drove the development of the messages, with renewed attention being given to issues like urban empowerment zones (areas inside cities with reduced tax rates) and school vouchers, especially for parents of children in low-performing urban school districts. One former Hastert aide recalled, "we worked with J.C. [Watts] on a lot of minority outreach. We did Cinco de Mayo parties. We did a lot of different things to expand our thing."[492]

At the same time, because the legislative calendar continued to drive much of the messaging, communicators for Majority Leader Armey and Whip DeLay played critical roles during this time period. As time passed, and the earnest pledges of cooperation were forgotten, coordination among the leadership dissipated. Indeed, Watts nearly resigned from his position because DeLay's office was sending out communications directly to the conference membership, a task that should have fallen to Watts. Though the Oklahoman, in the end, did not quit abruptly, he was quietly out of Congress by 2003.[493]

For Armey and DeLay, aggressively operating on their own, the aim was to find the intersection between good policy and good communications, according to a former staffer. "You try to schedule bills on the floor in a way you can get the maximum attention for yourself," explained a communicator who worked for Armey during this time.[494] It was a subtle shift in emphasis, but a meaningful one. Communications was moving away from being a mere addendum to a policy discussion. Now the policies that were promoted were chosen because they fit into the messages that would best help the

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[492] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.
[493] Jake Tapper, "Fade to White: The only African American Republican in Congress is headed home. Can the party of Lincoln – and Trent Lott – afford the loss of J.C. Watts?" *Washington Post Magazine*, January 5, 2003.
[494] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.

conference. Communications aides were charged with coordinating a "war room"

throughout the legislative session – a centralized location for coordinating political and

communications strategy relating to bills working through the House.[495] The designation

of such a place is usually associated with the management of a crisis or political

campaign, but was now used on a daily basis to manage the House majority's ongoing

legislative communications. Again, interestingly, polling, a traditional device to measure

the effectiveness of potential messages was seldom used. Pollsters hired by the NRCC or

the Republican National Committee (RNC) "came over and did presentations once in a

while, but it was not a regular thing," according to one former Republican aide.[496] The

NRCC, explained another staffer, would bring in polling and say, 'This is how this

[message] tests'…. You might get [a poll] every now and then, but that mostly went to

the electeds, the members, [and not leadership's communications staff]."[497]

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2004 to 2010 – The Democrats

After her election as minority whip in 2001 – defeating Rep. Steny Hoyer by a

vote of 118 to 95 – Nancy Pelosi brought a new dynamic to Democratic leadership in the

House.[498] She was the highest-ranking woman to every hold such a position for either

party and faced some different communications challenges than her predecessors.[499] Her

campaign for whip was interrupted by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The

tragic events of that day transformed the attitude of the nation and set in motion a series

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[495] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.
[496] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.
[497] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.
[498] Juliet Eilperin, "House Democrats Elect Pelosi as Minority Whip," *Washington Post*, October 14, 2011.
[499] Ethan Wallison, "New Whip Pelosi Wants to Keep Top Bonior Aide," *Roll Call*, December 13, 2001.

of events that would transform the nation's politics. In particular, national security immediately rose to the list of most salient issues, thereby forcing Pelosi, who was already facing critics who deemed her too liberal, to cope with additional political attacks driven, in part former staff argue, by her gender.[500] "Women are not viewed [as] strong on national security simply because it is such a masculine topic," suggested one ex-Democratic leadership aide.[501] Pelosi countered the perception of weakness by referring to her status as ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, a position that provided her with insights and a level of comfortableness when discussing terrorism and security matters. At first, her staff struggled to have reporters take her seriously on national security, "but once they started talking to her and she would do an interview, it was very clear that she knew what she was talking about," added the aide.[502] In this sense, she proved to be a communicator in leadership who was well suited for the new era.

In every leadership race, Pelosi faced strong challenges from other members of the Democratic caucus. She was buoyed by the California delegation – still the largest block of votes within the caucus – and her tremendous fundraising ability, which allowed her to build connections across regional and ideological lines. When in power, she assiduously maintained these relations and was sensitive to welcoming of different kinds of input as new national messages were developed for the caucus.[503] Her frenetic travel schedule for fundraising and campaign events closer to the election – it was not uncommon to visit several cities in the span of one weekend – put her in touch with

[500] Juliet Eilperin, "The Making of Madam Whip; Fear and loathing -- and horse trading -- in the race for the House's No. 2 Democrat," *Washington Post Magazine*, January 6, 2002.
[501] Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012.
[502] Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012.
[503] Erin P. Billings, "Pelosi Plans Ahead," *Roll Call*, May 14, 2003.

aspiring candidates, party activists, and especially current Democratic members, all of

whom offered advice, solicited and unsolicited, on national messaging. One leadership

communicator from the time explained how the feedback loop helped caucus leadership

develop and refine its own national messaging endeavors:

> "Members report back to the leaders…. Let's say I represent Iowa. I go home and I just pound the crap out of my opponent in events there saying, this person wants to go to Washington. Their Party is infected with a culture of corruption. Let's say that I get ... that really resonates with people and I'm sensing that it does. The local papers are publishing about it. There are national columnists who are all pining about it in the local press. My events, there's all kinds of discussion about it and it's really weighing down my opponent.

> "Those people, those members of Congress are going to come back to Washington and say, 'We're just crushing them on this message.' People are frustrated and it's resonating with them that, 'What the hell's going on with the other side of the aisle,' and this culture of corruption and [we've] got all these problems?

> "Members of Congress, when they sense that [a message is] working, they're going to run with it."[504]

Inside the Washington beltway, Pelosi would bring in loyalists who were

considered experts in certain issue areas to help with the messaging effort, prior to

making a presentation to the larger caucus. "If it was during the bailout," noted a former

Pelosi aide.

> "Barney Frank played a big role in those discussions, with that messaging. If it was healthcare, you would go to Frank Pallone, the members who have expertise, Dingell, who are on the committee…. Immigration, you go to the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and you talk to them, 'We have the Dream Act. We have comprehensive.... We have guest worker program," and they [would provide feedback], 'Do not talk about that. Do talk about this.'"[505]

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[504] Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012.

[505] Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012. During this time, 2007 to 2010, Rep. Barney Frank (MA) was the chairman of the House Financial Services Committee. Rep. Frank Pallone was chairman of the Health Subcommittee within the House Energy and Commerce Committee and Rep. John Dingell (MI) was the chairman of the entire House Energy and Commerce Committee.

It seemed rational for Pelosi to reach out aggressively when it came to messaging on a given issue or legislation. However, the gathering of input did not end there. In election years, Pelosi was very active in trying to pull together a national theme, a banner under which all Democrats could run and win. In the fall of 2004, she announced the "New Partnership for America's Future," the umbrella label for six values and dozens of campaign promises that the House Democrats pledged would guide their work in the next Congress.[506] It had been developed over several months with input from caucus members, consultants, and other key party leaders, and focus groups and polling from 57 battleground congressional districts.[507] Unfortunately, aides from the time recollect, the input apparently did not include Senator John Kerry, the party's nominee against President Bush that year. When Kerry didn't embrace it on the campaign trail, the House communication effort lost whatever traction it might have had.[508]

Two years later, in the ramp up to the 2006 election, House Democrats faced a much more hospitable messaging environment. The Iraq War had grown very unpopular among the electorate and it was the sixth year of the Bush presidency, a year that, based on historical trends, would prove to be a poor one for the president's party in Congress. Pelosi and other Democratic leaders began pushing their election year theme of a "New Direction for America."[509] The vagueness of this label was intentional. Democratic leaders in the House, excited for a potential "wave" election that would sweep them back into the majority, wanted to take advantage of national messaging, but at the same time,

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[506] Stuart Rothenberg, "Democrats Now Have a Theme, But It's Not a Wave-Maker," *Roll Call*, September 27, 2004.

[507] Andrea Stone, "Democrats Polish Their Positions in Bid to Regain House," *USA Today*, September 22, 2004.

[508] Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012.

[509] Dana Milbank, "Democrats Meander in a New New Direction," *Washington Post*, September 15, 2006.

wanted to avoid scaring away moderate and conservative Democratic candidates who would have to be a part of any broad victory. A "New Direction for America" was chosen by leadership to the members because,

> "….there was a huge, as you know, big diversity of views on the caucus, but [the New Direction theme] can mean anything…. At that point, the war in Iraq was the big thing. The new direction is what we need to get out of Iraq; we need to stop sending so many troops over there. For Social Security, Bush was trying to privatize Social Security; we've got to stop doing that."[510]

Another leadership aide from the time elaborated on this point by saying Pelosi approached the election, "one seat at a time… It wasn't so much we have to win a national election. We have to win it in those districts." Therefore, the speaker and her staff sought to "frame it in a way, bring the national messages to them, but also respond to the needs of that community and build agendas that are responsive to the priorities [individual candidates] have." Her approach,

> "was a much more strategic, as opposed to just national broad agenda and everybody come to the same page. What west Texas likes, east New York doesn't. You can't have everyone…. like pie this way. She understood that. She was very big on that…. There are some things that this part of the country doesn't care about and this does, and we have to make sure we have messages aligned, but also initiatives that respond to that, both are comfortable with."[511]

The "New Direction" theme was, in typical Pelosi's fashion, developed and tested over several months, beginning almost as soon as she won the top Democratic spot.[512] Campaign consultants would routinely meet with leadership staff to discuss messaging. Top Democratic pollsters would make presentations to the top leaders every few months. In 2006, however, many communicators found that the highly tested and carefully

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[510] Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012.
[511] Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012.
[512] Andrea Stone, "Democrats Polish Their Positions in Bid to Regain House," *USA Today*, September 22, 2004.

considered national theme was less memorable as a message than the Democratic attack line of "culture of corruption." Interestingly, it seems that this effective alliterative critique developed organically, as opposed to being developed and poll-tested like the others.[513]

Democrats were speaking out regularly on the "compilation of real and perceived transgressions" involving Republicans such as Majority Leader Tom DeLay, lobbyist Jack Abramhoff, Rep. Mark Foley and others.[514] At some point, a former aide recalls, Pelosi started using the "culture of corruption" attack line. Her persistence eventually had an effect, as Howard Dean, chair of the Democratic National Committee, picked it up and began to use it regularly in his speeches as well.[515] One Pelosi staffer remarked, "I don't know if she created it, using 'the culture of corruption' [attack line, but] she would go on the floor and [say to the House Republicans,] 'Your greed will be your downfall!' I remember her pointing at them."[516] Another Democratic leadership aide from the time explained,

> "'Culture of corruption' is not that brilliant to come up with. It's just [that] everything coalesced around it so someone one day said, this is about the culture of corruption…. It was the Democrats' opportunity to sell that to the American people – and it was in our judgment correct…. [However, use of the attack line did not come about] like flip the switch and a revelation and a lightning bolt from on high, culture of corruption! It was just many months of playing out."[517]

After riding the corruption attack to a huge victory in 2006, Pelosi staffers said the speaker wanted to keep the "New Direction" theme and found it fortuitous that the overall message meshed nicely with what Barack Obama was talking about as the party's

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[513] Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012.
[514] Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012.
[515] Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012.
[516] Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012.
[517] Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012.

standard bearer in 2008. Congressional Democrats rode the "New Direction" wave to two consecutive elections with large-scale victories.

Now in control, Pelosi initiated her own version of weekly message development when the House was in session. What began when Democrats were in the minority continued after January 2007, when they took control, but on a larger scale with more people involved in the process. As former aides explained, the core leadership meeting on Mondays set the tone and larger messages for the week. At Pelosi's invitation, additional members would be invited, either because they represented part of what was understood to be a diverse caucus or because of issue expertise on a matter that would be on the agenda.[518] Leadership staff would also be in the meeting, though Pelosi's staff would meet on their own to coordinate strategy, including communications strategy, as well. The agenda was driven, as in the past, by the floor schedule, with messages designed to support whatever legislation was being considered at the time. The ever-engaged Pelosi would then meet separately with committee chairs and other colleagues who were leaders on a given bill.[519] "Through that," explained a former communications aide to the speaker, "she would sort of extract where they were on the issue, what was going on and through that she would create a message, a plan; a messaging plan that was a response to what they had advised."[520]

The leadership meeting was followed by a messaging committee meeting. Throughout this era, former staff members recall that it was primarily led by Rep. Rosa DeLauro (CT) and Rep. Frank Pallone (NJ) – continuing similar roles they first

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[518] Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012.
[519] Steven T. Dennis, "An Evolving Relationship; With Panel Chairmen, Pelosi Picks Her Battles," *Roll Call*, September 10, 2007.
[520] Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012.

undertook in Gephardt years – though others would occasionally take on more responsibility. It was Pallone who took on the day-to-day responsibilities of recruiting and assigning the one-minute speeches to be delivered on the House floor.[521] The DCCC leadership and staff were active as well and they contributed polling results every few months in off-years and much more frequently as the calendar moved closer to an election. Staff from the caucus leadership took on a very active role and would often lead the substance of the meeting. As described by one such communicator, Pelosi's staff would present the larger themes that had been agreed upon in the leadership meeting, offering to all in attendance:

> "Here's what [the caucus leaders] think we should talk about and we may want to do a press conference on Monday on this. Which one of your bosses can do it? If we're going to do it on jobs, who can we get? Let's get a good line up here so we put somebody in charge of that. Hoyer says, 'Ok, we'll do it,' so, 'You guys are in charge of that,' or Clyburn says, 'We'll do it on something else.' We kind of went through what was going to happen."[522]

In addition, leadership press staff from the time indicated that the office of the caucus chair would organize a meeting of all press secretaries for every House Democrat. It was a weekly meeting led by staff. Participation was never 100%, but 80 to 120 people would attend in a given week. Pelosi's communications team would speak along with the Majority's Leader's staff. The purpose was to have everyone on the same page and to handle whatever adjustments needed to be made to the messaging for an individual member in a given district.

Throughout this time, former aides believe that Pelosi and other Democratic leaders thought the *heterogeneity* of the caucus limited their effectiveness in

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[521] Mike Soraghan, "Dems Change the Subject," *The Hill*, May 19, 2009.
[522] Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012. Rep. Steny Hoyer (MD) was serving as majority leader at this time. Rep. James Clyburn (SC) was the Majority Whip.

communications. This seems counter-intuitive given the scholarship that proclaimed

Republicans and Democrats were actually more homogeneous and united with fellow

House partisans in the 2000s than ever before.[523] Yet despite voting together more often,

the party's top House leadership viewed their caucus differently: having so many

disparate elements that national messaging efforts needed to be handled delicately, so as

to accommodate the individual concerns of nearly every caucus member.[524] The push to

stay unified on a given message was a soft sell, leading to the vagueness of the "new

direction" theme. As recollected by former aides, both leaders themselves and staff

communicators suggested – never insisted – what messages would work and would then

gauge the reaction from members and their staffs. Contrary to what one might expect in

a highly-partisan House, when it came to both communications and legislative votes,

there is "much more of a cajoling, persuasion process that goes on internally within the

caucus," said one leadership aide.[525]

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2004 to 2010 – The Republicans

The two wave elections for the Democrats in the House in 2006 and 2008

decimated the chamber's Republican conference. The election of Barack Obama was

ground-breaking because of the unique, personal qualities of the new president, the fact

that he won with more than 50% of the vote – the first Democrat to do that in a

generation – and the good will that he was offered by the public, both domestically and

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[523] Thomas E. Mann and Raffaela Wakeman, "Growing Gridlock in Congress: An Interactive Graphic," Brookings Institution, November 23, 2013. http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/fixgov/posts/2013/11/25-gridlock-congress-party-polarization-mann-wakeman. Accessed on August 3, 2014.
[524] Jennifer Yachnin, "House Leaders Backslap After Supplemental Win," *Roll Call*, March 26, 2007.
[525] Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012.

internationally, resulting in popularity ratings north of 60%, higher than either Bill

Clinton or George W. Bush had been in the first few months of their presidencies.[526] In

January of 2009, many congressional Republicans felt they were backed into a corner.

They were down to just 176 members in the House. In complete control of all power

centers in Washington – the White House, the Senate and the House – Democrats

believed they had a mandate for dramatic change and were expected to push a very

aggressive agenda.[527] Messaging for the House Republican leadership was going to be a

more serious challenge than at any time since the 1980s.

The top two GOP leaders in the House, Minority Leader John Boehner (OH) and

his deputy, Minority Whip Eric Cantor (VA) huddled together to figure out their next

steps.[528] As they had virtually no legislative power to influence anything, national

messaging was their next best tool to use to get back into power. Boehner and Cantor

chose a strategy of "communicating a contrast" by offering their own alternatives

combined with a refusal to support any part of the Democratic agenda.[529] Said one

Republican leadership aide:

> "We sort of made a decision that we were going to have to present our case but
> we are going to do it from a policy-driven perspective and that really what we
> needed to do is offer an alternative viewpoint, recognizing that our viewpoint was
> not going to be executed in the House from a policy or legislative perspective."[530]

Cantor's communications staff, and to a lesser degree, those of Boehner and

Conference chair Rep. Mike Pence (IN), drove the bulk of the messaging for the House

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[526] Jeff Zeleny and Megan Thee-Brenan, "Survey Revels Broad Support for President," *New York Times*, February 24, 2009.
[527] Steven T. Dennis, "Democrats Look to '34, Not '94," *Roll Call*, November 19, 2008.
[528] Molly K. Hooper, "House GOP Tries to Revamp Naysaying Image," *The Hill*, January 8, 2009.
[529] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.
[530] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.

Republicans. The legislative alternatives were the underpinnings of the larger

communications strategy that emphasized not how the parties can come together, but

rather the differences between them. For the GOP communications strategy to work, the

contrast had to be emphasized, and that meant no compromise. The strategy "became the

mechanism through which we could come in every day and present from a

communications perspective that contrast and say, 'Look, they have all the power, but we

do have ideas.'"[531] On the Democratic side, Pelosi and her larger, more diverse caucus

used national messaging, frequently generic phrases for change, as a big tent where

everyone would feel welcome, despite policy differences. In contrast, the Republicans

embarked on a different course that used national messaging to aggressively bring their

team together. A Cantor aide from those years explained,

> "The result of that unified conference messaging and our driving on this contrast was we had zero votes in the Republican Party for the stimulus plan. That became a conference-wide catalyst for us. I mean, after that vote, we were more on offense. We had a solid sort of mechanism to contrast with. The conference realized that it was unified around an approach and the entire demeanor of the members changed."[532]

The leaders met daily, and their staffs communicated with each other throughout

the day. It was in these meetings that individual messages were arrived at. Conference

leaders deferred greatly to their staff, who were more than happy to push hard and fast,

every day, with policy attacks on Democrats in Congress and the White House.[533]

Boehner also recruited communications staffers for the party's ranking members in key

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[531] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.
[532] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.
[533] Adam Nagourney, "In Gingrich Mold, a New Voice for Solid Resistance in GOP," *New York Times*, February 15, 2009.

committees to be more aggressive in their promotion of "better solutions."[534] Overall, the

goal was to frame the narrative that was already being talked about by the press in such a

way that a Republican message got into each story. If the press was talking about some

GOP alternative plan, and House Republican members were talking about their

proposals, then staff believed its communications effort was working.

Despite the focus of House GOP leadership on communications, the actual details

of the developing messages never became very complicated: The House Republicans

were for small business, while Obama and the Hill Democrats were for government

spending. They were for tax cuts, while he was for tax hikes. Once the overall strategy

of driving contrasting policies into the press was linked to denying votes for Democratic

proposals that did not incorporate the core of the GOP idea for a given issue,

implementation was relatively easy. Message meetings occurred both formally on

Monday mornings and informally throughout the day, but never took on a tense nature

because of disagreements on what the messages would be, recall leadership staff. In their

strategic simplicity – linking basic conservative critiques of the Democrats with

straightforward alternatives and zero support for any non-Republican initiative – the

House Republicans of the era offered a new approach for the minority party to generate

coverage.[535]

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In sum, between 1981 and 1990, House leaders developed messaging in roughly

the same ways: a collaborative process that frequently involves multiple meetings, with

combinations of leadership, members, staff, and consultants. The era reflected a dramatic

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[534] Jackie Kucinich, "Boehner Expands GOP Communications Plan," *Roll Call*, April 13, 2009.
[535] Molly K. Hooper, "Cantor takes new approach as Republican whip," *The Hill*, January 16, 2009.

shift from the days of show horses and work horses in Congress. Messaging was driven by the top leaders in each House caucus. Time, personnel and other resources, at the leadership level, were increasingly invested in it. These leaders brought their own styles and skills to the coordinating meetings, and history was shaped because of the specific personalities involved. No one reflected this dynamic more than Newt Gingrich, who rode his ability to create aggressive messaging that got covered to the speakership, and, ironically, was forced to resign because of a series of messaging errors.

For both parties, the basic approach to message development was to use the legislative agenda as a guide. Thus, communicators for the House majority had a clear advantage in terms of generating coverage. Not only were they in charge, and therefore the recipients of press attention because they could actually impact the final outcome of a bill or policy, but they knew in advance what the agenda was going to be and therefore had greater opportunity to coordinate their messaging efforts. Of course, members – and even leadership themselves – were not always focused on coordinating messaging. Being in power meant additional time-consuming responsibilities involving governing; time that could no longer be spent developing a unifying message. Minority party communicators, with little power in an increasingly partisan House, saw communications as the primary vehicle to win back control. This element in strategic thinking took on much more relevance following the 1994 elections, when the House shifted to a new competitive era. In the following decade, the margins between the Majority and Minority were often so close that both sides believed any good run of press contributed to a potential victory on the floor or especially in the next election. Even in the aftermath of sweeping Democratic victories in the 2006 and 2008 election, when margins were no longer

relevant to a political discussion about control of the House, a decimated Republican

conference saw communications as its way out. Its top leaders consolidated, centralized

and simplified their messaging operation and used it to drive a message of contrast that

would help propel them to their own sweeping victory in November 2010.

CHAPTER 6

THE PROCESS OF LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATIONS:

DISSEMINATING THE MESSAGE

In the 1980s, House leaders on both sides of the aisle began to take on additional responsibilities as communicators for their respective caucuses. The shift occurred for a number of reasons, foremost among them the increasing partisanship in Washington.[536] It was recognized that Capitol Hill politics was no longer just an "inside" game of backroom negotiations, compromise, and deal making, but now also an "outside" game focused on mass mobilization and the shaping of public opinion.[537] "We've created a situation where the real way you drive the legislative process is by influencing public opinion, rather than by trading for votes," suggested one observer in 1984.[538] In addition, caucus leaders had come to accept the modern public relations perspective about the influence of national trends.[539] Certainly, every member of Congress had a personal "home style," as Richard Fenno described, but that no longer meant that larger forces didn't shape the political environment.[540] Tapping into these trends in national thinking was now going to be part of the caucus leadership communications strategy over the next 30 years.

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[536] Drew DeSilver, "The polarized Congress of today has its roots in the 1970s," Pew Research Center, June 12, 2014. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/12/polarized-politics-in-congress-began-in-the-1970s-and-has-been-getting-worse-ever-since/ Accessed April 25, 2015

[537] Smith, 1988.

[538] Ronald M. Peters, Jr., quoted in Steven V. Roberts, "Speaker O'Neill: Hardball or Hand Grenades?" *New York Times*, June 7, 1984.

[539] Harris, 2005.

[540] Fenno, 1978, repr. 2002.

At the same time, leaders continually adapted to the changing media landscape.[541]
New ways of disseminating their messages were being introduced, including platforms
such as non-legislative debate in the House, talk radio, cable news networks, and
eventually blogs and other Internet-based news sites. New devices to use, like fax
machines and email, provided quicker and quicker delivery of messages. These devices
also allowed for the targeting of messages to individual voters, not just to communicators
like reporters, columnists, talk show hosts, and television producers and their reporters.

Still, with all the changes, some elements in the dissemination process remained
the same. Personal relationships still underscored the symbiotic relationship between
communications staff for House leaders and the media. The nightly newscasts for the
three dominant networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC, lost millions of viewers to other media,
but still more people watched them than the most popular cable news program.[542] In
2010, the Sunday network talk shows would still be considered vitally important for
disseminating messages to opinion makers as they were in 1981. Regular quantitative
assessments of all the effort put into messaging by House caucus leaders was still
typically random, often relying on the "gut feelings" of those doing the talking. As no
one was sure what platform or tactic worked best, it was assumed you had to try it all.
Emphasis certainly fluctuated depending on the perspective and skill set of the

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[541] An interesting resource on this topic is "Riptide," a website produced by the Shorenstein Center for Media, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard University. It provides "oral history of the epic collision between journalism and digital technology from 1980 to the present." http://www.digitalriptide.org/ Accessed July 25, 2015.

[542] Emily Guskin and Tom Rosenstiel, "State of the News Media – 2012," Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. http://stateofthemedia.org/2012/network-news-the-pace-of-change-accelerates/ Accessed August 12, 2014; Jesse Holcomb, "Five Facts About Fox News," Pew Research Center, January 14, 2014. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/01/14/five-facts-about-fox-news/ Accessed August 12, 2014.

For example, in 2009, Fox News hit its peak viewership with about 2.1 million viewers each night. That same year, the worst ratings among the three network nightly news programs belonged to *CBS Evening News* with 5.65 million viewers each night.

communicator, but overall, between 1981 and 2010, the strategy for disseminating messages on behalf of House caucus leadership can best be described as "*use everything available.*"

This section will highlight the message dissemination approach of both Democratic and Republican communication aides to caucus leaders over the 30-year period. Their comments have been grouped together by four major sub-periods.

Message dissemination from 1981 to 1989

"We didn't have a tried and true formula," for disseminating a national message said one Republican aide who worked for Bob Michel.[543]   Michel presented his staff with a very individualized set of challenges because he was not particularly gifted in speaking with reporters. He had experience in dealing with the press in his home district, but Washington, D.C. standards differed from those back in Illinois. "He was a very good orator… and he did well when he was passionate about the subject," the aide continued. For this reason, his staff tried to limit him to speaking on the floor of the House, especially if the issue "needed a more expansive treatment." When Michel was sent up to the corridor within the Capitol where television cameras and radio reporters would be waiting for the comment that would "make" their story, he didn't come off as well. His aide added, "Bob had a tendency to [use phrases like] 'on one hand and on the other' and so sometimes TV wasn't as helpful. Sometimes it was better to be in a more scripted television interview."

Of course, this can be said of many older generation leaders, like Michel, for whom the floor speeches became a natural and dominant way to deliver the party's

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[543] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.

message. In a legislative debate, Michel would typically close down the Republican time as the last speaker. Staff members recall changing the speech up until the last minute. Edits would reflect what had been said previously in the debate, or left unsaid, as if part of a formal debate society. By speaking last, he aimed to establish himself as the primary communicator for his conference. "That doesn't happen at all anymore," said the former Michel aide. "You hardly ever see one of the leaders speaking on the floor anymore."[544]

One dissemination device that has continued throughout the 30-year period being reviewed here is the use of pen-and-pad sessions. These would typically be small press conferences with the press and a top House leader, sometimes more than one. Those in the majority who ran such gatherings would almost always have a more crowded room than their counterparts in the minority. In the 1980s, Democrats would typically meet every day the House was in session for at least 15 minutes before the start of the session. The subsequent press conference led by Speaker Thomas "Tip" O'Neill, would be, according to one observer, "a media event, not only because dozens of print and broadcast reporters crowd his office to hear him, but because much of what he says is designed for their benefit."[545] On the Republican side, Michel would hold his pen-and-pad session less frequently, usually weekly and sometimes every other week, and generating much less fanfare.

It was a comfortable, on-the-record setting for most leaders. By making such press availability routine, top leaders were able set a "benchmark" on how the party would respond to the dominant questions from the press.[546] Pen-and-pad sessions also

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[544] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.
[545] Alan Ehrenhalt, "Media, Power Shifts Dominate O'Neill's House," *CQ Weekly*, September 13, 1986.
[546] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.

allowed the caucus leaders to set the message for that day; a message they hoped, according to staff, the press would pick up and feature in their coverage.

Even when facing a small gaggle of print reporters, there was always a concern about misinterpretation. When he became speaker, Foley's staff brought in a legal stenographer "because sometimes these things get out of context or people are not as good note takers as you would have liked them to be, so we put out a transcript and that was available to everybody within about 30 minutes after the meeting."[547] The transcript was disseminated by staff throughout the press galleries.

As the name implies, pen-and-pads were traditionally left to print reporters. But as time progressed, and talk radio and cable began to compete with traditional media as new forums for political news, there was more of a demand by reporters for video and audio coverage of the leaders in this kind of discussion with the media. The temptation to grant the access was significant given the possibility of delivering a message to the widening audience. However, throughout the decade, with a few exceptions, leadership staff from the time remember frustrating reporters from those outlets by frequently barring cameras and recording devices in the room. An exception might be made if the press availability involved leaders from the Senate as well, or focused on an issue of critical importance to the leader. Fundamentally, staffers that were interviewed for this dissertation believed it was critical to protect their boss from making a mistake on camera. There was always a concern that a rhetorical slip-up would draw the focus away from whatever the primary message had been. One former aide to Michel remarked, "the TV guys…. and the radio guys really hated" the policy of no cameras or recording devices in the room. However, the decision wasn't difficult to make because Michel,

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[547] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.

"…never spoke in sound bites anyway, so instead of doing an on-camera briefing, we just did a pen-and-pad [with just print reporters]. Bob was much more comfortable that way. I was much more comfortable that way. It got everybody into a room in our suite of offices for them to just be able to ask him whatever they wanted."[548]

Another Michel aide listed several of the considerations that went into the decision:

"My job was to make a decision whether Bob was ready to talk in front of cameras. Did he have the messages down? Was he buttoned-down? Would it be better to do a backgrounder or just with the pen-and-pad and say this is off-the-record, but we're trying to give you a flavor of what we're doing. Or this is on-the-record. It was all gradations. It depended on the issue and whether Bob was ready."[549]

National message dissemination would also come through one-on-one sessions with various reporters, not just limited to print journalists. This would usually involve staff arranging a sit-down session with the House leader and a reporter, or escorting the leader up to one of the press galleries for a series of brief interviews. The timing of these kinds of meetings was sometimes affected by the deadlines of reporters, especially for the nightly news programs on the three major networks. A Republican aide recalled that when it came to pushing a leadership message on television, "running [Michel] up to the galleries worked, but you really had to time it right. You had to know what the cycle was in New York for them to edit you in and get it into that first feed."[550]

Despite some success, his kind of proactive outreach was not widely used. More typical would be a reactive press operation. Reporters would constantly leave their business cards with the doorkeepers at the entrance to the House floor, so that an individual leader could come out to chat. According to staff who worked in the House at the time, most leaders were very accessible, especially those who were in the minority and therefore had more time. A staff member to Foley, who served as caucus chair, majority leader and then speaker during this period, talked about how different the press operation was back then when compared to today:

"There was no Internet. We had fax machines. I think it was far more passive than it would be today…. I would get 50 to 60 press calls a day. Some of them easy. Some of them tougher. And I would sort of winnow some of these out. There were say, a dozen people where… there was Adam Clymer of the *New York Times*, David Rogers of the *Wall Street Journal*. There were reporters who really did set sort of the bar for an awful lot and certainly the wire service

[548] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.
[549] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.
[550] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012. News divisions for the three major networks were based in New York City.

reporters. I knew them. So I might initiate calls to a handful of reporters but there was more I was responding [to] rather than initiating."[551]

By the end of this era, however, House leaders were just beginning to expand their communications staffs to handle a new, aggressive approach to media relations. "I had one assistant," lamented a former Democratic leadership aide who had to deal with both the press in Washington, DC and in the home district. "If you look at the *CQ Staff Directory* now for communications staff, it is enormous.[552] With larger staff, the ability to do more than just respond to media requests became much more logistically possible. At the same time, the common understanding of what the press secretary for a House leader does also changed. In contrast to previous eras, communications staff began to become more direct in their appeal to the press. Credit for this more public strategy is largely given to Chris Matthews, O'Neill's press person who eventually was promoted to be the speaker's administrative assistant, effectively chief of staff in the House's most powerful office.[553] He was seen by his Republican counterparts as a new breed of press person: one who was so aggressive that he made a name for himself, as well as his boss.[554] "In the O'Neill years," suggested one commentator upon the speaker's retirement, "media strategy has become indispensable to House leadership."[555] Matthews was seen as someone who helped lead that change, and his influence was pervasive. In short order, on both sides of the aisle, communications staff for the House leaders began

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[551] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.
[552] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.
[553] Cook, 1989, 130.
[554] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.
[555] Alan Ehrenhalt, "Media, Power Shifts Dominate O'Neill's House," *CQ Weekly*, September 13, 1986.

to "do kind of regular rounds in the print and radio/TV galleries" without their bosses "just to maintain accessibility."[556]

Moving out of the office like this also proved valuable for gathering political and media intelligence, especially for the Republicans in the minority who – because they were not driving the agenda – were usually unaware of what the Democrats were doing until the last minute. Meet informally with reporters and you might learn what they had heard from the Democrats about their agenda.

Weekly media forums, such as the Sunday talk shows and the weekly radio address provided additional opportunities for message dissemination. The talk show circuit was dominated by three programs: *Face the Nation* (CBS), *This Week* (ABC), and *Meet the Press* (NBC).[557] Each Sunday, top officials from the White House and prominent members of Congress would come on to face some of the toughest interviews in media. The audience was not widespread, but at the time, these programs were virtually unchallenged in their appeal to Washington insiders, national decision-makers, and key opinion makers across the country.[558] House leaders understood the tremendous platform that the shows represented. It was "one more way to sort of set the stage on how you handle these tough policy issues," explained a Democratic aide from the 1980s.[559] A successful appearance would also raise the stature of a leader, and would be a forceful reminder of one's national party spokesperson skills to his or her caucus, who were often watching the same shows.

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[556] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.
[557] Walter Goodman, "Shaking Up the Shakers and the Movers," *New York Times* April 8, 1990.
[558] Barbara Gamarekian, "Washington Talk: Come the Weekend, It's Talk-Show City," *New York Times*, March 1, 1987.
[559] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.

House leaders consistently used the caucus membership to further disseminate a national message. Democratic caucus leaders were not particularly concerned with complete unity during their days in the majority. (After the 1994 turnover, they were much more attentive.) They recognized that they could afford to lose some votes in a given bill, so long as it wasn't a critical procedural vote like on a proposed rule for upcoming legislation. In a similar vein, a lack of unity on messaging – as opposed to legislation – was not ideal, but certainly didn't set off alarms among leadership. Messaging unity was assisted when member offices needed guidance on how to respond to the press. As recalled by former staff, it became a bit of pattern: The media would call leadership offices to ask about a given issue or pursue a line of inquiry, and sometime thereafter, other reporters would seek similar comment from non-leaders in the caucus. If the issue "starts at the local level, there's a one-in-a-million chance of trickling up. But at the national level, there's a big chance of trickling down."[560] In many cases, according to leadership staff, members' press secretaries would seek advice from the leadership before responding to an inquiry. "I would," said one former Democratic leadership aide, "throughout the day get press queries from say the press secretary for member X wanting to know, 'how were you handling this question?' because they were beginning to get the question. Now, that was not [a very coordinated process. It] was sort of a give-and-take. It was more ad hoc."[561]

So while the drive for maximum message discipline was quite casual at the time, leadership was relied upon to guide press messaging for many members, especially on difficult issues. This reliance also translated into each caucus using leadership to give its

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[560] Unnamed press secretary for member of the House, cited in Cook 1989, 84.
[561] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.

members messaging materials for use when they were back in their home districts. For the Democrats, this effort was part of the majority whip's operation. On the Republican side, it was largely the conference chair who took the lead when it came to these tasks. However, when Newt Gingrich entered GOP leadership as whip in 1989, he took on a much bigger, personal role in helping disseminate his party's message, including providing background source material and talking points at every meeting. One former aide remarked, "I remember Newt, when he came in, had this rule that you never left a meeting, you never came into a meeting unless you had a handout. That was his deal."[562]

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Message dissemination from 1989 to 1996

Moving into the 1990s, House caucus leaders continued to do a bit of everything in their efforts to disseminate a national message. They were buoyed by increasingly talented communications staff with aggressive attitudes towards media outreach and what would come to be known as "spin" – the verbal technique to frame an issue for a reporter in such a way that one's party comes across in the best possible light.[563] On both sides of the aisle, leaders and staff relied on floor speeches, especially during non-legislative debate, along with press releases, one-on-one conversations, and the Sunday talk shows to deliver their messages.

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[562] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.

[563] A good example of coverage of "spin" is David S. Broder, "Top Democrats Give Reagan's Messages a Different Spin; Party's Optimism About Elections Rising," *Washington Post*, June 22, 1986.

These traditional forums were augmented by the advent of cable news outside of CNN[564] and the earliest stages of the Internet – largely web sites – in the mid- to late-1990s.[565] The changes in media and technology that took place over several years resulted in, "many more outlets for getting stuff through," including the use of email and web sites, according to one leadership aide. "This was when things kind of transformed" so that leaders had a "much more robust kind of efforts at websites and getting messages out that way."[566]

Democrats, spurred on by Majority (and later Minority) Leader Gephardt, had slowly started utilizing one-minute speeches and special orders speeches as a way to make news and disseminate one's key messages, just as the Republicans had been doing for years.[567] "The one-minute speech was a given," said one Democratic communicator who worked on the Hill when the party was still in the majority. "It happened almost every day."[568]

Over the years, Gingrich worked to expand his party's message dissemination strategy by coordinating communications training for fellow conference members.[569] He "had gotten other Republicans on board to start using, start sharing, the time and sort of almost acting like there was a conversation going on and there were really just a few

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[564] MSNBC and Fox News were both launched in 1996. See David Lieberman, "Microsoft, NBC Join Forces On-Line, On Air," *USA Today*, December 15, 1995; Paul Farhi, "Murdoch Joins Crowded Cable News Field; Murdoch to Launch All-News Channel," *Washington Post*, October 3, 1996.

[565] The change was so rapid that many members found themselves violating technical House rules on linking official self-promotion with political activity. See Emily Yehle, "Member Web Sites Stuck in the Past; Posting YouTube Videos, Flickr Photos Often Against Chambers' Rules," *Roll Call*, December 6, 2007.

[566] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.

[567] William H. Freivogel, "Gephardt Works on 'Message'; Democratic Leaders Draft Party's Line," *St. Louis (MO) Post-Dispatch*, January 28, 1990.

[568] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.

[569] Jeanne Cummings, "A War of Words: The architect of the Republican Revolution admits he erred in so labeling the GOP takeover of Congress, but he still throws verbal punches," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. July 23, 1996.

people in the room," said one former GOP staffer.[570] After becoming speaker, he ensured

that non-legislative debate was centralized using the Theme Team apparatus, already run

out of Minority Leader Michel's office. Whether in the minority or the majority, the aim

was to be colorful in a way that would generate attention for the then-minority

Republicans. The group would be chaired by a member, but the theme came from the

speaker, and the one-minute speeches, usually 15 each day, were all written by an

leadership staffer assigned specifically to the task.[571]

     "The great thing about the House floor," explained a GOP communications aide,

was that "they gave you a minute, and so if you were able to tip-off the press what was

coming and you could have a particularly interesting speech, they would take that sound

bite and use it in the nightly broadcast."[572] "Particularly interesting speech" was largely

understood to be rhetoric that was creative, colorful, and often outlandish. One

Republican speech called candidate Bill Clinton a "liar" no less than 10 times;[573] one

Democratic example involved a miniature Washington Monument and a special hat

employed by magicians.[574] It was clear that one-minutes were not just about getting a

message into the print media, but also tempting television and radio to pick it up as well.

     Pen-and-pad sessions remained a staple for both Republican and Democratic

caucus leadership. After the election of 1994, Minority Leader Gephardt would host one

every week.[575] Gingrich, upon his elevation to speaker, eagerly utilized this particular

kind of press availability to exhibit his gift for chatting extemporaneously on most

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[570] Republican staffer B, July 30, 2012

[571] Betsy Rothstein, "House GOP Theme Team vs. Democrats' Message Group," *The Hill*, March 31, 1999.

[572] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.

[573] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012; Guy Gugliotta, "Courtesy Call; Wave of Campaign Venom Poisons the House Well, *Washington Post*, September 25, 1992.

[574] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.

[575] Tim Poor, "Gephardt's Bids for Consensus Muddy His Views," *St. Louis (MO) Post-Dispatch*, April 1, 1995.

subjects. He sought to expand the platform by allowing radio and television into the room.[576] A longtime Democratic leadership aide, now in the minority for the first time in his life, recalled a conversation with Gingrich's widely admired communications director, Tony Blankley:

> "He said, 'What advice can you give me?' I said, 'I got only one piece of advice, and that is be very careful when you start inviting in the electronic press. You may be on a high today but at some point down the road you're going to be on a low and then you can't decide, well, you don't want the television cameras in there. So take this very, very carefully.'"[577]

It proved to be prescient advice. The skills that Gingrich had employed to masterfully in his party's march to the majority frequently backfired in the pen-and-pad sessions. According to staff from the era, Gingrich's musings on legislative possibilities were presented as a definite agenda. Blankley and others on leadership staff – exploiting the fact that the news cycle was still several hours long – often had to explain the context and actual intention of a given comment to reporters, in an effort to shape the final coverage. Television cameras, however, magnified every rhetorical flub. Furthermore, Gingrich and the press were not getting along well. "It was very confrontational," explained Tony Blankley, the speaker's press secretary. "If they were aggressive with him, he was aggressive right back. It became very hard to have a regular press conference. It became theater as much as it became a press conference."[578] Within a few weeks, the daily pen-and-pad was cancelled, and instead became more of a weekly event. Eventually, according to staff from the time, Gingrich stopped doing pen-and-pads

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[576] Kathleen Q. Seelye, "GOP Starts Expanding TV Coverage," *New York Times*, January 3, 1995.
[577] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.
[578] Quoted in Kerry Kantin, "Hill leaders' media briefings are a sometime thing," *The Hill*, May 2, 2001.

altogether and Majority Leader Dick Armey re-started the practice in 1996.[579] He

focused largely on the legislative agenda for the week, much as the Democrats had done

when they were in control.

Republicans, once they were in the majority, would also hold "impromptu" press

conferences following a leadership meeting. It was less formal than a pen-and-pad

session, but it served the same purpose: a chance to deliver the party's message before

the entire media. John Boehner, in his role as the conference chairman, usually took on

this role.[580] "In political terms," said the Ohioan, "all of what we're doing is great. But it

isn't so great if people don't know about it."[581] Boehner "was the guy coming out of

leadership meetings who would be the first person I think that the media would see and

talk with," said one GOP aide, so he "would set the table, if you will, or set the

parameters of what was discussed."[582]

Communications staff for Democratic and Republican leaders recall taking

advantage of the proximity of the media in the Capitol and engaged with them throughout

the day, frequently by going out and pushing a particular message. Walking up to the

press galleries and explaining the views of their respective leadership became common,

thereby transforming Chris Matthews' unique approach of the 1980s into something that

was rather ubiquitous. The challenge, according to one Democratic aide of the time,

"was how to use [this approach] effectively."[583] Sometimes it would mean holding a

small press conference with the staffer as the primary speaker. Other times, one of the

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[579] Kerry Kantin. "Hill leaders' media briefings are a sometime thing." *The Hill*, May 2, 2001.
[580] Adam Clymer, "Battle Over the Budget: The Overview; Leaders in House Drop GOP Plan on U.S. Workers." *New York Times*, January 5, 1996.
[581] Richard Wolf, "Fulfilling Contract, GOP Turns to Selling It," *USA Today*, February 17, 1995.
[582] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012.
[583] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.

leaders would be brought up to do the same thing. It largely depended on the issue, the skills, and confidence of the speaker, and – in the case of the leaders themselves – their time availability.

It was in this final area in which House caucus leaders tried to distinguish themselves. Gephardt's team, reflecting the minority leader's commitment to rebranding the Democratic Party, especially its members in the House, allowed not just one, but multiple staff members to speak on his behalf to the media, thereby ensuring that any question would be quickly answered and that the Democratic perspective would be delivered immediately. "It was a very media-intensive operation… very media-savvy and active," said one former aide who was involved.[584]

Republican staffers also spoke to the press but almost all their efforts were overshadowed by the new speaker. Gingrich, having pulled away from conducting pen-and-pad sessions himself remained far too much of a charismatic figure to shy away from the press completely in the early years of his tenure. He would "just walk and talk, and get to know the reporters that way as well, spending a little bit more time with them. It wasn't just a quick hit in the office or whatever. He would actually get to know reporters."[585] Another Gingrich aide added that,

> "….part of the way that you would build the capital with the reporters so that you could then call them and they would take your calls is that even if they were on a 30-minute deadline and [Gingrich] might have been scheduled to do X, Y, Z during the next 30 minutes, making it priority to somehow find the way to get them what they needed."[586]

[584] Democratic staffer, July 31, 2012.
[585] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012.
[586] Republican staffer B, July 30, 2012.

Communications staff on both sides would typically have an open-door policy, which allowed press to be filing around leadership offices constantly. A Gingrich aide joked about having a back door from the office, just to be able to get out of the Capitol building without being swarmed by reporters. The new speaker was not always as lucky, in part, by choice. According to a former staffer, "one of the reasons that Newt made so much news, intentionally and unintentionally, initially was that [reporters] were just roaming the halls and catching him literally as he's walking to the restroom or to get lunch or to do anything."[587] The naturally loquacious Gingrich had a difficult time pulling back from these kinds of opportunities.

It was, to be sure, a unique time in the history of the House of Representatives and the Washington press corps – virtually none of whom had every known a GOP majority.[588] Reporters seemed to find the new leadership fascinating.[589] The ability to disseminate the Republican leadership's messages was relatively easy because the demand was so great. Indeed, one of the biggest challenges was trying to navigate all of the appeals for comment. "Basically," said one Republican communicator of the time, "I

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[587] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012.

[588] This was perhaps most frustrating for the GOP leader who preceded Gingrich – Rep. Bob Michel. In his 38-year career, Michel never once experienced being in the majority, having been sworn into office in 1956, one term after the party had lost the majority, and retiring in 1995, just as the Republicans were coming back to power.

[589] A similar dynamic was found by Kuklinsky and Sigelman (1992), who write about television coverage of the U.S. Senate in the 1980s. As with the Republican takeover in 1994, "The political landscape changed in 1980, and in dramatic fashion. The unexpected election of a whole class of conservative senators gave Republicans control of the Senate for the first time in decades." (829) Where the comparison seems to diverge is when Kuklinsky and Sigelman suggest that Democratic senators were wary of openly taking on the Reagan administration and its senatorial allies. "At least during much of the administration's first term, many did not." (829) However, in 1995, Democrats – according to leadership communications staff – immediately found common cause and an interest in coordinating and unifying their message. Certainly, they were helped by the fact that Bill Clinton was still president, while the Senate Democrats in the 1980s had no such partner. Thus, while Kuklinsky and Sigelman find that the combination of ascending Republican power and diminutive Democratic media presence combined for the appearance of bias towards the GOP, this dissertation finds that it is really just the former – the newsworthiness of Republicans in power after a long period of being in the minority – that drove the coverage. Democrats weren't covered as much, but, in contrast to what Kuklinski and Sigelman found, it wasn't for lack of trying.

was talking to reporters all day long, listening to their pitches, and then deciding what I would take to Tony [Blankley]. We would kind of go through what the opportunities were for Newt, and then we would take those the Newt, and then decide what it was that he was going to do."[590] For the first time, Republicans had their pick of which television channel to favor with an interview. Staff was confident that any editorial authored by their leadership could run in the next morning's edition of almost any major daily newspaper with the placing of a simple phone call.[591]

The plethora of opportunities also brought about some new tensions as the Republicans set out to deliver on their promised agenda. For Gingrich, "biased, elite media' is essentially one word in the speaker's lexicon," according to one reporter.[592] He, and to a lesser extent his leadership staff, took the opportunity to challenge the assumptions about what constitutes good public policy, arguing that the media had covered Democrats for so long, and had their own pre-existing partisan biases, that they couldn't properly understand and report on the GOP's new government approach. According to one communications staffer, the speaker would often respond to a reporter's question by questioning the premise, for example by saying:

> "'Now think about this. Why would you ask that? Why would you ask that that way? Here's the issue.'" He was constantly challenging them, and I think the reporters enjoyed it, some of them. Not all of them enjoyed it because they didn't want to be taken on. Newt didn't care. He took on everybody. He took on members. He took on staff. He took on media. If you took it personally, that was your problem."[593]

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[590] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012.
[591] Indeed, as seen in Chapter 10, mentions of Republican leadership in 1995-96 spiked significantly.
[592] Jeanne Cummings, "A War of Words: The architect of the Republican Revolution admits he erred in so labeling the GOP takeover of Congress, but he still throws verbal punches," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 21, 1996.
[593] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012.

As the partisanship on the Hill grew following the GOP takeover, GOP leadership staff began to strategize on how to disseminate their messages given the assumption held by many that there was a pro-Democratic bias among the elite media, such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and the three major networks.[594] "It was not that we ever took a decision that we would ignore [the elite media]," explained one Gingrich aide from the mid-1990s. "If they called, do they get their questions answered? Yes, all that sort of thing. But we can certainly decide that we were not going to rely on them," to help disseminate our message."[595]

Despite Republicans' growing unease with the type of coverage they would receive from the media – or from the Democratic perspective, the lack of it – both sides continued to focus on the dominant, mainstream outlets, with the networks' Sunday talk shows being a primary vehicle. Gephardt and other Democrats were thrilled to have a chance to stand toe-to-toe with the dominant Republican leaders. As the House minority, they rarely had similar high-profile coverage in print. The producers for the Sunday morning shows chose the topics for discussion based on what was happening on Capitol Hill that week or in global politics, that week. Therefore members of Congress with specific expertise were often sought out by the networks. However, "there were other times," said one former Gingrich aide, "when they had slow weeks that we were able to try and plant the ideas and the messaging that we wanted to talk about."[596]

With Gingrich in constant demand, his staff was concerned with overexposure and they were constantly considering whether it was the best venue for the speaker on

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[594] "In Media Res," *Roll Call*, April 2, 1998.
[595] Republican staffer A, July 30, 2012.
[596] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012.

any given week, and if not, who should be given the national platform instead.[597]

Eventually, the GOP Conference took over the booking responsibilities for its House

members and began to parcel out the coveted seats on Sunday morning in a much broader

way.

During this period, new opportunities emerged for conservatives in Washington to

promote their messages. Fueled in part by the public backlash to a proposed

congressional pay raise in 1989, a wildly unpopular issue that happened to come in the

same year as the Wright and Coelho ethics scandals, conservative radio came into its own

with hosts such as Rush Limbaugh suddenly becoming national celebrities. Gingrich was

one of the first to recognize the new power of the old medium.[598] One aide remarked that

the future speaker was, "always about the new thing. When talk radio came on board, it

was a full embrace of talk radio…. A lot of them were conservative, so that played right

into Republican audiences. He fully embraced it and made that opportunity available to

members, encouraged them to do it."[599] "Without C-SPAN, without talk radio shows,

without all the alternative media, I don't think we'd have won," in 1994, Gingrich

remarked. "The classic elite media would have distorted our message."

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[597] Not all GOP communicators believed that the Sunday talk shows were worthwhile: "Nothing good was going to happen to a Republican congressional leader from going on the Tim Russert show. Nothing. It was an utter waste of time…. [The Sunday talk shows were] the epitome of what we did not want to do." (Republican staffer A, July 30, 2012) The late Tim Russert was host of NBC's *Meet the Press* throughout this period. Despite this one leadership communicator's opinion, he was typically overruled by others in the office.
[598] Howard Kurz, "Radio Daze; A Day with the Country's Masters of Gab: Is America Talking Itself Silly?" *Washington Post*, October 24, 1994.
[599] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012; Ben Pershing, "10 Years Later; Lessons to be Learned from GOP's '94 takeover Republican Revolution Evidence that Change is Decade-Long Process," *Roll Call*, September 8, 2003.

Conservative talk radio hosts were not shy about accepting the new speaker's compliment and openly took credit for contributing to the GOP takeover.[600] Gingrich and his team thanked them by ensuring that favored programs received space along "radio row," the area in the Capitol where every network could set up and broadcast live.[601] In addition to conservative radio, Fox News Channel, an ambitious and audacious effort to create a new cable network that challenged CNN and the major networks was launched in 1996 by media mogul Rupert Murdoch and headed by Roger Ailes, the former GOP campaign media consultant. Despite the network's self-description as being "fair and balanced," Democrats and Republicans soon recognized that this was a network focused on disseminating politically conservative perspectives.[602] As CNN was viewed by some Republicans as inhospitable to leaders of their party, the emergence of Fox was very encouraging. One longtime congressional aide for Republicans talked about the changes during the decade and took partisan ownership of the network by saying, "*We* had just started Fox News. So you had a coordinated effort to get members to do TV in the mid-90s."[603] [Emphasis added.]

For Democrats, the Fox News Channel was, at first, an afterthought. No party communicator seemed to anticipate what a phenomenon it would become. However, the growth of conservative talk radio was clearly a troublesome issue for leadership and their staff responsible for messaging.[604] "There was a sense and potentially a reality that talk

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[600] Michael Janofsky, "Talk Radio's Conservatives Enlist in the Budget Battle," *New York Times*, November 18, 1995.

[601] Steven A. Holmes, "The 104th Congress: Talk Radio; True Believers Rejoice in Babylon," *New York Times*. January 5, 1995.

[602] Jim Ruttenberg, "The Right Strategy for Fox; Conservative Cable Channel Gains in Ratings War," *New York Times*, September 18, 2000.

[603] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.

[604] Tom Kenworthy, "Rumbles of Discontent Shake Democrats Like a Quake," *Washington Post*, October 9, 1994.

radio played a big role in creating a lot of the energy around the Republican win in '94," explained a Democratic communication staffer from the time. "And our antidote to that, at least to some degree was that we were going to try to really use local media as a channel."[605] The effort was made more difficult because so many regional newspapers had shut down their Washington, DC bureaus to save costs.[606] House caucus leaders needed to proactively communicate with them in their home offices.

New efforts were made to reach out directly to the smaller market newspapers, television and radio stations throughout the country to deliver the Democratic message. "The thinking was, they've got talk radio, what do we have?"[607] Technological advances like e-mail, which were just hitting a tipping point in terms of usage in the latter part of the decade, made messages easier to deliver to reporters, but there was still no sense of social media and how it would eventually connect tens of thousands of party faithful outside the Beltway in the years to come.

Of course, members had always been focused on local media, even leadership. "If I got a call from the *Spokesman-Review* in Spokane in Washington and from the *New York Times*," a Foley aide noted, "I would answer the *Spokesman-Review* first."[608] But in the aftermath of Foley's loss and the 1994 turnover, Democrats were more united in refocusing their efforts to spread a national message – developed by caucus leaders – through their local media, quite a different approach than the individualized "home style" approach used previously. According to one Democratic leadership press aide, following the Republican takeover, "there was a willingness among members to try and take a

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[605] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.
[606] Glenn R. Simpson and Craig Winneker, "Regional Papers Are Shutting Down Their DC Bureaus," *Roll Call*, June 20, 1991.
[607] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.
[608] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.

national message and localize it for the greater good of winning the House back. So there was a lot of participation where that wouldn't have been the case in '91 or '92."[609]

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Message dissemination from 1996 to 2004

As with previous eras, House caucus leader communications continued to rely on everything that was available, with one-on-one pitching and pen-and-pads remaining the primary vehicles. The outward aggressiveness of communications staff continued to become more widely accepted, and expected. Aides would now go out of their way to engage the press even before the story was written. "My strategy was to engage reporters, find out what they were writing, nip things in the bud, give them information, and as much as possible have an open door so that I could figure out what they were writing before they wrote it," said a former Hastert press aide.[610] "The House press gallery was really convenient," recalled another senior leadership aide. Whether it was a staff communicator or a member of leadership,

> "….you could just go up there and talk to people. Anytime there was a significant [breaking story], whether it was a vote or a comment or a statement from the White House or the White House Press Secretary said something or whatever. Whenever there was anything to react to or to make sure you framed for the national media, you just went up there and did it…. Having them right there was a lot of how you shape the national message on a daily basis."[611]

In 1999, the new speaker, Rep. Dennis Hastert (IL) held a few pen-and-pad sessions after he took office, but there was no regular schedule and he saw no need to do it. "When Hastert took over, he pledged to everyone he wasn't going to be a talking head

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[609] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012,
[610] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012
[611] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012

for the party," said a GOP leadership aide at the time.[612] Republican leaders in the House

clearly didn't select the new speaker based on his communications skills – an area which

was not considered his strength – but after years of having a dominant spokesman in

Gingrich, the conference understood that messaging didn't have to rely on the top leader.

In the early part of the Gingrich speakership, "nobody would talk to anybody but Newt,"

explained Tony Blankley, the speaker's press secretary. "It would have been a waste of

time to ask anyone else what we were doing."[613]

Therefore, as in the Gingrich era, the only regularly scheduled interaction

between House Republican leadership and the press was led by Majority Leader Dick

Armey. Typically, his pen-and-pad briefings would occur on Tuesday, to explain and set

up the week's floor schedule. A second, but important goal was to provide a broader

context for current debates. "The pen-and-pad," said a former Armey staffer, "was the

best way to frame for the beat reporters on the Hill what our message [was] and what we

were doing to drive it and what we were going to be [doing]."[614] The division of

communication responsibilities was "both [Hastert and Armey] playing to their

strengths," explained Michele Davis, who had worked as Armey's communications

director.[615]

The most dramatic change in message dissemination during this period of the

post-Gingrich, Republican majority in the House concerned the rapid growth of cable

television options. In 1992, rock star Bruce Springsteen described a new world with a

song entitled, "*57 Channels (And Nothin' On)*." Just a few years later, the song was

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[612] Cited in Kerry Kantin, "Hill leaders' media briefings are a sometime thing," *The Hill*, May 2, 2001.
[613] Ibid.
[614] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.
[615] Cited in Kerry Kantin, "Hill leaders' media briefings are a sometime thing," *The Hill*, May 2, 2001.

hopelessly out-of-date as the emergence of a "500 channel universe" transformed the entertainment and viewing habits of tens of millions of Americans.[616]

For congressional communicators, the impact was stark. "Special orders became less and less relevant," noted a GOP staffer from the time. The new media landscape meant, "C-Span is less of a phenomenon than it used to be. It used to be a kind of a big deal. Special orders, you always wanted to have somebody down there doing it, but [by the late 1990s] it was just more of this noise in the background."[617] Immediate news was still largely the province of CNN, and that made it a targeted priority for both parties. Fox News remained a work in progress for several years after its debut, but by the end of the century, it had taken off.[618] One former communicator for Armey recalled that during GOP Conference meetings, members would share the weekly or monthly Fox viewership numbers among each other, with similar stunned reactions to the network's astronomical growth. "They were so happy about that," he said, "because it finally felt like they had an outlet to get their point of view across in a neutral way to a receptive audience."[619]

The success of Fox News also helped reinforce a perspective among conservatives that the traditional, mainstream media outlets were biased in favor of the Democrats and opposed giving voices on the political right fair coverage. One GOP staffer noted that, "there was an overtly adversarial premise to how we perceived the relevance of the national media, because it was born out of a lot of experience."[620] That perception also included a view that the national media was aloof to the concerns of

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[616] "Cablers Anxiously Await Rereg," John Dempsey, *Daily Variety*, January 5, 1993.
[617] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.
[618] Jim Ruttenberg. "The Right Strategy for Fox; Conservative Cable Channel Gains in Ratings War," *New York Times*, September 18, 2000.
[619] Republican staffer, August 2, 2012.
[620] Republican staffer, August 2, 2012.

anyone who might disagree with their editorial decisions. It was "narcissism"; if a story about Congress was not in the top-tier national outlets then "it wasn't happening."[621] Fox News was one conservative political response to these perceived slights, and the network was joined by the launch of several other vehicles for conservative/Republican message dissemination, including the newsmagazine *The Weekly Standard*, also backed by Fox News-owner Rupert Murdoch.[622]

Interestingly, in another response to the perceived bias of the national media, Republicans took a page from the Democratic playbook and began to reach out directly to smaller market media outlets to push their national message. "A lot of our focus is too much inside the Beltway," said one public relations executive who had been hired by the party to deliver its message everywhere else in the country.[623] The idea was to generate enough chatter in the grass roots that the elite national media would eventually have to cover the story. Ed Gillespie, who served as communications director for Armey during this era, explained the strategy this way: "It's important to have a lot of smaller megaphones going off at the same time. If they're going off at the same time with different messages, it's just noise. If they're going off at the same time with the same message, it's an echo chamber."[624]

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Message dissemination from 2004 to 2010

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[621] Republican staffer, August 2, 2012.
[622] Cathy Hainer, "Aim of 'Standard' is right of center," *USA Today*, September 11, 1995.
[623] Kevin Merida, "The GOP's Town Criers; Got a Tax Cut but Don't Know Whom to Thank? A Small PR Firm is eager to Tell You," *Washington Post*, July 10, 1997.
[624] Ibid.

By this time, what was clear was that the new media landscape was dramatically, and in many ways negatively, reshaping the power of the traditional press outlets.

Competition hit existing media venues quite hard and almost all lost viewership and readership over the next decade. The big three broadcast television networks still outnumbered the viewership of any of the cable news programs. *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* remained perched atop the printed news elite. However, as America entered the 21st century, it seemed that everyone who followed politics was accessing many more news vehicles, and that meant less time for those who were around before.

Working within this morphing media environment, House caucus leaders and their staffs continued to use any and all tools available to them when disseminating their national messages. One Democratic leadership staffer explained that,

> "on any given issue it could be one of just a variety of avenues to communicate. It could be the pen-and-pad session. It could be a press statement. It could be a floor statement. It could be a big speech that the leader gives at a think tank downtown. There's just a variety of ways to push out communications."[625]

One of the most explosive changes was the emergence of a news cycle that never ended.   News reporting now took place 24-hours a day, 7-days a week. It was increasingly instantaneous and delivered to an ever more competitive marketplace.[626] While headlines rode on an endless loop, the stories themselves had less of a "shelf life" than in previous eras. New stories received top coverage and unless a story had "legs," that is, the ability to be constantly updated with additional information, it was quickly replaced by the next new story, falling off the screen almost as quickly as it had appeared.

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[625] Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012.
[626] David Shaw, "Scoop dupe: Being first is not best," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 22, 2004.

In this kind of competitive environment, news companies sought their own advantage by being the first to report anything, and that meant non-stop coverage. The media's need to fill their programming offered many more opportunities to put a leader on camera to deliver a national message on behalf of his or her caucus. One aide to Majority Leader Hoyer said: "I think that the cable networks and the fact that they have to fill up 24 hours, they're always willing and able to the extent we wanted to put Hoyer on television on a particular issue, to have him come on and speak."[627]

The constant need for new material was not limited to television. With news websites that were being refreshed by users throughout the day, every story needed multiple updates, and new stories had to be continuously developed. For Republicans in the House minority, there were opportunities for coverage that were available to them that previous House minority caucuses could only have dreamt of. GOP leadership recognized that reporters "have to file many, many times a day. They need stories."[628] Feeding the unquenchable thirst for news stories that cut through the roar of everyone else's filings was the goal of Minority Leader Boehner and Minority Whip Cantor. Dissemination of their messages became easier because "if you're creating contrast and conflict for them to cover, they're going to cover it," a former aide to Cantor explained. "What else are they going to do?"[629]

With media competition rising to new heights, outlets began to target their own specific markets. In turn, according to staffers who worked on Capitol Hill at the time, House leaders were now able to target different audiences with their own, poll-tested messaging. Cable networks were considered a good way to communicate with people

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[627] Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012.
[628] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.
[629] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.

outside of Washington, DC.[630] If one wanted to reach caucus members, lobbyists, etc.,

then it was more important to be covered in one of the dominant daily newspapers,

including those whose sole coverage area was politics in Washington, such as *The Hill*

and *Roll Call*, or newer online journals such as Politico.com.[631]

When John Boehner took over as majority leader, following Tom DeLay's

resignation, her was eager to engage the media in the pen-and-pad session. The Ohioan,

in contrast to his aggressive and often contentious predecessor, had a strong relationship

with reporters, based on years of "holding court from his perch among fellow smokers in

the southwest corner of the Speaker's Lobby."[632] Cameras were a rarity in these sessions,

though a full transcript was distributed afterwards, as had been done during DeLay's

tenure.[633] After Democrats came to power in 2007, they jumped into a regular routine of

once again holding pen-and-pads. Generally, national coverage generated by the House

Democratic leadership's pen-and-pads was limited,[634] but coverage inside the Beltway

tended to be much more extensive, according to staff. Messages broke through when

they were colorful attacks by House leaders against any other political player. A Pelosi

aide commented that the new speaker, especially before Democrat Barack Obama's

election in November 2008,

> "….was able to at least get the message out there also because she was very
> willing to be very critical of Bush. Whenever [the media] needed a critical

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[630] Brian Stelter and Richard Perez-Pena. "Voting With Their Eyeballs." *New York Times*, August 4, 2008.
[631] Launched in January 2007, Politico.com "averaged 2.5 million unique visitors each month in the first half of 2008, more than all but 13 American newspapers." See Brian Stelter and Richard Perez-Pena, "Voting With Their Eyeballs," *New York Times*, August 4, 2008.
[632] Patrick O'Connor, "Majority leader jokes his way through first pen-and-pad," *The Hill*, March 1, 2006.
[633] Ibid.
[634] One Pelosi staffer insisted this was partially due to a bias in the press to cover the Senate leadership over that of the House. Indeed, other scholars have found that the Senate is more frequently covered than the House. See Cook 1989, 59.

comment, they'd go to Pelosi and she'd give it to them…. [She would] pound them on social security, on Iraq, on Katrina, on any one of the above."[635]

While they were first in the minority, between January 2007 and 2011, Rep. Adam Putnam (FL) and Rep. Roy Blunt (MO), the minority conference chair and minority whip, respectively, jointly held pen-and-pad sessions.[636] But Cantor considered the pen-and-pad much too unfocused to be effective in the growing world of targeted messaging dissemination. The competition in the media had coincided with a perceived rise in reporter-driven news. Any journalist who could get one controversial quote might be able to then generate a slew of online updates with responses to the original story. Thus, for Republicans in the House, a traditional pen-and-pad session had changed into something that was not particularly beneficial. A GOP aide from that time explained:

> "I was the big proponent of canceling the pen-and-pad, which ultimately [House Majority Leader Cantor] did, because you have 25 people showing up just wanting to ask shitty questions. The pen-and-pad's function used to be the layout of the schedule and ask questions about pieces of legislation. That's not what it is now. What it's become is a place where you can play 'gotcha' with a member of the majority leadership."[637]

Instead, Republicans developed the practice of producing a morning email that attempted to shape the day's political conversation; "flooding the zone" was how it was described.[638] E-mail, of course, had been around for more than a decade, and sending out talking points and suggested messages were not particularly novel ideas – except "no one else was doing it."[639] In truth, Democrats were distributing leadership statements and speeches via e-mail to their press lists. In that sense, e-mail was simply an upgraded

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[635] Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012.
[636] This was done at the insistence of Blunt, despite the messaging operation coming under Putnam's portfolio. Susan Davis, "Blunt Stakes Out His Turf; Whip Boosting Outreach to Conservatives, Media," *Roll Call*, March 27, 2007.
[637] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.
[638] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.
[639] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.

version of older practices like handing out printed copies of remarks to the press gallery or later on, faxing them. What the Republican minority did, according to staff from the time, was use e-mail more effectively by devoting senior staff time to the specific task of creating intriguing material for reporters looking for new angles on the day's stories. It wasn't just about disseminating material, but disseminating the right material that could shift the day's discussion to terrain favorable to the GOP. "Finding content and framing it into a storyline for the day is an art form," said a Republican aide, "because you have this huge universe of information. But you can find places to create wedges and drive themes every day."[640]

Another change that had to be navigated by House caucus leaders looking to disseminate their messages at this time was the explosion of social media. For Democrats in the minority, 2004 through 2006 was a period during when they felt besieged on the front lines of a national messaging war.[641] Exploiting social media became their first effective counter-attack. Liberal blogs began garnering more readers than some of the daily newspapers in the nation's biggest cities.[642] The owner / operators of the most popular progressive-oriented websites, such as Markos Moulitsas Zuniga of DailyKos.com, became famous in their own right.[643] Virtually none of them had been widely known before. These sites were far more than online providers of ideological news and analysis. They began linking like-minded people into a network that could be mobilized for political action. (As an example, DailyKos.com describes itself as "a news

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[640] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.

[641] Matt Bai, *The Argument: Billionaires, Bloggers and the Battle to Remake Democratic Politics* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), 25.

[642] Through the fall of 2008, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* had an average weekday circulation of 300,674. During that same time period, DailyKos.com had as many as 338,283 unique daily visitors. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-02-22-newspapers_N.htm/ Accessed April 30, 2015. https://www.quantcast.com/dailykos.com/ Accessed April 30, 2015.

[643] Deborah Solomon, "Kos Celebre," *New York Times Magazine*, March 19, 2006, 17.

organization, community, and activist hub."[644]) A former Pelosi aide explained his

party's reaction to the new development:

> "….for the first time, Daily Kos and those guys, the liberal blogs, we had an infrastructure on our side. Before it always was this vast right-wing conspiracy that Hillary so famously said that they had. They had Fox. They had Washington Times. They had Hannity. They have Limbaugh. We didn't have anybody in our side and we were really upset about that. We tried Air America,[645] which didn't really last, but Daily Kos and these other bloggers really were the ones who were actually, ok, we have somebody on our side who can help us get our message out."[646]

Just as the Republican staffer claimed that "we started Fox News," the quotation

above shows that Democratic leadership aides also took possession of the media outlets,

even though they were private companies.[647] House GOP leaders, however, took

exception to the perception, especially after the Obama victory in 2008, that the

Democrats were the party of the Internet and social media. In a 2010 press release,

Minority Leader Boehner insisted that, "House Republicans demonstrate an unmatched

ability to connect with the American people on the Internet's most popular

communities."[648] During meetings of the GOP conference, members were encouraged to

present "their social media successes and talk about how best to use various tools."[649]

The public mobilization aspects of social media meant message dissemination

could take on a vastly different form and purpose. With the growing ability to speak

directly to supporters, and in turn, have them easily spread House leadership messages to

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[644] http://www.dailykos.com/special/about#/ Accessed August 10, 2014.
[645] Air America was a private-sector attempt to create a nationally-syndicated talk radio network devoted to liberal/progressive programing. Never particularly successful, it existed from 2004 through 2010 when it filed for bankruptcy.
[646] Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012.
[647] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.
[648] Cited in Robert Farley, "Boehner Claims House Republicans Dominate Twitter, YouTube and Other Social Media in Congress," *St. Petersburg (FL) Times*, January 25, 2010.
[649] Robert Farley, "Boehner Claims House Republicans Dominate Twitter, YouTube and Other Social Media in Congress," *St. Petersburg (FL) Times*, January 25, 2010.

others, top House communicators began working closely with different groups on

disseminating national messages. Pelosi, in particular, started using these newfound tools

when she ascended to minority leader in 2004. Though House Democrats had someone

in charge of Hispanic media and outreach since 2000,[650] Pelosi's office included not only

a large press operation, but several additional "outreach advisors" assigned to both

constituency groups and regions. "That's where the Internet became very effective,"

recalled one aide. Pelosi understood,

> "It doesn't help to have a message if nobody wants to repeat it and talk about it…. Before, you had to rely on the press to take the press release and put it on the media. Now you have this group of people who are creating their own newsletters, and they're blasting them via email to all these community centers, labor groups or veteran groups. I remember I would get emails from people saying, 'Oh my god! This is great. Can you add all my members? We've got 3,000 members.' Sure! They're getting a direct conversation and messaging from the office."[651]

National message dissemination was an increasingly critical part of House caucus

leaders' responsibilities between 1981 and 2010. Significant effort was put into

generating these messages and now they had to be pushed out into the media so the

public would be exposed to them over and over again. From the beginning, there were

traditional ways to do this, such as pen-and-pads, floor remarks, press conferences, press

releases, Sunday talk shows, and one-on-one conversations with reporters. These tactics

remained throughout the period. But as the media landscape changed, these tactics were

augmented by House leaders utilizing every new device and forum. Thus, one sees the

growth in the use of non-legislative debate, such as special orders and one-minutes, talk

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[650] David Montgomery, "Spanish Lesson; Two Constituencies, Two Campaigns? What You Need Is Another Tongue," *Washington Post*, June 3, 2007.
[651] Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012.

radio (especially for Republicans), cable news networks and, eventually, social media fueled by the Internet. It was the technological advancements in news dissemination and mobilization that allowed both parties' caucus leaders to target their messages to specific supporters. In effect, the press had less of a role to play in House leadership national messaging dissemination because technology allowed the caucus leaders to bypass the media and speak directly to an audience. Tip O'Neill would hardly have recognized how things were done by 2010.

In reviewing how message dissemination efforts developed and changed over the years 1981 to 2010, it might be easy to see the process as a tightly coordinated one, centered in the offices of House caucus leadership. That, however, would be an idealized view of the reality. In several interviews, different communicators who used to work for House leaders stated their belief that while their efforts were only somewhat successful, the other side of the aisle was much better at it. Democratic aides acknowledged their party's diversity and frequent lack of unity, and perceived the Republicans as being more homogeneous, and therefore a more unified group when it came to messaging. At the same time, Republicans saw themselves as unstructured with constant internal battles occurring over what to say and how to say it. They saw the Democrats, with their history of party bosses and strong organization, as the much more disciplined party in terms of messaging. The reality is the neither side was ever as successful as its top leaders wanted to be in these communications efforts. To be sure there were successful moments, but in terms of a leadership-driven operation, those on the inside always saw where it didn't work.

The holes in the system probably have less to do with the qualities of each side's respective caucus and more to do with the nature of the House as an institution. In brief, it is a big place that remains, despite the reforms of the 1970s, difficult to manage. "The key thing to understand about the organizational chart in Congress is you've got a normal hierarchy," said one Republican aide from the 1990s,

> "....with the rank-and-file at the base of the pyramid and subcommittee chairmen, committee chairmen, some leadership and then speaker and majority leader, but there's dotted lines connecting them. There are no solid lines, so they're free, independent agents to do what they want, and oftentimes they did."[652]

House leaders had come to accept that the requirements of their offices demanded that they be involved with the development and dissemination of national messaging on behalf of their respective caucuses. Towards that end, they expanded their staff and other resources devoted to this work. At the same time, staff members working for those leaders readily acknowledge the inherent difficulties in such an enterprise. The House might be seeing more party unity in its voting, but when it came to messaging, leaders often had difficulty generating buy-in from other members of their own caucuses, which thereby weakened leadership's efforts. As one former Gingrich aide explained, leadership was never able to say to members,

> "'I want a report on Monday morning of how you injected the themes into your speeches and town meetings over the weekend, and let me see the thematics from your weekly column for the newspapers or what did you say on the radio show.' You can't really enforce that on members of Congress."[653]

In sum, House caucus leaders believed that their members demanded national messaging development and dissemination, but many of those same members were

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[652] Republican staffer, August 2, 2012.
[653] Republican staffer A, July 30, 2012.

unlikely to participate themselves in those efforts in any consistent way, if at all. In spite of this tension, leaders in the House pushed forward and built, over 30 years, large staff operations dedicated to the task of communicating messages on behalf of their respective caucuses. The next question is whether it made a difference.

CHAPTER 7

THE PROCESS OF LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATIONS:

ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNICATIONS EFFORTS BY HOUSE LEADERS

As the nation entered the 1980s, House caucus leaders began adapting to a

striking shift in what they were expected to do as leaders. They were no longer charged

with just running the "inside game," including the give-and-take of negotiations, the

building of internal coalitions, and catering to the needs of their caucus members. A new

responsibility was being added to their plate, and it involved the "outside game," the duty

to build grassroots support for the party by promoting their brand and their agenda

through national messaging. It was a slowly developing process, but over the course of

the next three decades, the expansion of what House caucus leaders did was very clear.

This growing communications effort eventually resulted in the expenditure of significant

resources. "I was one press secretary for the House Republican leader, [Rep. Bob

Michel] and I had a part-time secretary. [Current Speaker John] Boehner now has about

five or six professional, highly-paid staff people that deal with nothing but

communications."[654] This development was not limited to just the House leadership.

Press secretary duties for non-leaders in the House that were once incorporated into the

job descriptions of other staff members, over time, were centralized into one designated

individual in the office.[655] House caucus leaders were, of course – then, as now –

different in many ways from other members. Press operations reflected this distinction.

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[654] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.
[655] Data provided by Cook indicates that in 1972, just 113 members of the House (26%) had a designated press person. By 1986, that number had increased to 323 members, or 74%. Cook, 1989, 73,

It was understood that leaders had an obligation to comment before the national media, as well as their local district press. While members of the House minority had, in the past, traditionally viewed their leader as their "congressional party's prime external spokesman," this was considered a smaller part of the leader's overall role.[656] The principle responsibility for such a leader was "to see that the rights of the minority members are continually protected."[657] Beginning in the 1980s, the leadership's national messaging process, for both sides of the aisle, began to expand.

Both Democratic and Republican leaders adjusted their personal and staff time, along with other resources, to accommodate the growing communications obligation. This was a significant move from the previous decades under the speakerships of McCormack and Albert, reflecting a modern approach to modern media. Given the expanded leadership effort to produce news, it is striking that they and their communications staff never seemed to develop a clear and consistent way of measuring their success, or lack of it. While House leadership teams were engaging in significant national messaging, what actually constituted effective national messaging could still be debated. Goals were fluid, often changing as the political landscape for the party and specific leaders shifted. Quantifiable measurements of communications effectiveness tended to be unsophisticated and cursory, not given serious attention because of a lack of time as well as adequate collection and measurement tools.

Despite the haphazard assessment systems, interviews with former communications staff members to House caucus leaders provide a few patterns. When it came to assessing communications, there were two stages of assessment.

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[656] Peabody, 1976.
[657] Peabody, 1976, 49.

In the first stage, House caucus leaders' efforts to develop and disseminate national messaging were primarily intended to drive coverage. Did the press cover what the leaders said and did? The most basic measurement of this was an examination of the daily collection of press clippings that both sides prepared for leaders and staff. In this initial stage, coverage was the primary, but not the sole, goal. It was occasionally augmented by other objectives, including (1) putting opponents on defense, (2) building caucus unity, and (3) encouraging member participation in promoting the designated national messages. Forcing one's political opponents across the aisle to respond to attacks meant they had less time and opportunity to promote their own positive messages. Similar to measuring coverage, assessment was done by examining the morning clips and watching television news. Where the "coverage" objective was focused on one's own press clippings, the "putting opponents on defense," for example, emphasized the coverage received by the political opposition.

The leaders' communications effort was also judged effective if it provided a rallying point for members of their caucus and if it secured the buy-in and engagement of non-leaders in the House, as well as allies in and out of Washington, DC. When everyone was on the "same page," leaders had internal cohesion and a sense of momentum, both of which made the caucus stronger in its day-to-day operations. "If you're on a message," noted a former senior Republican aide, "if everyone is saying the same types of things, it helps you get more confidence that you have a team behind you."[658] Measures of success were personal assessments by staff and leaders, drawn from their own understandings and gut reactions. Additionally, feedback from members

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[658] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.

and organizational allies provided a measure of assessment as to whether national communications was effective in this first stage.

In the second stage, the inputs were all of the objectives from the first stage: coverage, putting opponents on defense, caucus and party unity, and participation of members and allies. Assuming these four initial objectives were achieved, three new objectives emerged between 1981 and 2010, including (1) producing electoral victories in congressional races, (2) strengthening a leader's political standing, and (3) influencing policies and legislation. In other words, while the growing effort to generate and disseminate national messages might lead to additional coverage, the second stage of assessment looks at the reasons for generating coverage. According to the congressional aides interviewed for this dissertation, election results, and eventually polling data provided standardized, quantifiable forms of assessment when it came to the second-stage objective of electoral victories. However, in measuring how well the communications effort translated into strengthening a leader's political standing and influencing policies and legislation, leaders and staffs continued to make these assessments themselves, with very little quantified data to substantiate their final judgments.

Table 7a offers a graphical presentation of the two stages, including the inputs, objectives and typical measurements. To be clear, no individual communicator interviewed broke down their own objectives and assessment tools in this fashion. Both objectives and measures of success in meeting those objectives would be acknowledged and prioritized depending on the political needs of the leaders at the time, and, as one staffer put it, "different people had different theories" as to the end goals for

communications.[659] This two-stage outline is an attempt to bring structure to what

emerged from the total collection of qualitative research for this dissertation.

Table 7a
House Caucus Leadership Media Objectives and Measures of Success

STAGE 1		
Inputs (intended to achieve Objectives)	**Objectives**	**Measures of success**
Efforts by House caucus leaders to generate and disseminate national messages	Media coverage	Examining daily newspaper clips Watching television news broadcasts
	Putting opponents on defense	Examining daily newspaper clips Watching television news broadcasts
	Caucus & party unity	Leader / staff assessment Feedback from members Level of involvement of outside groups
	Member & ally participation	Leader / staff assessment Feedback from members Level of involvement of outside groups

STAGE 2		
Inputs (intended to achieve Objectives)	**Objectives**	**Measures of success**
Media coverage Putting opponents on defense Caucus & party unity Member and ally participation	Strengthening leader's political standing	Leader / staff assessment
	Electoral victories	Election results Polling
	Policy and legislation influence	Leader / staff assessment

This section focuses on the Stage 1 and Stage 2 objectives of Democrat and

Republican leaders in the House of Representatives and how they assessed their efforts in

meeting them over a thirty-year period.

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[659] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.

Messaging assessment from 1981 to 1989

In these early years of more robust House caucus leadership engagement in national messaging, the Republican minority's Stage 1 objective was simply to be covered, not an easy feat given that the entrenched Democratic majority had a lock on virtually all levers of power in the House. One Michel aide remarked that the office was "constantly trying to push our message out. Some of it was because that was the leader's job…. You're not winning. You rarely were going to win a vote. The only way to articulate your point of view was to try to use the media."[660] With coverage so tough to come by, the fear of any lost opportunity was a highly motivating factor. Like an arms race in global politics, each side – but especially the minority GOP – began to conclude that it had to respond to the other.

> "There is underlying it a fear that if you don't do it, you may get burned, that you may miss something…. You do things in communications because you don't want to take the chance of not doing them, and the risk of screwing it up, of being misquoted, is just not that great, frankly. You get misquoted all the time, but there's not much penalty for it in the end. As long as you're getting press, good or bad, it's supposed to be positive."[661]

By coordinating the conference's messaging out of Minority Leader Michel's office, his staff hoped to rally their fellow partisans in the House, assuming that, in legislative battles, party unity is always helpful. Generating coverage, naturally, "was our top priority," explained a former GOP aide. A close second was to make "the point to the broader members of the conference that, in fact, the leadership was concerned about using the press to its best advantage."[662] As a party in the middle of a 40-year run

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[660] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.
[661] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.
[662] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.

out of power in the House, communications provided an opportunity, and sometimes the only one, to demonstrate the party's own vitality and bring its diverse conference together.

For the majority Democratic caucus, good national press certainly helped build the party's brand – a broad concern as O'Neill and others faced off against Reagan and his significant communications skills. A positive party brand was also needed to achieve the Stage 2 goal of winning elections. Another Stage 2 objective that was cited in the interviews was influencing policy and legislation. In part, said a Democratic aide, this goal explains why "the leadership always wanted to have people on the Sunday talk shows, because the Sunday talk shows tended to set the press message for the Monday papers."[663] The assumption was that whatever key newspapers wrote about on Monday would drive what policies and legislation would be discussed that week. In some cases, the GOP minority was less concerned with their own coverage than with whether they forced the majority leadership to respond to their critiques of upcoming legislation. The pen-and-pad sessions were cited as one of the more effective tactics to use in accomplishing this Stage 2 goal, according to a Michel aide. "We would plant information and questions that the press would then take to O'Neill on the Democrat side and question their messages," he explained.[664]

This same veteran Hill communicator emphasized a Stage 2 objective for national messaging by House leaders that applied to both sides of the aisle: the ego of the leader. "Politics runs on ego," said the aide. National communications "satisfies the need of

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[663] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.
[664] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.

politicians to be exposed to the public."[665] Leaders, the staffer argued, did care about

whether press coverage made a difference for the congressional party. But they, as a

group, felt just as much, if not more, concern with whether such efforts solidified and

expanded their own political position.

Again, while Democrats found it easy to be covered, Republican assessments of

their communications efforts as the Minority focused on whether they were generating

any coverage at all. "Really all we were looking for, rightly or wrongly," one aide said,

"was a clear and concise quote from our side which everybody needed to provide in

terms of balance."[666] GOP leadership staff would concentrate on a small handful of

influential Hill reporters, because, as the Minority, aiming for a large swath of the media

simply generated too few stories in the press. The goal was to secure a "balanced" story,

which even among this small group of press targets, was frustrating to Michel staffers.

> "The media back then got most of their messaging from Reagan, and what they
> didn't get from Reagan, they got from O'Neill. That left us third in line, and by
> the time we were able to get in line and deliver our message, the story had been
> printed. We did not have instantaneous media in order to counteract things on an
> immediate basis. There was no Internet. There was no cable news. We had to
> affect and plant our messages in a very limited circle of venues, so if we missed
> that boat, we were just shit out of luck."[667]

Stage 1 quantitative assessment, according to leadership committee aides from the

era, usually involved assigning interns to review the top-tier newspapers each morning.

Sometimes specific counts of mentions were tallied, and occasionally these included

adding a variable noting the location of the mention in the story. But this kind of

quantitative analysis was almost always a low priority, as partially evidenced by the

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[665] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.
[666] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.
[667] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.

assignment of an intern to do it. "We didn't have the time and we didn't have the resources," admitted one GOP communicator.[668] Thus, frequently, evaluation was left to one's gut feeling, an internal sense of whether efforts were making a difference as determined by staff after looking at the day's clips. In terms of evaluating press coverage in the 1980s, a GOP leadership aide noted:

> "Those were pretty much pioneering days and we were somewhat in the wilderness, but the same concepts applied. You could tell you were being effective if you got some good hits. We didn't have a company counting all of our hits, but that was it. If you got good press, then you said, 'Well, yeah, that was good, we should have done that.' If you were able to get press that was strong enough to change the course of something, that was even better."[669]

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Messaging assessment from 1989 to 1996

The emergence of Newt Gingrich in the upper echelons of Republican leadership brought with it the Georgia Congressman's drive to take over the House. Of course, this was always the stated objective of other GOP leaders, but Gingrich believed it to be achievable in short order, while others in the conference were seen as more accepting of a semi-permanent minority status. When the 1994 election year arrived, Gingrich pushed for a full-scale drive for a GOP takeover, despite his own staff's skepticism. "I don't think anybody really thought it was achievable even at that point," said one former aide.[670] A House Republican majority had been part of Gingrich's primary objectives since he was first elected in 1978. As one of the more effective congressional communicators, it was therefore Gingrich who promoted an "electoral connection"

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[668] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.
[669] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.
[670] Republican staffer B, July 30, 2012.

between national messaging and wins in November.[671] "Ultimately," said one former

Gingrich staffer, his communications efforts "all came down to whether or not we got

more Republicans elected."[672] The significant challenge for his strategy was that press

coverage flowed to the House majority and so it was especially difficult to use

communications to help win seats if no one was seriously covering the GOP messages.

"Bottom line," added another former Gingrich aide,

> "….we were in the minority. We were for forty years. A lot of reporters had no
> regular sources in the Republican Party that they used on a regular basis. It was
> just a given that the Democrats are going to win every single election so really,
> why bother getting the Republican side of the story? They might throw us a bone
> here and there, but there was kind of no point."[673]

Seemingly confident that his form of messaging would break the mold, Gingrich

used colorful language, as outlined earlier in this dissertation, to rail against the

Democratic leadership and their management of the House. The approach reflected a

"burn the village to save it" strategy, one in which the focus was to attack the corruption

of the entire institution, even if you were attacking fellow Republicans, in pursuit of the

long-range goal to take it over. A Democratic critic described Gingrich as one who

believed that, "you could pull a pin on a hand grenade, roll it down in the middle of a

Metro [subway] car and it's going to blow people up on both sides. You might lose some

Republicans but overall, you would be better off."[674] Assessment of the Gingrich

strategy therefore relied on Stage 2 measurements, like election results. The focus was

on how much closer national communications efforts moved the GOP to a House

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[671] This phase was, of course, popularized by David Mahew's book, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*,
2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), in which he argues that members are primarily
focused on their own re-election.
[672] Republican staffer B, July 30, 2012.
[673] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012.
[674] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.

takeover, as opposed to simply generating coverage. Coverage was not the objective. It

was a means to a political "revolution" in Washington.[675]

As Democratic leadership began to upgrade their national messaging efforts

during this period of time, they too began justifying it by adding their own version of the

Stage 2 electoral connection. After 12 years of Republicans in the White House, winning

the presidency in 1992 was a top priority for many key players in Majority Leader

Gephardt's office, and thus it became a goal for Democratic leadership communications.

One Democratic leadership aide from the era explained,

> "There was nothing more important that we could help do than elect a Democratic
> president. That was for many of us the end goal. Doing that would help establish
> conditions precedent for electing more Democrats to Congress, and then having a
> sufficient Democratic majority in order to pass programs that people care
> about."[676]

Clinton's election in 1992, with solid majorities of fellow Democrats in both the

House and Senate indeed helped launch a wave of progressive initiatives. Having

achieved their objective of a Democrat in the White House, Foley, Gephardt, and other

Democratic caucus leaders kept their communications focus on improving the electoral

chances for the party, largely by enacting a popular agenda. An aide to Speaker Foley

cited the effort to pass the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 as a

unique opportunity for Democrats to re-brand themselves in a way that was opposite of

the "soft on crime" portrayal that had been pushed by Republicans in previous years,

perhaps most effectively in the 1988 presidential campaign of Vice President George

H.W. Bush running against the Democratic governor of Massachusetts, Michael Dukakis.

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[675] Dan Balz, "Intraparty Strains Emerge as GOP Debates Its Course," *Washington Post*, November 15, 1994.
[676] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.

"You would set up press conferences outside the Capitol," the aide said, "and you would have the police unions and you would have all these police in their uniforms…. A good visual makes a good deal of difference."[677] The "crime bill," as the legislation was widely known, provided, in part, for 100,000 police officers and expanded the death penalty as a punishment to a host of additional crimes.[678] It was, for Democrats, a chance to promote their party

The potential Stage 2 electoral benefits of the legislation were shot-lived however, as the law also included a ban on the sale and ownership of certain assault weapons. The provision was popular in national polls, but was anathema to the National Rifle Association (NRA) and other powerful advocates of an expansive 2nd amendment. Democrats in districts that had high levels of hunters and gun advocates, including Speaker Tom Foley, were put on the defensive by the national messaging, and many would lose their seats to NRA-backed candidates in 1994.[679] While the crime bill might have been an example of a two-sided messaging coin, there was little upside to the Democratic effort to produce positive messaging on the failed Clinton national health care proposal, widely considered a public relations disaster for the party.[680] The subsequent GOP takeover, with its use of the Contract with America, and coming so close to these two high-profile and ineffective Democratic efforts at national messaging, added to the perception in Washington that there was a causal link between centralized communications and electoral outcomes.

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[677] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.

[678] Katharine Q. Seelye, "House Approves Crime Bill After Days of Bargaining, Giving Victory to Clinton," *New York Times*, August 22, 1994.

[679] Donald C. Drake, "A Lobby That Never Loses Aim; The NRA Set Out to Defeat David McCurdy. He Had Votes for the Assault-Weapons Ban," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 27, 1994.

[680] Dana Priest and Michael Weisskopf, "Heath Care Reform: The Collapse of a Quest; Clinton's Top Domestic Priority Succumbed to Miscalculation, Aggressive Opposition and Partisanship," *Washington Post*, October 11, 1994.

The post-1994 world for Democrats shifted the electoral connection of national messaging to their own political survival. The "one central goal," described a senior leadership aide from the era, "was to take back the House."[681] Positive coverage was not enough. It had to be the right kind of coverage. According to a member of Gephardt's staff, their efforts were focused on,

> "How do we communicate best in a way that will help us take back the House? That was the organizing principle. How you do that? You have the national press corps that you have to convince that you know what the hell you're doing, that you have an agenda, that you're aggressive, that you're doing all the things you need to do to keep the Majority off balance. You're getting a broader message out that you absolutely want to filter down to Topeka's first district about this is what separates us [from the Republicans]. This is why they stink and this is why we're good. And it's mostly about why they stink because that's much easier to get everyone interested in than the positive agenda."[682]

In a similar vein to minority Republicans from the 1980s, House Democratic leaders after 1994 targeted their communications towards those who would be critical to any rebound election, rather than the public as a whole. The result was a shift in understanding what constituted successful national messaging. It was no longer just about generating coverage (Stage 1), though that was still monitored on a cursory level. Rather, it was focused on unifying and inspiring key parts of the Democratic coalition, including organizational allies and the remaining members of the Democratic caucus (also Stage 1). One senior Gephardt staffer explained,

> "I think that a lot of the communications efforts that we had may or may not have reached the general public at any given time, but it certainly was reaching the members and the staff, political influentials in Washington, and donors, and party activists, so that people felt confident that we could come back and that we could win."[683]

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[681] Democratic staffer, July 31, 2012.
[682] Democratic staffer, July 31, 2012.
[683] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.

The electoral connection to House leadership messaging meant that assessment in Stage 1 involved looking at whether communications efforts resulted in strong coordination among members, donors, and party activists, and then, in Stage 2, how well the party did in the next House election. If leadership was raising enough money, if there was confidence in the leadership among key players in Washington and the party as a whole, if the caucus was perceived as being unified, and of the House Democrats eventually won back seats lost in 1994, then the leadership's national communications effort was considered effective by the staff members charged with implementing it.

Despite some Democratic gains in the 1996 and 1998 elections, it became clear to many observers that the GOP takeover was not a one-time fluke, but rather the ushering in of a new competitive era for the House, during which the Republicans started in the driver's seat as the majority.[684] "I think people were feeling like we were clawing our way back," recalled a former Democratic staffer from the time. "It just wasn't enough to get us over the top."[685] As both sides of the aisle settled into a period of a competitive but Republican-controlled House, communications staffers were divided over how much election year branding and promotion should be part of their focus. Minority Democrats noted that, "it was obviously desirable to have a political climate, nationally, that favored Democrats than it was to have an indifferent or a bad one, and part of creating that environment was getting the message out."[686] In the majority, one GOP staffer insisted that, outside of the last few months of an election year, those

[684] E.J. Dionne Jr., "Horse Race to History: The Contest for Congress Is Defining the Issues of a New Era," *Washington Post*, November 3, 1996; Ben Pershing, "10 Years Later; Lessons to be Learned from GOP's '94 takeover Republican Revolution Evidence that Change is Decade-Long Process," *Roll Call*, September 8, 2003.
[685] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.
[686] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.

responsible for leadership communications did not spend much time "worrying about brand or membership recruitment."[687] The electoral connection was still there, but it was not the top priority it was immediately before and after the 1994 election.

Electoral results would still be used to assess the Stage 2 impact of national messaging, but it was increasingly obvious that the road back to majority status would be a long slog for the Democrats, involving a variety of factors, not all of them directly related to communications. Regaining control would remain the overarching objective, but it would be more of a long-range goal now, with limited emphasis in communications. "We'd all get excited about [Democratic chances of a takeover] when it was an election year," explained a former Gephardt aide, "but people had a fairly sophisticated understanding of the electorate in off-year elections, how a lot of it was hyper-partisans and the generally low turnout and that people weren't paying attention."[688]

Communication objectives for House Democratic leaders remained focused on party unity, much as the Republicans tried to do in the 1980s, when they were in the minority. Assessments of the significant communications efforts emanating from the Democratic minority leadership now prioritized "all of the members that you touched, all of the candidates that you touched; the projection that we were saying something coherent together."[689] For the Democrats, typically mocked as disorganized, this was never easy. "A year after the 1994 election," noted one Capitol Hill reporter, "the party remains just as torn between its old industrial base (labor unions and social

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[687] Republican staffer A, July 30, 2012.
[688] Democratic staffer, July 31, 2012.
[689] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.

conservatives), its liberal base (minorities, environmentalists, and civil libertarians) and its suburban base (fiscal conservatives and social moderates).[690]

Heading into the latter part of the era, Gingrich expanded the GOP's objectives with a "focus on issues."[691] He wanted to make sure that the Republican agenda was "part of the national dialogue so the same thing that was being talked about at the dinner table [was] the same thing that Congress was either addressing or was solving or had helped make their life better."[692] The Republicans, as the Democrats did when they were in the majority, measured communication success in part by considering whether legislation or White House policy that had been the subject of leadership messaging was affected. "That would be the ultimate measure of success," one Republican staffer remarked. "To know that you had a difference in whether or not this bill was passed or not passed or if the administration decided to take this tact or that."[693] There was no quantitative assessment as to whether the leadership achieved this Stage 2 goal. Instead, it was largely left to the individual reactions by the leaders and their staff members.

House Republicans also remained committed to using national communications to maintain their majority status. Gingrich and his leadership team, with their focus on issues, ironically found a willing partner in the Democratic president, Bill Clinton. Welfare reform and a balanced budget, both of which had eluded other congresses and presidents for decades, were suddenly signed into law with bi-partisan support. As part of the GOP's Stage 2 electoral connection objective, the drive for press coverage was intended to emphasize that conference leadership deserved credit for these historic

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[690] David Grann, "Democrats still searching for the right message," *The Hill,* November 22, 1995.
[691] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012.
[692] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012.
[693] Republican staffer B, July 30, 2012.

achievements. One Gingrich aide from the latter part of his tenure as speaker asked

rhetorically, "Who's going to get credit for [a balanced budget]? If we stood idly by and

don't [publicize our role in passing the legislation], Clinton's going to take credit for

doing all of that, and probably spin out that he had to drag the Congress kicking and

screaming along to get it done."[694]

In addition, during this time of transition, both parties looked to the level of non-

leadership involvement with national messaging efforts as an assessment of the

successfulness of those efforts. Similarly to the Michel-led Republican conference of the

1980s, non-leadership Democrats in the majority were viewed by leadership staff as

being less concerned with the importance of national messaging than with their own

perks. Increasing participation of these members was a way of gauging the success of the

overall leadership communications effort. "We were trying to break these guys out of the

box that they were in," explained a Democratic leadership staffer who worked with the

caucus in its days in the majority, "which is [that they were] legislators, in a discredited

institution, making just another speech. Without a message, they'd be all over the map

talking about whatever…. If you couldn't break them out of it, then our goals were

inconsistent."[695] In the aftermath of the GOP success in 1994, the Democratic caucus

would be far more motivated to achieve this communications goal, though it would

always remain a challenge.

The growing sophistication of House caucus leaders' message development and

dissemination did not easily translate into similar development of assessment measures.

Indeed, aides on both sides of the aisle struggled with finding a proper communications

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[694] Republican staffer A, July 30, 2012.
[695] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.

evaluation technique. "There's not really a way to do it," explained a Republican. "I've practiced public relations in the government and out of the government, and corporate settings, and that's what everybody wants to know. It's a very difficult thing to measure the effect that you're having."[696] Among all the staffers who were interviewed, several noted that it would be easier to measure the impact of national communications efforts if one had access to the technology of today.[697] But back then, a cursory review of the daily collection of clips of congressional coverage from the national press remained the most popular form of assessment:

> "We counted clips. We had clips, but I don't remember doing a presentation that [offered a] 12-month review [of] how we're doing. I don't remember it being that analytical. This was sort of the pre-analytical age of media."[698]

> "Obviously, you'd look at the clips every morning. I was usually in at 5, going through six or seven newspapers."[699]

> "I don't recall [evaluations of our messaging] being anything very scientific. We certainly kept track of clippings, both nationally and down in Georgia."[700]

> "Were we measuring the inches? No. There was so much about Newt. How could we keep track? I don't ever recall a conversation where Tony [Blankley, Gingrich's first communications director when he was speaker] and I were talking about metrics."[701]

One communicator said it was typical to follow the three nightly news programs on the broadcast networks. Staffers noted who had the top Washington story and which party was included in it, as well as the tone towards their side. At the time, the 24/7 nature of cable news was just beginning to shape how House leaders judged the impact of

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[696] Republican staffer A, July 30, 2012.
[697] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012; Republican staffer, July 24, 2012; Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.
[698] Democratic staffer, July 31, 2012.
[699] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012.
[700] Republican staffer B, July 30, 2012.
[701] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012.

their communications efforts. Eventually, for a brief period of time, House caucus

leaders, according to staff, assumed that how fast one's message took to be reported on

CNN was considered a good yardstick for assessing the impact of a message from

leadership informally. A former Gingrich staffer explained the logic:

> "We didn't keep formal written [records of when messages were reported on
> television]. Who has time for that? But you instinctually know 'okay, they
> picked it up in 10 minutes. That it's getting faster. Our issues are getting hotter or
> else our delivery methods are getting better.'

> "It's always a combination of factors [that determined how television coverage
> was judged]. Did they not cover us the first six times but because we call and
> work with them or griped so now they're giving us some time? Is it that we found
> the exact right person for the exact right story, so we're getting on faster? It could
> be anything from your relationships to the mechanisms."[702]

According to the communicators, there was no substantive, longitudinal review of

whether the time, resources, and personnel being put into messaging on behalf of the

House caucus leaders was translating into actual coverage, and whether that coverage

was making a difference in terms of the broader goals of each side's leadership.

Assessment was pretty basic, according to one blunt staff member: "Positive news was a

plus. Negative news was a minus. Was there any damage control that needed to be

done?"[703]

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<u>Messaging assessment from 1996 to 2004</u>

The objectives for House leaders in the latter part of the 1990s and into the

beginning of the new century remained largely consistent with previous years. Framing

and promoting the GOP brand, so as to help with the party's electoral prospects, was a

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[702] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012.
[703] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012.

key Stage 2 objective. This goal stemmed, in part, from the legacy – some might call it the mystique – of the Contract with America. Whether accurate or not, the Contract was perceived, according to a senior Republican communicator, as the first part of a larger agenda that the American people expected to be delivered.[704] Pushing legislation that fell within the general themes of the Contract would therefore be rewarded at the ballot box; that is, the Stage 2 "electoral victories" objective was tied to the Stage 2 "policy and legislative influence" objective. Each one fed off the other. "If we pass [our agenda]," explained the aide, "then we are getting things done and it's a validation of what we stand for as a party."[705]

Since communications was such a critical part of the development and promotion of the Contract with America, it was accepted by leaders and staff that national messaging would be a part of its implementation, and would continue even after the original 10 bills were considered. "What shaped our attitude in that time," the staffer continued, "was that I think there was a belief that having an agenda, and going out and communicating it, is what got us the majority in the first place."[706] The effectiveness of this national messaging could be assessed very differently depending on who was being asked. For example, two prominent GOP communicators suggested that a national message "oriented heavily toward past accomplishments – balancing the budget, cutting taxes, saving Medicare, and reforming welfare" were "all fine deeds, but relatively meaningless in the electoral arsenal of a GOP challenger."[707]

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[704] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.
[705] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.
[706] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.
[707] Gary Andres and Ed Gillespie, "Recruitment, Message Development in 1999 Lead to Gains in 2000," *Roll Call*, January 21, 1999.

Negative assessments of the House GOP's media outreach strategy was also came from some communicators who thought that the electorate was primed for a true partisan realignment, uniting a majority of Americans for generations to come under an array of conservative policies. A former communicator for Majority Leader Armey recalled the leadership's conundrum with messaging to some traditionally Democratic-aligned constituencies:

> "We had an ongoing sense that our ideas were not only important but would work better for a lot of constituent groups that were arrayed against us, so Hispanics or something like that, women or whatever. We had all these advocacy groups that said, 'We speak on behalf of this group,' and then their agenda, we felt, was actually detrimental to that group. The question is how do you point that out, how do you elevate it, make it transparent, and get those constituent groups to start rethinking their affiliations like that?"[708]

For Democrats as well, the competitive nature of the House ensured that electoral results would remain an important Stage 2 measure of messaging success for leaders. At the time, only a handful of votes separated Democrats in the minority from taking control. However, they found that the persona and messaging power of the Clinton White House dominated whatever communications efforts they were pursuing.[709] House Democrats faced weight of popular bipartisan agreements between President Bill Clinton and Speaker Gingrich on one hand, and their own desire to draw contrasts between themselves and the GOP on the other. It was a difficult position for leadership communicators and House Democratic messaging floundered, beset by policy clashes between liberal and moderate voices within the caucus. DCCC chairman Martin Front (TX) went so far as to argue that the House Democrats didn't need a national message to

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[708] Republican staffer, August 2, 2012.
[709] Democratic staffer, July 31, 2012.

win elections.[710] Nonetheless, Gephardt and others on his team continued to seek one

that could push them over the top to become a majority again.

In this kind of political environment, assessing the effectiveness of caucus

leadership communications boiled down to "how much could we get momentum [as

House Democrats]."

> "There was a lot of discussion back then of the impact, both positive and negative, of the President at the time. The backdrop of the '98 elections was all the Monica Lewinsky stuff, which was definitely challenging and then ended up working out really well for us," though, he added, not quite well enough to bring about a Democratic takeover of the House.[711]

House Republicans, out of power in the executive branch and thus unencumbered

by fellow partisans with a much stronger microphone, were able to make more of a direct

case to the electorate. According to a former GOP leadership aide, the parties were

largely fighting over one-third of the electorate to secure a majority. "The only way you

get to 50-percent-plus-one from that third is through communications," the staffer

explained.[712] Selling the party's legislative program was not just important for the

policies that could be implemented, but because passage would help bring successful

results in the November election – both Stage 2 objectives. GOP communicators

therefore focused on "making sure that the public understands the stakes, what's going

on."[713] Another Republican leadership staffer recognized that the day-to-day legislative

agenda was not likely to make the difference in November, but that it was wrapped up

with the way the party was trying to communicate with the public:

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[710] Jim Vande Hei, "The Message Wars: During Long Recess, Dems Struggle to Fine Common Theme," *Roll Call*, November 24, 1997.
[711] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.
[712] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.
[713] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.

"It's not that that message, that week, is going to make people vote Republican. It was that, as a party, especially in the majority, we looked at ourselves as having the House and the Senate…. So we had a responsibility to set the agenda and show the public that we had an agenda. Here's what it was. Here's why it's the right agenda. That will, by definition, benefit the Republican brand, if you will, and help in the reelection efforts."[714]

Aside from looking at election results, Republicans started using another quantitative device at this time: polling. Favorability ratings for Congress as a whole and the generic ballot were those that were watched closest by GOP communicators.[715] These measures were typically asked by public polling firms who then released their results to the media, and therefore were available for free to House caucus leaders.

House Republicans, under Speaker Dennis Hastert, made a conscious effort to present a calmer image to the public, so as to distinguish themselves from the turbulent Gingrich era. "We dare to be dull," was the mantra, according to a former GOP aide.[716] Polling provided them with one of the few scientific measures available to see if it was working. "We looked at was polling numbers, in terms of, is [the messaging] resonating?" recalled another Republican staffer.[717] One of Armey's former aides noted the limits of measuring one's communications effectiveness through polling. "You'd have polls saying people kind of agreed with us on some issues, but the media coverage was the opposite."[718] Nonetheless, the wider use of polling was now a part of House communications Stage 2 assessment and it certainly helped Republican leaders by

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[714] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.
[715] The "generic ballot question" in a poll can take different forms, depending on the pollster. Typically, it is phrased along the lines of, "If the election were held today, would you vote for the Republican candidate for Congress or the Democratic candidate for Congress?" It is designed to measure the public's partisan inclinations and the strength of each party's brand in a competitive environment.
[716] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012
[717] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012
[718] Republican staffer, August 2, 2012

offering feedback on public opinion of their tenure. The Hastert aide explained the

linkage:

> "When we were on message, on a good message, and we were getting our work done, our favorability ratings would increase. When we were fighting amongst ourselves, when there were coups, when we were saying crazy stuff…. when we were taking on very controversial issues that would polarize the country, and [….doing] it in a way that angered people, the numbers would go down."[719]

In terms of Stage 1 assessment measures, daily clippings of Capitol Hill coverage

remained a tool used by both Democrats and Republicans. "Back then, you'd have clips

every day, and you'd get a sense of who's covering what, how they're covering it, whose

hair is on fire," said one GOP leadership aide, reflecting an attitude shared across the

aisle.[720]

Occasionally, a leadership communicator would dig a bit deeper into the coverage

and look to see whether House Republicans were getting "equal time" in the stories, vis-

à-vis coverage of messaging coming out of the Democratic White House. "To get in the

press is not a problem," said a former Republican communicator, adding that everything

was different when they were in the minority.[721] The challenge was that when one had to

compete with the Clinton administration, or any White House for that matter, it was

difficult to generate press coverage worthy of an equal branch of government. The

"equal time" assessment would typically prove what the aides expected to see and, since

there wasn't much that could be done about it, the measurement effort was discontinued.

The importance of assessment would often vary with individual leaders. With

Hastert attempting to lower his profile as speaker, other GOP leaders, including majority

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[719] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.
[720] Republican staffer, August 2, 2012.
[721] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.

whip, and later majority leader, Rep. Tom DeLay (TX), took an even more active role in being the face of the leadership's communications effort. Measuring his clips was a bigger concern for the Texan than it was for Hastert. "When you're the speaker, you don't really need to worry that much about [getting covered] because you're going to get that" routinely, noted a leadership communications aid.[722] For DeLay, however, the effort to place himself as the face of the House Republicans reflected the Stage 2 objective of "strengthening a leader's political standing." When he and his staff assessed that he was getting less coverage, or that the portrayals of his leadership were slanted, DeLay was not shy about making his complaints public.[723] "The more DeLay got out there" in the press, the better he did in achieving his goal of increasing his position in the Washington, DC power structure, according to one GOP leadership staff member from the time.[724]

> "His public persona that he was a tough guy that was ruthless made people want to give him more money. As a matter of fact, there was a press story…. where he let people know that he had a PAC list of who gets what. That may or may not have been legal, but it certainly sent the right message, which was you guys have to pony up …. He became a very effective fundraiser."[725]

Feedback from individuals and groups was also used to assess the Stage 1 impact of the ongoing national messaging effort. Virtually every communicator interviewed readily admitted that the average member of Congress cared much more about press

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[722] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.

[723] It is unclear from published reports exactly how DeLay came to assess that media coverage was unfair. It is inferred here that DeLay's judgement was a personal assessment, not subject to any quantifiable measurement. See Susan Crabtree, "DeLay Sees Progress from CNN," *Roll Call*, June 6, 2002.

[724] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.

[725] The K Street Project, named after the street in Washington, DC that is home to many of the city's major lobbying firms, was a DeLay-initiated effort to reward those lobbyists who raised money for Republicans and stopped doing the same for Democrats. The "PAC list" referenced here was a record of which firms were to be granted access and other accommodations by the GOP majority, and which were to be denied for failing to follow DeLay's rules. See Jim Vande Hei, "GOP Monitoring Lobbyists' Politics; White House, Hill Access May be Affected," *Washington Post*, June 10, 2002.

coverage in their own district than the benefits of national messaging. Nonetheless, "you wanted to develop a camaraderie and teamwork that you're driving through a similar message," explained one GOP communicator from the time. "It helps bring the team closer together. Everyone gets buy-in."[726] As a measure of assessment, leadership staff knew their national messages were working if more members used it during their trips back home and returned to Washington with reports that there was a good response from constituents.

Attempts to get everyone on the same messaging page, however, had mixed success on both sides of the aisle because of internal and national political forces. Without such coordination, the ability to assess a message's effectiveness was stunted. Even poll-tested phrases and themes were only occasionally adopted by Democrats, in the immediate aftermath of terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. According to staffers from the time, the political landscape reflected a "rally 'round the flag" dynamic, greatly benefitting Republican George W. Bush and frequently dividing the Democratic caucus.

The lack of message unity, resulting in limited ability to assess message effectiveness, seems curious as partisanship was growing in the House during this era, unifying Republicans with Republicans and Democrats with Democrats in roll call votes unlike any time in history. It would appear logical to assume that message unity on each side of the aisle would follow voting unity. But this was not the case. Both Democrats and Republicans found their caucuses full of diversity when it came to communications, a dynamic that weighed heavily on the leadership staff, as they felt the demands to craft something that could be judged as both unifying and effective. "You'd be writing the messaging," recalled one Republican,

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[726] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.

"….and think, 'okay, is Mike Castle going to use this?' And on the other side, 'Is Tom Coburn going to use this?' And you'd have to be realistic about it.[727] There's probably not going to be one thing that they're both going to say every time. What's the common ground, and where can we find the common ground, and keep everybody comfortable, and keep everybody together? For a lot of that period, the biggest measure of success was just how cohesive is the conference because they would all flip out when they thought we were losing the messaging battle."[728]

During this era, additional Stage 1 feedback came from outside groups. In many cases, these were organizations and associations upon which the national parties relied on for electoral coalitions. The communications efforts of House caucus leaders were intended to build support and engagement among these outside groups, particularly in promoting the congressional leaders' messages to their membership. For Republicans, coalition management became so critical to the overall communications effort that, within every leadership office, at least one specific staff member was designated to be responsible for handling the outreach.[729] As head of the Republican conference, Chairman John Boehner initiated the Thursday Group, a meeting of key conservative organizations working to promote the House GOP's agenda.[730] "All of these groups worked hard to become part of the communications and grassroots work that helped drive the Republican message last Congress and this Congress," explained Terry Holt, a Boehner spokesman.[731] But when the message wasn't working – for example, during the debate over the balanced-budget deal in 1997 – members of the Thursday group expressed their displeasure by very publicly walking away from further coordination.

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[727] Rep. Michael Castle (DE) was considered a traditional, moderate Republican, while Rep. Tom Coburn (OK) was viewed as a largely uncompromising conservative, thereby representing the two ends of the ideological spectrum inside the Republican conference.

[728] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.

[729] Republican staffer, August 2, 2012.

[730] Juliet Eilperin, "Key Conservative Group Quits Boehner Meetings," *Roll Call*, May 19, 1997.

[731] Quoted in Juliet Eilperin, "Key Conservative Group Quits Boehner Meetings," *Roll Call*, May 10, 1997.

Thus, from a communications standpoint, leadership could now assess their Stage 1

effectiveness based on the reaction from ideologically-affiliated interest groups.[732]

"who's going to be out there with op-eds or with press conferences or with news releases

or mail or whatever," according to one leadership aide.[733]

Assessment was also done by looking at the feedback from one's opponents. A

Stage 1 objective employed by both sides at this time was to put your opponent on

defense. House Republican leadership staff sensed their messaging was making an

impact if the Clinton White House was forced to respond to whatever Hastert and others

had said. The tactic was similar to what Foley, Gephardt, and other Democrats had

pursued when George H.W. Bush was in the White House. "We were pounding [Clinton

White House press secretary] Joe Lockart one time on government waste," recalled a

Republican communicator. "And Joe got asked about one of the things I did and I was,

'Wow, we did it!' because that means you're really breaking through to the media."[734]

Democrats, for their part as the House minority, concerned themselves with trying to

keep the GOP leadership "off message."[735] During this period, they repeatedly attacked

the Republicans for their stands on four issues: Medicare, Medicaid, education, and the

environment.[736] "They just pounded on that, and it had an impact," lamented a Hastert

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[732] Feedback was not always at the invitation of congressional leaders. Grover Norquist, the head of Americans for Tax Reform, organized the Leave Us Alone Coalition, an ad-hoc gathering of several prominent conservative groups, including the Christian Coalition and the National Rifle Association. Meetings with members of Congress and staff were held every Wednesday morning during which House leaders were able to hear what these affinity groups were thinking about the GOP message, strategy, and tactics. See Leslie Wayne, "Conservative Advocate and His GOP Ties Come Into Focus," *New York Times*, July 8, 1997.

[733] Republican staffer, August 2, 2012.

[734] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.

[735] "Off message" is an American political idiom referring to when someone is unable to speak about that he or she intended to speak about. Being "off message" can be done by design, mistake, or – as in the situation presented here – due to attacks from one's opponents that necessitate a response.

[736] A.B. Stoddard, "House Democrats seek to shape agenda and resolve differences at retreat this month," *The Hill*. January 10, 1996.

aide, indicating that the response given by the GOP was not particularly effective.

"People felt like we were on the defensive because we were trying to cut these fairly

large programs. You just have to counter that as best you can."[737]

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Messaging assessment from 2004 to 2010

Despite the emergence of social media and advances in media content evaluation

software, the goals and assessment techniques applied by House leadership

communicators during this era did not differ significantly from the previous one. Both

Democrats and Republicans maintained the view that there was a causal link between

national messaging and their success in the November elections. "The ultimate measure

is the election," bluntly stated one former Pelosi aide, explaining how they sometimes

judged the effectiveness of their communications efforts.[738] Another Democratic

leadership staff member suggested that leadership communications were intended to

"affect the environment and to persuade [voters]. The reason all of these avenues are

important is that they are just opportunities – small opportunities – in a larger kind of

drama that plays out" in an election.[739]

Ongoing polling, which leadership staff on both sides of the aisle indicated only

started coming into widespread use a few years before, remained an effective and widely

used Stage 2 assessment tool for both parties. "You have real time polling. That's

watching your generic ballot and you can see if you're moving the ball," explained a

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[737] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.
[738] Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012.
[739] Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012.

former Republican leadership staff member.[740] House leadership from both parties used public polls and their own internal polling to assess the effectiveness of their message operations. The polls, explained one leadership aide, allowed leaders to consider, "Are we moving up? Are we moving down? What do we think is resonating here?"[741] Heading into the 2004 election year, Minority Leader Pelosi argued that the party's strong lead (9 to 19 points) in generic ballot polling was a sign that Democratic messaging was resonating with the voters.[742] A Democratic aide explained that the Pelosi team would look at the polls to see "what messages resonated and how they resonated. How are people viewing those messages? What are they hearing about it? .... That's one way to measure how effective you're being out there."[743]

In 2006, Democrats took advantage of a series of GOP missteps on ethics.[744] Pelosi and other attacked accused the Republicans of fostering a "culture of corruption."

In Stage 1, this message was successful because it provided a widely accepted, unifying slogan for the caucus. Its effectiveness would have been undermined had it not also found Stage 2 success, when Democrats won a sweeping victory in November and took control of the House. In addition, Democrats believed that their communications efforts were effective because they were finally receiving enough coverage, a Stage 1 objective, of their criticisms of the Bush administration. Despite not being reported on as much as the majority House Republicans, leadership staff members were convinced that the public was seeing and hearing the party's perspective because the press was paying

[740] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.
[741] Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012.
[742] Chris Cillizza, "DCCC Sees '04 'Trend'," *Roll Call*, June 15, 2004.
[743] Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012.
[744] Jonathan Weisman and Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, "Scandals Alone Could Cost Republicans Their House Majority," *Washington Post*, November 2, 2006.

attention to them. "People do get the message out there," said one former Pelosi aide who worked with the leader when Democrats were in the minority.

> "The culture of corruption, the new direction, certain things [such as the fact that Pelosi] was vehemently opposed to the war in Iraq. People understood that. They understood that we weren't going to allow social security to be privatized. I think both of those had an [electoral] impact."[745]

Likewise, Republicans, after voters turned them into the minority in November 2006, reasoned that "we're not legislating, so we need to be communicating" policy contrasts with the Democrats.[746] "The message driver is all you really have in the minority," noted one former aide to the Republican conference.[747] "It wasn't Barack Obama sucks and Nancy Pelosi is terrible," explained one former GOP leadership communicator. "It was, 'they have a world view that we do not share and we think it's this way, they think it's that way.' The more we can debate that, the more we can create a contrast narrative."[748] Making such distinctions stick in the public's mind required the conference to be united consistently in opposition to the Democratic agenda. Therefore, GOP leaders assessed the effectiveness of their messaging, in Stage 1, by looking at how unified their conference was in reading from the same script, and in Stage 2, how well they did in the next election.

While during this era, both parties consistently used elections as a means to judge the strength of leaders' communication efforts, Democrats in the majority also used the passage of legislation as an assessment tool. "People have to know what you are doing," said a former Pelosi staffer. "What you are proposing, introducing, developing will

[745] Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012.
[746] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.
[747] Susan Davis, "New Minority Gets a New Messenger," *Roll Call*, February 5, 2007.
[748] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.

generate support from constituents…. You have the policy. Then you have to build a message behind that policy. Then you have to communicate effectively."[749] The goal was not just to pass the policy, but to do so in a way that the public understands, and rewards you for doing it.

Former communications staff for both Democratic and Republican leaders in the House suggested that the national messaging efforts could be judged by the success that House caucus leaders had in recruiting high quality candidates to run for congressional seats and then raising money to help them – fundamental steps towards the Stage 2 objective of electoral victories.[750] A former Democratic leadership aide said that, "when you have effective messaging that resonates with the public that clearly will translate to political support."[751] Another Democratic aide agreed that good press from the caucus leaders helps with candidate recruitment, fundraising, and the overall perception of the party, but added that local communications mattered just as much as anything in the national press.[752] In an election year, congressional leaders will typically cross-cross the country every weekend fundraising and campaigning for their party's incumbents and priority challengers.[753] The former staffer explained.

> "They're doing fundraisers on the weekend. They're doing campaign events. They're able to speak directly to the party activists who would be attending an event for some challenger in Tennessee. A lot of times the local press will come out, too…. They'll have a little story on that so that speaks to a larger audience in that congressional district."[754]

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[749] Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012.
[750] As Jacobson (1989) notes, recruiting top-tier candidates becomes much easier when ambitious potential candidates believe there are favorable conditions. Such favorable conditions, argue the communicators who worked for House leaders, are affected by effective national messaging.
[751] Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012.
[752] Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012.
[753] David M. Drucker, "Leaders Have Packed Fundraising Schedules," *Roll Call*, May 24, 2007.
[754] Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012.

It is during these kinds of trips that the leaders themselves are able to glean whether or not their communications efforts are having an effect on the Stage 1 objective of "caucus and party unity." When national messages received a positive reception across the country, it was considered a strong endorsement of the effectiveness of leadership communications. Leaders would also speak individually with the candidates and key party activists, along with "sophisticated observers around the country who also write big checks and are big supporters," according to the Democratic aide.[755] As they travel, caucus leaders "hear from different voices. Not just their staff. Not just members of Congress. Not just their own consultants, but a lot of other people; some who are sophisticated, some who are not. But they are smart people."[756] The feedback loop provided the well-travelled leaders with an internal gauge on what messages worked and what messages were not working, and this information was shared with staff.

Other Stage 1 forms of assessment were used as well to measure the impact of national communications by House caucus leadership. The daily clippings of newspaper articles allowed staff to develop their own sense of whether or not a message was getting through. As discussed previously, the changing media landscape reduced the length of the news cycle dramatically.[757] One consequence was that newspaper clips were somewhat less significant of a measure, according to former staffers, because new headlines were being reported all the time. The clips themselves might be out-of-date by the time they were distributed. While the printed articles helped prime and frame the larger conversation over a given issue, the major daily newspapers certainly did not wait

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[755] Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012.
[756] Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012.
[757] Brian Montopoli, "Surviving the Shrinking News Cycle," CBSnews.com.
http://www.cbsnews.com/news/surviving-the-shrinking-news-cycle/ Accessed July 28, 2015.

for the next print edition to put out a story. Instead, they used their websites to feed the public demand for instantaneous information.

A second consequence of the shrinking news cycle was that leadership staff had to respond quickly to every charge, regardless of the credibility of the source. In an effort to achieve the Stage 1 objective of "putting opponents on the defensive," Republicans in the minority pushed to exploit this new dynamic in the media landscape. One example, cited by a former aide to Cantor, was during the debate over the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 – commonly referred to as "the stimulus bill" – a Democratic initiative designed to respond to the national recession with more than $800 billion in federal spending.[758] The staffer explained how his office used the lack of a news cycle to force Democrats to spend time responding to Republican critiques, rather than promoting their own messages. "If you're Nancy Pelosi," said the aide, "you're going to want to be talking about how many jobs you created. But if we flooded the zone every morning with the eight things [involving hard-to-explain spending] we found that day that are in the bill…. then that's what she's going to be answering questions on."[759]

No news cycle meant that there was no time to distinguish among political storylines being proffered. Most messages, especially if they were colorful, controversial, and emphasized conflict, made "news" for some part of the day, and that meant that those facing the attack had to take the time to respond, even when they would rather be pushing their own messages. Looking at that day's television news and the next day's clips was the standard assessment tool used to measure if leadership's communications effort had been successful. In those cases where the minority

[758] David Rogers, "Obama stimulus clears House." Politico.com, January 28, 2009. http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0109/18136.html Accessed July 28, 2015.

[759] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.

Republicans created a media dynamic that required Democrats to not talk about their own

issues but instead respond to GOP charges, one might expect the powerful effects of the

power bias to kick in, providing the majority House caucus leaders will ample

opportunity for coverage. However, ironically, at least one former Pelosi aide said the

opposite was true. The communicator cited the Republican charge that the Democrats

had not produced a budget. "We *do* have a budget," lamented the aide with emphasis.

Despite being in the majority, "the press is just not talking about it."

> "It is a big challenge for both parties. How do you convey your information about
> how you're doing and what you're doing? It is a big, big struggle and if you don't
> have a megaphone and if you can't talk about it, then you get beat on the
> messaging. It is a big issue."[760]

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Over the 30 years covered in this dissertation, it is clear that House caucus leaders

began to upgrade their ability to generate and disseminate national messaging. The

leaders came to believe that such efforts were a requirement of their position, an

expectation of their members that had to be met. What it less clear is whether their

efforts were effective. It is an important question to ask because House caucus leader

communication was not a simple operation. Over time, it because a central part of what

leadership offices do, a process that would take up an increasingly larger amount of time,

resources, and personnel. And yet, the goals of these expansive efforts varied, taking on

different emphasis depending on who was doing the communicating. What it means to

achieve those goals fluctuated as well. Assessment of effectiveness was most often left

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[760] Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012. What is perhaps most striking about this statement is how it could easily have been delivered by a member of the House minority leadership in the past, as they often found themselves ignored by the press. It would seem that in the new media landscape, at least from one communicator's perspective, the power bias might be dissipating.

to the subjective judgments of the leaders and their staffs. Quantitative analysis, to the degree it was done at all, was limited and cursory. In an effort to better understand this underappreciated and understudied part of House leadership activity, this dissertation considers 19 interviews with former communications staff for House caucus leaders, spanning the entire three-decade period. Taken together, a pattern of objectives and assessments emerge. This pattern can best be understood in two stages.

In Stage 1, as the leaders generate and disseminate communications, four objectives were identified. The first, and most obvious, goal was to garner press coverage of the leaders. A second goal was to produce coverage of one's opponents in which your political adversaries are on defense, forced to respond to charges. For both of these objectives, the standard assessment was done by examining clippings of articles from daily newspapers and watching television news broadcasts. While quantitative analysis could have been accomplished using this media coverage, it was rarely done, and never on a sustained basis. Staff members cited a lack of proper software that could easily pull together such an analysis and more frequently, the lack of time, given the hustle-and-bustle of daily Congressional leadership life. Looking at the coverage was almost always done in a cursory fashion.

An additional goal of the messaging efforts by House caucus leadership was to build unity among their respective caucuses and others supportive of the party, ranging from Capitol Hill lobbyists to party activists across the country. A final goal was to encourage member participation, along with the participation of key electoral allies, in disseminating the messages emanating from leadership offices. Assessment as to whether or not communications efforts secured these two objectives relied on direct

feedback from individual members, watching the level of involvement of outside, allied

groups, and the individual judgments of leaders and their top staff. Such judgments

varied with the individual and were often affected by the needs and political position of

the House caucus leader at the time. Thus, majority party leaders, for example, charged

with running the House, had to worry if their communications efforts kept their caucus

members unified, secured coalition partners both in and out of Washington, and built

public support for their legislative agenda. In contrast, minority leaders, free of the

burdens of government, could assess their communications efforts using a completely

different set of objectives, with the electoral goal being usually held above the others.

For such leaders, the fundamental assessment question was: Did their communications

efforts make them more or less likely to win the majority in the next election? In some

cases, the objective for leadership communications in the House was dictated by the

political needs of the individual leader, as we the case with Speaker Newt Gingrich

towards the end of his tenure. In a designed strategy, coordinated by staff, the loquacious

Georgian assiduously avoided the media spotlight for a while. Thereafter, beginning with

a "statesman-like" trip to China in the spring of 1997, he launched a calculated effort to

rehabilitate his public image in the press.[761] The communications objectives during the

"dark period" reflected the new strategy:

> "We still had press conferences and things but we weren't looking for 101 reasons [to talk to the press.] We weren't going to keep talking in the hallway all the time and we weren't going to talk all the way from the House floor to his office about 60 topics in between there or else 60 people are going to ask you about what you don't want to talk about. Don't talk to them every single time."[762]

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[761] Maureen Dowd, "Liberties; The China Syndrome," *New York Times*, March 29, 1997.
[762] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012.

The Stage 2 breakdown focused on the impact of successfully achieving the objectives outlined in Stage 1. "Generating coverage" was not the final goal of messaging efforts, but a means to an end. The coverage that was garnered had to help the House leaders achieve a larger goal. The same expectation applied to "putting opponents on the defensive," "caucus and party unity," and "member and ally participation." Under Stage 2, these four inputs were viewed as achieving any combination of three objectives. The first was to win elections. As a way to assess whether this was actually happening, House leaders looked to polling, particularly the popularity of Congress and the generic ballot, and then, ultimately, congressional election results. The electoral connection to House caucus leadership messaging became a much more powerful part of what leaders do following the 1994 Republican revolution that ushered in a new era of a competitive House of Representatives. During prior years, in the era of a safely Democratic chamber, communicating so that you win seats was simply not as important. Other Stage 2 goals included influencing policy and legislation, and strengthening a leader's political standing. There was no good quantitative measure that could be done with either of these objectives, and therefore judging whether or not messaging made a difference was determined by leaders and staff members themselves. Again, such individual assessments are shaped by each person's political position at the moment.

United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously said of pornography, "I know it when I see it."[763] It would seem that the top leaders in the House had a Stewart-esque approach to judging their communications activities. Despite the increasing devotion of time, personnel and other resources towards generating and disseminating national messages on behalf of House caucus leaders, no set of standard

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[763] *Jacobellis v. Ohio* 378 U.S. 184 (1964).

objectives was ever employed by those offices. They knew they were doing more, but they never took a sustained and quantitative look as to whether doing more meant they were achieving more.

CHAPTER 8

HOUSE LEADERSHIP OBLIGATIONS AND DISTINCTIONS

Starting around 1981, House caucus leaders on both sides of the aisle began ramping up their efforts to generate national messages on behalf of their respective caucuses and then disseminating them through a variety of means. Before this, "messaging was kind of relegated to the campaign trail" with Hill communicators usually limited to fielding requests, drafting responses, and handling constituent communications.[764] But moving into the 1980s, leaders began to spend more time talking to reporters, and emphasizing more than just the day-to-day discussions of the travails of individual legislation or policy proposals. They would also now start imparting messages and themes that they hoped would shape debate throughout the nation, and ultimately, assist their party's electoral efforts. Additional leadership staff was hired to focus on communications strategy and media relations. These staff members would take on increasingly more prominent roles inside the House leadership infrastructure. "Message teams" were created to incorporate non-leadership members.[765] Weekly meetings were held and polling was used to find the appropriate message, messenger, etc. for a national audience. "Home style" would always be important to individual members, but for the caucus as a whole, a more strategic communications effort was deemed necessary. Partisan communicators on each side monitored their counterparts for new tactics to employ. When one emerged that seemed to work – such as the creative use of special orders and one-minutes – it would be picked up by the political opposition.

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[764] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.
[765] Betsy Rothstein, "House GOP Theme Team vs. Democrats' Message Group," *The Hill*, March 31, 1999.

The fact that the short-term and long-term objectives for these significant investments in time, resources and personnel varied from year to year, and from member to member, did not make House caucus leaders less likely to do any of it. On the contrary, over three decades, leaders became even more invested in the process, even as the media landscape changed and bitter partisanship in Congress increased. More striking is that examining whether any of the varied objectives were actually met was rarely done in a sustained and systematic way. Assessment of the impact, if any, of all these messaging efforts was usually cursory, offering few quantitative data points for rendering a judgment. Despite little evidence that any of these national communications efforts were worthwhile, top caucus leaders continued to build on what they were doing. What mattered was that they believed, by virtue of the position they held, they were expected to oversee a strategic communications operation to support their respective caucus.

"They realize they are the leaders," suggested a former Pelosi staffer, "and they've got to take charge of the show. I think they all do. It's a big part of their job. You've got to get out there and communicate."[766] Even if they did not feel that speaking with the media was in their comfort zone, they had to support others doing it on their behalf. They were obliged to engage in national messaging activity because it was understood to be part of their job description as a top leader. While other members of Congress would be invited to be a part of the messaging process, the organization and coordination was expected to emanate from the central House caucus leadership on each side of the aisle. When members believed that they were facing a hostile political environment, it would not be uncommon to complain to leadership for not doing a good

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[766] Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012.

enough job on messaging. Leaders would consistently respond with materials provided

to all caucus members to use on trips back home. During the height of the debate over

the Affordable Care Act in 2010,[767] Democratic members of the House were given

talking point memos, fact sheets, and district-by-district analyses of the bill's impact.[768]

Providing this communications assistance was seen as a direct responsibility of the

caucus leadership.

The distinction between House caucus leaders and other leaders is often glossed

over in congressional scholarship.[769] While acknowledging that there are "core leaders,"

all too frequently, the definition of "House leadership" broadens as those core leaders

pursue a "strategy of inclusion," thereby encompassing deputy leaders, committee chairs

or ranking members, and other key players.[770] By strictly limiting those who are House

caucus leaders to the speaker, majority leader, majority whip, and campaign committee

chair for the majority, and minority leader, minority whip, minority caucus/conference

chair, and the campaign committee chair for the minority, this dissertation narrows its

focus to those who should be concerned primarily with the fortunes of their respective

caucus. These are the people who are asked to consider the needs of everyone and not be

limited by issue area, region, committee designation, etc. In terms of national

communications, these are the people who are most responsible for getting it done. One

communications professional who used to work for Democratic leadership said that "the

whole point of electing a leader is to be the face of the party," while it is different for

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[767] The Affordable Care Act passed the House by a vote of 219 to 212, with no Republican member supporting it. Shailagh Murray and Lori Montgomery, "Divided House Passes Health Bill; Measure Goes to Obama; No Republicans Join 219 to 212 Majority," *Washington Post*, March 22, 2010.

[768] Carrie Budoff Brown and Chris Frates, "Dems brace for another recess," Politico.com http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1109/29342.html Accessed July 28, 2015.

[769] Peabody, 1976; Sinclair, rev. ed. 1998; Cook, 1989.

[770] Barbara Sinclair, *Majority Leadership*, 1983, 29.

committee leaders because "their responsibility is leading the legislative debate within the committee… and lead the policy development of that issue."[771] Another Democrat who worked for leadership in the 1990s said that leaders "do have a different obligation because they're elected by the caucus to be the leaders, whether it's the minority or the majority. They are elected by the caucus to be bigger-picture communicators to a wider audience than their congressional district."[772] A Republican from the 1980s and early 1990s expressed a similar sentiment:

> "Whether it's officially recognized or not, it's just known that when you become part of the leadership your communication responsibilities are going to expand; that you're not just representing yourself, your district, your committee. You're speaking on behalf of the Republicans as whole. You take on that additional responsibility."[773]

The press, by virtue of their tendency to focus on those with the most power to influence outcomes, burnishes this distinction between some leaders and everyone else by placing select leaders in this role as national spokespersons. "The media always wants to hear from the people closest to the decisions being made," said one former Republican Hill leadership communicator from the 1990s.[774] In addition, leadership believed that that caucus members distinguished between the top leadership and all other "leaders" when it came to staying "on message." "There's zero tolerance for the highest level of leadership to be diverging from the line," a Democratic staffer explained. "There's a little bit more if you're not in the elected leadership but you're the ranking member on a committee."[775]

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[771] Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012.
[772] Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012.
[773] Republican staffer B, July 30, 2012.
[774] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012.
[775] Democratic staffer, July 31, 2012.

There are certainly exceptions. For example, as minority whip, New Gingrich was involved with the 1990 budget negotiations, and later infuriated many fellow Republicans when he broke with GOP president George Bush a compromise deal that included new taxes.[776] The pressure to back the plan was "enormous," said Gingrich ally, Rep. Bob Walker (PA).[777] "What they were using on him was, you're now a member of the leadership, you signed up to be a member of the leadership, you president needs you right now." The fact that Gingrich's move caused so much controversy and consternation among Republicans is further evidence that caucus leaders had different expectations placed upon them than others members.

The accountability dynamic was raised again and again by leadership communicators interviewed for this dissertation. Among the reasons that House caucus leaders are different is their agent status for the caucus.[778] Such a status provides, in many ways, its own electoral connection. One of the primary jobs of the each caucus's top leadership is to address the needs of the caucus membership. As Mayhew noted, the objective of the members is to be re-elected.[779] To achieve this goal, those members are likely to return home to their districts frequently. When they come back to Washington, the communicators interviewed said that members were never shy about sharing the feedback that they were receiving in their districts. If voters back home don't feel positive about what the member's party is doing in Congress, members will pick up on it and let their top leaders hear about it.

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[776] Dan Balz and Serge F. Kovaleski, "Gingrich Divided GOP, Conquered the Agenda; Revolt Gave Party a Glimpse of Its Future," *Washington Post*, December 21, 1994.
[777] Ibid.
[778] Sinclair, 2008.
[779] Mayhew, 2nd ed., 2004.

Internal complaints within the caucus filter back up to the very top, not to the

expanded leadership circle. This is significant because it indicates that members hold

their caucus leaders – and not just anyone in the expanded leadership circle – most

responsible for the national political climate, and not the larger body of leaders often

referenced by congressional scholars. Of course, other things can shape the political

environment in one's home district, not the least of which might be the approval ratings

of the president, the state of the economy, and the public's perception as to whether the

country is going on the right track or wrong track. In any of these cases, staff reported

that top House leaders believed that their members expected them to make it easier for

the members to navigate this terrain. When House members returned to Washington

frustrated," an aide to Majority Leader Armey pointed out, "it was frustration that [the

leadership's communications] role was not being carried out properly."[780] The

accountability was clear. "There was a presumed, 'You guys are in charge. We voted for

you.'"[781] Thus, House caucus leaders believed that had to respond to complaints by

being more effective in generating and disseminating messages. A former Gingrich

staffer explained the challenge:

> "Everybody wants to see their leader articulating a view with which they are
> 100% bought in. They want to see their leader doing that on television, on the
> House floor, in the news media, in political speeches. They want to see that. That
> makes them feel good. That gets them revved up. It's part of the leadership's
> challenge, because otherwise members of Congress easily get down in the mouth
> about the quality of job the leaders are doing. 'My constituents all moaned to me
> last weekend because they don't think we're doing anything. They think the
> budget's out of control. We're not doing anything. Our leaders aren't telling us
> what the answer is.'

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[780] Republican staffer, August 2, 2012.
[781] Republican staffer, August 2, 2012.

"Very easily that can happen to you, so [non-leadership members] want to see the message being forcefully delivered to help ease their political pain. That makes it easier to cast those votes that the leadership wants cast."[782]

Pulling together a national message that was effective and brought one's caucus together was never considered an easy task, as reviewed earlier in this dissertation. Political incentives often create a collective action problem. For example, according to one former GOP staffer, the federal budget negotiations can get difficult from a communications perspective because constituents are often less willing to go along with the compromises negotiated by leadership.[783] This forces the member into a difficult situation. Part of the logic of electing caucus leadership in the first place was to put certain individuals in charge of the overall needs of the caucus, and yet the compromises necessary to address such needs can still be contrary to the political needs of the individual member. In another example, a former Democratic communicator cited the battle over the Affordable Care Act as one in which the compromises involved created a bad communications environment for members in their districts.

"[Speaker Nancy] Pelosi didn't get all that she wanted. Neither did [Majority Leader Steny] Hoyer, But they know, at the end of the day, their responsibility as party leaders is to guide and put the party in the best position that they can. There was a recognition that, on that issue, a failure was just going to be a colossal political debacle. They needed to get legislation passed and enacted."[784]

Powerful though they may be, an additional way in which caucus leaders were differentiated from other members was the constraint dynamic. They were expected to hold back from simply speaking their mind, despite ample opportunity. Those members who are not in leadership can, and often do, offer opinions for public consumption on any

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[782] Republican staffer A, July 30, 2012.
[783] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.
[784] Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012.

given topic. However, in what appears to be an informal "sliding scale," additional constraints are imposed as one moves higher up the leadership ladder. Thus, the pressure to stay on-message is greatest at the top level of House leadership, with the flip side also being true: The less leadership responsibility one has, the freer one is to say anything.

Under Republican Minority Leader Michel in the 1980s, leadership staff would encourage conference members to endorse the messaging initiated by leadership with their own comments, until there was pushback. Explained a former Michel aide, members would approach conference leaders to say, "'Can you tone it down on this or that?' particularly on some of the social issues. But most of the time, as long as Bob [Michel] had a strong point of view, we would push [the national message] out as far as we possibly could until the next issue came up."[785]

In some cases, the leadership team would be divided on an issue of principle. The bitter debate over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993, split the Democratic majority leadership with Speaker Tom Foley in favor of it while Majority Leader Dick Gephardt and Majority Whip David Bonior (MI) were opposed.[786] A former Foley aide described it as "a conscience vote" and that this was one of the moments when it was accepted that leadership was "not on the same page."[787] Despite their strong disagreement over the issue, the three leaders concluded that a bitter, public fight would

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[785] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.

[786] NAFTA was a trade agreement between the United States, Canada and Mexico. It was designed to lower barriers to the sale of commercial goods between companies operating within their respective borders. Proponents argued that it would generate new economic activity and spur growth. Opponents were concerned that a reduction in certain trade barriers would incentivize private companies to shift jobs to the country in the agreement with the cheapest source of labor and manufacturing – Mexico – leaving many displaced American workers. The agreement was ratified by the House of Representatives in November 1993. The vote was 234 to 200. Those voting in favor included 132 Republicans and 102 Democrats. The agreement then passed the Senate easily and was signed into law by President Clinton. Kenneth J. Cooper, "House Approves U.S.-Canada-Mexico Trade Pact On 234 to 200 Vote, Giving Clinton Big Victory; NAFTA Split parties, Shuffled Politics as Administration Overtook Opponents," *Washington Post*, November 18, 1993.

[787] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012,

not be beneficial. An agreement was reached under which "Gephardt and Bonior didn't go out and try to beat it into the Congress to vote against this when Foley was in favor of it."[788] Faced with a split among top leaders, everyone felt the need – because of their positions as leaders – to constrain themselves from being too outspoken on the issue.

Gingrich provides another interesting example of the pressures that members face once they enter the top rung of leadership. When he first was elected to the House, the Georgia representative felt free to speak on any number of issues. He was quotable and noteworthy, frequently described as a "bomb thrower," but largely irrelevant to House outcomes.[789] However, in 1989, when he was elected minority whip, he no longer had such freedom. Though Rep. Bob Michel, the Minority Leader, certainly deferred the conference's communications to others, including his staff and the conference chair, Gingrich's continued freelancing to the press was a source of great agitation to his fellow leaders.[790] While such disagreements were prominent, they were not constant, and Gingrich seemed to understand that had a different role to play most of the time. One of his top communications staffers explained:

> "It was a learning process for both him and for the party because, of course, he was used to not having such power and such a platform. He had more freedom to act in ways that he knew would get attention or directions he thought the party should be going on.

> "But [ascending to caucus leadership] also came with, I want to say, maybe 'constraint' is the right word. Once he joined the leadership, he wasn't just speaking for himself anymore or a small subset of the House Republicans. He was representing the entire Republican Party. So that was a learning process for him that took a few incidences where he had to learn, 'oh gosh, I can't just go out

[788] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012,
[789] David S. Broder, "Revolution, Stage 2," *Washington Post*, July 28, 1985; Don Phillips, "Reps Madigan, Gingrich Vie For GOP Post," *Washington Post*, March 16, 1989.
[790] Dan Balz and Serge F. Kovaleski, "Gingrich Divided GOP, Conquered the Agenda; Revolt Gave Party a Glimpse of Its Future," *Washington Post*. December 21, 1994.

there and say whatever I feel like. I'm speaking for the whole body of the Republicans.'"[791]

The demand for accountability eventually caught up with the gentleman from Georgia. A GOP leadership aide from the latter part of the 1990s talked about the negative reactions from conference members when Gingrich was not effective as a communicator. "If Newt messed up," said the aide, "they would be furious because they all felt like we have to communicate as a body."[792] The House Republican thinking was that Democratic President Bill Clinton,

> "….is a master politician and these guys are really good at what do in the White House and we can't slip up. If Newt would say something about Medicare withering on the vine or throw a tantrum about getting off Air Force One, or whatever it was, the entire conference would be furious with him."[793]

"Normally," said another Republican leadership aide who worked with Gingrich, "nobody could have held a national audience or gotten as much attention as Newt."[794] This was usually a significant positive for House GOP leadership communications efforts. However, "there were times when that wasn't so helpful," so staff pushed other caucus leaders, including Armey and DeLay into the spotlight. As another example, the staffer cited the House leadership's decision during the impeachment trial of President Clinton to go with a communications strategy greatly diminishing the role of Gingrich and promoting only Rep. Henry Hyde, the lead House prosecutor, as the conference's top messenger.[795] Being a top leader meant being constrained in how you spoke to the press. It was part of the collective understanding that the caucus leadership was different from

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[791] Republican staffer B, July 30, 2012.
[792] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.
[793] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.
[794] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012.
[795] Guy Gugliotta, "The Right Guard; Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde, the House's Unimpeachable Character," *Washington Post*, May 12, 1998.

everyone else. Though Gingrich often ignored such constraints, he is the exception that proves the rule.

Even as House caucus leaders were understood to be different than every other member, and therefore judged differently by their members and by the press, not all House leaders were the same. There were significant differences between each side of the aisle depending on one's majority or minority status. For the majority party, the expectations of one's caucus members were not limited to just communications. The top leaders were also distinguished because they set the legislative agenda and organized the House functions. When members were not happy, they directed their displeasure with the top level leadership team. The governing responsibility for majority caucus leaders also forced them to be much more on top of everything that was going on in Washington, and around the world. "You're expected to know what's going on on the Senate side," explained one former leadership aide. "You're expected to know what the President's thinking and what the President's cabinet is thinking. You're expected to know foreign policy issues."[796] In the minority, the caucus leaders had fewer governing responsibilities, but those that they did have still differentiated them from other members. One leadership aide from the 1990s, asked and answered this question:

> "When you're in the minority, what are the things that you can really be judged on? Fundraising, communications, and political strategy. There are obviously legislative fights, but the legislative fights are about communication strategy to shape the outcome, as opposed to legislative maneuvering…. Public opinion is the way to impact legislation."[797]

Much like the irony of congressional leaders who make significant efforts with national messaging but very little on seeing if it makes a difference, a second irony

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[796] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.
[797] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.

emerges here. While the top House leaders were distinguished by being held accountable for using messaging to shape the political landscape related to members' re-election prospects, this desirable communications skill set was, according to legislative staff members, one of many factors during the leadership's internal elections before members of their caucus. When it came to fights for leadership positions, being able to be the "face of the party" and having the ability to communicate effectively in the modern media landscape was hardly the determining factor. This is ironic given the important place that a national communications operation is to the functioning of top House leaders and the accountability demanded if it wasn't done well. Senior staff for House caucus leaders believed that other factors come into play, including – but not limited to – regional loyalty (e.g., Pelosi's strong support from the large California delegation continues to give her an advantage over anyone not from that state), personality and friendships, experience in working together in the past either on legislation or in a campaign, and fundraising abilities. "I don't want to sound flip," one Democratic leadership aide from the 2000s said, "but those internal elections are the bitterest, intra-family feuds and the same is true on the Republican side…. There's a lot of different things that go into play there."[798]

At the same time, the staffer added that, "if you're a horrible communicator, you just don't project, you're not likeable, then I don't know that you would get to the position of really being someone running for a congressional leadership position. It's just one of the prerequisite tools. You need to be able to communicate." Republican staffers agreed that factors besides communications were prioritized in leadership elections. "Basically what [the conference members] want is someone who understands how to

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[798] Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012.

negotiate, someone who knows how to drive the process, and someone knows how to get things done."[799] In some ways, as the Democratic aide mentioned, the significance of one's communication skills was based on that which was demonstrated prior to the leadership vote. Following the 2010 election, Minority Leader Boehner (MO) became speaker, Minority Whip Eric Cantor (VA) was elected majority leader, and Kevin McCarthy (CA) was voted to be the new majority whip. A former aide to Cantor believed that "the view of the conference was that these are the three guys who got us here."[800] While communications skills were important, the staffer added that potential leaders were judged on their ability to raise money and "do a lot of the things we have to have to grow and be successful" as a congressional party.

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House caucus leaders believe implementing a national communications strategy on behalf of their respective caucuses is a fundamental part of their unique responsibilities. Therefore, they invest time, resources and personnel into generating and disseminating messages that will, ideally, shape the political landscape to the benefit of their party, and more specifically, the size of their existing and potential congressional caucus. Staffers interviewed for this dissertation argued that the top leadership – those that were responsible for the entire caucus – was distinct from the larger band of leadership. Though this was all unwritten, the internal dynamics of each caucus reinforced this distinction through two significant ways. First, the top leaders were considered most accountable for shaping the political landscape in every member's home district. When a trip home revealed a reaction from one's constituents that was negative,

[799] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.
[800] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.

top caucus leaders heard the complaints from members. Second, caucus leaders were constrained in what they could say because they were understood to be speaking on behalf of a broad group of members. Those leaders, such as Gingrich, who would often violate these constraints, generated a great deal of consternation and complaints from caucus members.

Leadership obligations were also differentiated by whether one was in the majority or the minority. The Majority had many more governing responsibilities, tasks that did not burden minority leaders in the House. Nonetheless, both majority and minority House caucus faced a second irony involving their communications efforts. As noted earlier in the previous chapter, the first irony of House caucus leadership communications is that despite doing all of this work, no one seemed inclined to consistently and quantitatively measure their effectiveness. The short-term and long-term objectives of the efforts can vary depending on the political needs of the moment, and indeed, depending on who is doing the defining of the goals. With no real agreement on communication objectives, little quantitative data was compiled by leadership to determine the effect of the significant efforts being made in messaging to the national electorate.

The second irony of leadership communications, outlined in this chapter, builds off the first. House caucus leaders have greatly expanded their communications efforts over a thirty-year period. They believe that their own caucus members expect them to do this as well, and will offer their own blunt feedback based on their district visits, especially if it is negative. However, despite the widespread understanding that House caucus leaders are responsible for making the political landscape easier for their members

through effective national messaging, those same members are unlikely to use one's skills as a communicator as a priority variable when selecting caucus leaders in the House. This is the second irony. Several other factors aside from communications abilities were cited by leadership staff as being more important in such internal elections, including personal relationships, fundraising, and negotiating skills. Even though House caucus leaders assume that members expect results in national messaging, the ability to be an effective spokesperson for the party is usually a side-note in the discussion of who gets to become a caucus leader. As one Republican leadership communication aide pointed out, members of Congress considered national communications a responsibility of the House caucus leaders, but "how they fulfilled that role was a subject of vast differences in opinion."[801]

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[801] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.

CHAPTER 9

POWER AND THE COMPETITION FOR COVERAGE

House caucus leadership communication efforts do not operate in a vacuum. At any given point in time, there are several other institutional players who are seeking press coverage in the Washington, DC universe. Editorial decisions by mainstream media dictate that there is a finite amount of coverage the press will provide for Beltway news. Thus, the environment for House communicators is a competitive one. These other players are both individuals and institutional power centers, such as the Senate and the White House. These actors can be motivated for various reasons, including ego, ambition, institutional assertiveness, partisan pique, and policy differences. This competition for coverage has gotten only more acute in recent years as the media landscape has shifted, resulting in fewer mainstream political reporters in Washington, DC. In 1985, over 600 newspapers had DC bureaus. By 2008, that number had shrunk to less than 300. While the number of niche publications, such as industry newsletters and policy-specific e-zines, has grown, it is clear that, "the 'balance of information' has been tilted away from voters along Main Streets thousands of miles away to issue-based groups that jostle for influence daily in the corridors of power."[802]

Since generating press attention and promoting national messages has become a larger part of House leadership duties, and members expect that this work will be done effectively, navigating through a crowded field of political coverage aspirants in a

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[802] "The New Washington Press Corps: As Mainstream Media Decline, Niche and Foreign Outlets Grow," Pew Research Center, July 16, 2009. http://www.journalism.org/2009/07/16/new-washington-press-corps/ Accessed on September 21, 2014. On the issue of a shrinking mainstream press corps in Washington, DC, see also: Richard Perez-Pena, "Big News in Washington, But Far Fewer Cover It," *The New York Times*, December 18, 2008.

smaller mainstream media arena is a significant challenge to House communicators. If

House caucus leaders are to be successful, they need to cut through competing

messengers and their competing messages. Understanding leadership in the House

therefore necessitates an examination of the dynamics involved with the competition for

coverage. The competition, according to senior House leadership communicators, stem

from four primary sources: (1) other House leaders in one's own party, (2) non-leaders in

one's own party, (3) the leadership of one's opposition in the House, and (4) the White

House. Interestingly, no one interviewed for this dissertation focused on the Senate as a

major competitive threat to House caucus leaders' communication efforts. Members of

each chamber have been described as "mutually suspicious, and inordinately prideful and

sensitive."[803] Such feelings did not seem to come in to play in terms of the competition

for media coverage in Washington. From the House leadership perspective, the Senate

could be ignored.

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(1) House leaders vs. House leaders in the same party

As coordinated as they typically intend to be, leaders in the same party are not always

on the same page when it comes to national messaging. The top elected officials for each

caucus may have long and competitive histories with each other.[804] Democrats Nancy

Pelosi and Steny Hoyer, for example, have faced off against each other in bitter battles

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[803] Baker, 3rd ed., 2001, 15.

[804] In 2001, Pelosi beat Hoyer to become minority whip in a very aggressive race that saw the candidates initially rallying supporters two years before the actual vote. In 2006, Hoyer was elected majority leader of the new Democratic majority over Pelosi's choice, Rep. John Murtha (PA). Juliet Eilperin, "The Making of Madam Whip; Fear and loathing – and horse trading – in the race for the House's No. 2 Democrat," *Washington Post Magazine*, January 6, 2002; Jonathan Weisman and Lois Romano, "Democrats Pick Hoyer Over Murtha; House Colleagues Elect Pelosi Speaker but Reject Her Choice for Majority Leader," *Washington Post*, November 17, 2006.

for leadership positions several times over the years. The ambitions of those who emerge at the upper echelons of the House food chain are not always satiated with their current position, and bitterness can always be the residue after a leadership election. Coverage in the press is one way an individual leader can project power to others. Therefore, it is always possible that any measurement of caucus leadership communications is actually a measurement of the results stemming from a competition rather than coordination among leaders. Disagreements among House caucus leaders in the same party can lead to different messages showing up in the press or a less-than-full effort to promote and disseminate one message.

This is not to say that even those leaders with complicated histories like Pelosi and Hoyer, or others who consider themselves more rivals than teammates, don't find a way to come together coordinate communications on behalf of their caucus. Informal peer pressure from other members of one's caucus typically imposes an effective restraint on top leadership. Anything in the media coverage that suggests the leadership team is not unified is widely considered a sign of weakness by the caucus members. Thus, straying "off the reservation" requires a very good reason, usually a matter of faith-based or moral principle or political survival in one's home district.[805] In some cases, such as the relationship between Bob Michel and Newt Gingrich, two leaders with very different views about communications strategy, it took a bit of time for peer pressure to have an impact so that an accommodation could be reached.

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[805] Since 1994, the specter of Speaker Tom Foley's re-election loss looms large over members, especially leaders. More recently, but outside the time frame of this dissertation, Majority Leader Eric Cantor's loss to an underfunded Tea Party challenger in Virginia's 2014 primary may have the same effect in the future. In both cases, the conventional wisdom is that the leaders did not properly tend to their districts, either by voting for things that were not popular back home (Foley) or not visiting the district enough to maintain strong ties with the constituency (Cantor).

The media, according to a former Michel aide, was an enabler of Gingrich's and others' efforts to compete with official leadership messaging, even when they were in leadership themselves. In part, the staffer insisted, this was because the press had a partisan bias towards the Democrats, and therefore found it convenient to quote and promote anything that might be said on the Republican side that made them look divided or extreme. The reporters,

> "….found people like Newt and Dick Armey much more interesting characters than Bob Michel. They knew that if they went to Newt that they would get the quote they wanted to position Republicans as crazy or off the reservation or impractical, or whatever. They might use a quote from Newt instead of a quote from us, which you just kind of lived with, because the guy was a master, and he still is, the master of the sound bite."[806]

The relationship between Gingrich and Michel was reconfigured once the Georgian was elected minority whip in 1989.[807] He still remained one of the most quotable Republicans and, though there were efforts to rein him in, he would not shy away from staking out his own controversial position, even if it meant challenging the Republican president George H.W. Bush.[808] On most matters, there was coordination between the communicators from Michel's office and Gingrich's office. But, as a former Michel staffer noted, "on other things, I knew [Gingrich and his communications team] were having their own meetings and weren't including me. I didn't just fall off the turnip truck…. so I knew that stuff was going on, but [overall], did we coordinate where we needed to coordinate? Yes."[809]

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[806] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.
[807] Robin Toner, "House Republicans Elect Gingrich of Georgia as Whip," *New York Times*, March 23, 1989.
[808] Dan Balz and Serge F. Kovaleski, "Gingrich Divided GOP, Conquered the Agenda; Revolt Gave Party a Glimpse of Its Future," *Washington Post*, December 21, 1994.
[809] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.

Over the years, Democrats faced their own internal messaging challenges. Through 1994, their margins in the House were so large that it often didn't matter if a non-leader was generating coverage. They were still the majority and therefore the press provided extensive coverage of their leadership when it came to reporting on Capitol Hill. However, as Speaker Jim Wright began to face ethics troubles in 1989, there was intensified speculation as to whether Foley would automatically be moved up to the speaker. A Foley communications staffer recalled, "I was periodically having to fend off stories that I knew had been generated from our own caucus because there were committee chairs who thought, 'My God, I'm more entitled to be speaker than Foley!'"[810] The challenge to leadership messaging dissipated after Foley won handily in his race to replace Wright.[811] Competition for coverage among Democratic caucus leaders remained a largely calm battlefield for the next several years. Following the 1994 elections, and Foley's loss, the Democratic caucus as a whole was so shell-shocked that few envied the challenges facing Dick Gephardt, the top remaining leader who was eventually elected minority leader. He handily beat back a challenge from Rep. Charlie Rose (NC), a more conservative member, 150 to 58, in part by promising to "have the most inclusive leadership group and the largest leadership group we've ever had."[812]

As indicated above, committee chairs and ranking members typically posed the greatest potential internal competition for coverage of caucus leadership messaging. House caucus leaders on both sides of the aisle rarely waited for new challenges to emerge from other leaders in the caucus. "There are always potential fissures within your

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[810] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.

[811] Tom Kenworthy and Don Phillips, "Foley Elected Speaker of the House; Lawmakers Urged to End Partisan 'Bitterness' and 'Division,'" *Washington Post*, June 7, 1989.

[812] Bill Lambrecht, "Gephardt Wins Post of Minority Leader; Next on Agenda: Gallbladder Surgery," *St. Louis (MO) Post-Dispatch*, December 1, 1994.

own caucus or conference," explained a Democratic leadership communicator from the 1980s. "You have got to constantly be aware of what is transpiring within your own camp rather than just the other side."[813] In the aftermath of the 2004 election, Pelosi, according to an aide, found her caucus withdrawn and despondent, frustrated that what they had expected to be a sweeping presidential victory had turned out to be the opposite.[814] The Democratic caucus in 2005 could have been torn asunder by a bitter congressional battle over the future of the party, a conflict that would have brought forth any number of competitors for coverage outside of the leadership team. Thus, Pelosi's focus as the minority leader was on "nurturing, development, getting everyone as one team, one party," according to one of her former staffers.[815] Her successful cultivation of the ranking committee members, in particular, allowed her to remain the face of the party while still deferring to their expertise on a given issue. This was made easier by a 2004 rule change for the Democratic caucus that allowed the Steering and Policy Committee, controlled by Pelosi, final say on who would be the ranking members for the powerful Appropriations, Energy and Commerce, and Ways and Means committees, including all of their subcommittees.[816] The purpose was to enhance party unity and it seems that Pelosi's actions helped funnel internal conflicts away from the media gallery.

Prior to attaining majority status in 1995, Republicans caucus leaders also faced competitive challenges for coverage from ranking committee members, depending on the committee. In those committees where "ranking members had a really cohesive and tight relationship with their committee chairman," leadership sensed no potential

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[813] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.
[814] Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012.
[815] Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012.
[816] Erin P. Billings, "Pelosi to Prevail on Rule," *Roll Call*, March 31, 2004.

communications threat from the ranking member, according to a GOP leadership staffer from the time.[817] However, other committees "were just much more politically charged….It was really more kind of a knife fight in the back alley" between the top Democrat and the top Republican. In these cases, the communication needs of the ranking member had to be addressed by leadership, lest he or she go off on their own to start messaging about an issue and the Democrats in ways contrary to the wishes of conference leadership. When the Democrats were moving legislation through the committees and onto the House floor, GOP communicators for caucus leadership worked to balance these individual member concerns among the broader circle of leadership with a conference-wide perspective.

> "The issue there was how do we maintain our either offensive or defensive position? How do we position it in the public as opposed to [admitting] we're not part of the process? [The Democrats] won't let us be part of the process. They are going to jam the bill through. How do we make our points? Do we need to organize one-minutes on the floor? Do we need to organize press conferences? Do we need to bring in third party validators? How should we handle whatever the case was?[818]

Once in the majority, Republican caucus leaders used the Majority Leader Dick Armey's office to filter the communications for its now-powerful committee chairs. Armey would meet regularly with all the chairs and senior communications staff, from both the conference leadership and the committees themselves, to coordinate messaging. "We would just talk about what was coming up, what floor votes were expected, what we were saying about these issues," said a communicator who was involved.[819] By doing so, leadership maintained its own communications dominance and coordinating authority.

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[817] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.
[818] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.
[819] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012.

(2) House leaders vs. non-leaders in the same party

Members who are not in leadership are also potential competitors for media

coverage. Gingrich, in his early years, perhaps best epitomized this dynamic. His

bombastic rhetoric immediately attracted attention from the press the moment he entered

the House in January 1979, despite having no official leadership position at all. He did,

however, help launch the Conservative Opportunity Society (COS), a smaller group of

House Republicans joined together by a shared conservative philosophy and a

commitment to aggressive attacks on Democratic leadership, and even GOP leaders,

when they believed them to be too placating of the Majority.[820] Gingrich, along with

several others in the COS, including Reps. Vin Weber (MN), Bob Walker (PA) and

Connie Mack (FL), might have been young upstarts with no formal leadership role in a

still-traditional House, but they were very much watched by Minority Leader Michel and

his team, who understood that Gingrich and his allies were not only a political threat to

their position, but they were also a messaging threat, constantly generating coverage

despite their lack of standing. Communicating without an official leadership position

meant Gingrich faced little formal pressure from fellow Republicans to hold back.[821]

When Jim Wright became the speaker in January 1987, Republicans immediately

noticed a change in their relationship with the Democrats. The Texan envisioned a much

more powerful Congress, led by the House of Representatives, and therefore, by the

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[820] Interview with Vin Weber. *Frontline*.
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/newt/newtintwshtml/weber.html Accessed July 29, 2015.
[821] As previously mentioned, once in elected conference leadership, peer pressure still did not work on Gingrich's tendency to promote his own messages, even if they were contrary to those of Michel and other conference leaders. Eventually however, agreements were reached on how to pursue a unified communications strategy without competing with each other. It should also be noted that the legacy of the COS continues today with other internal sub-groups, such as the Republican Study Committee, made up of strong ideological conservatives within the GOP conference. These groups maintain their own strong messaging operations and operating independently of formal leadership.

speaker.[822] Where O'Neill had been viewed as a jovial pol, willing to reason and

accommodate where possible, Wright was seen as more combative, confrontational, and

"bitingly partisan."[823] At the same time, Gingrich – not yet in official leadership – led a

small group of members in challenging Republican conference's leadership with their

own much more aggressive approach towards communication. Wright's speakership

helped them tremendously. Indeed, the allegations of ethical impropriety lodged against

Wright by Gingrich – charges that would eventually lead to the speaker's resignation –

helped the Georgian eventually ascend to minority whip. According to a former Michel

aide, the GOP leadership in the House found itself competing with a new, self-designated

messenger who was speaking in aggressive language far beyond what Michel's team was

prepared to do themselves. It was Gingrich, who – according to a Republican staffer –

"introduced into the process the stridency and the division, wedge issues and wedge

messages that gradually evolved into where we are now where everybody's beating the

living hell out of each other."[824] Whatever equilibrium among Democratic and

Republican leaders existed before was completely upended, which was, of course,

Gingrich's goal.

While the GOP conference leadership was certainly challenged by quotes in the

paper from fellow Republican House members that were out of line from where Michel

thought the conference should be, they were also impressed with the "creative and

innovative ways" Gingrich and his cohorts were using to generate media attention of

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[822] Barry, 1989, 66.
[823] Jonathan Fuerbringer, "The Elections; What Awaits Congress; For 100th Congress, Many of the Problems that faced the 99th," *New York Times*, November 5, 1986.
[824] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.

Republican positions after years of being largely ignored.[825] Republican House

leadership began accommodating and even adopting these tactics themselves. The front

steps of the Capitol were used much more for press conferences. Candlelight vigils were

held inside the National Statuary Hall, inside the Capitol Building. Michel agreed to lead

a dramatic "walkout" over the seating of McCloskey over McIntyre in a contested

Indiana election.[826]

It is not that Michel was naïve about the attractiveness of congressional conflict

for reporters. He would happily criticize the majority Democrats whenever they stood in

the way of President Ronald Reagan's priorities or imposed what he considered an

egregious abuse of power. But he clearly had limits on how far such tactics should go

and was uncomfortable with the overall aggressiveness of Gingrich. "Conflict was where

we usually got our most mileage" in terms of press coverage, suggested a former aide to

Michel. "The key was always, how do we promote the conflict without bringing down

the House," a potentiality that did not seem to fear Gingrich and his allies.[827] Faced with

such a competitive internal threat to messaging efforts, the "inside baseball" survival

instincts of Michel kicked in. At the urging of Michel, Minority Whip Dick Cheney

(WY) facilitated a behind-the-scenes understanding between the GOP conference leaders

and Gingrich and his allies. Michel would not try to clamp down on the communications

tactics of Gingrich and others and they would help the minority leader with his priorities

on the legislative side. A former top aide to Michel paraphrased the minority leader's

attitude as:

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[825] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.

[826] This incident is explained in Footnote 285, located in Chapter 4.

[827] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.

"'Look, I'm not going to be out there riding a bike across the lawn advocating for lower gas prices, but go ahead and do it. Just be careful not to screw up my policy stuff and the things I need to get done for Reagan.' That was the implicit deal that few people ever knew about between Gingrich and Michel."[828]

(3) House leaders vs. House leaders from the opposite party

No other variable affected the competition for coverage by House leaders than their status as either the majority or minority party. Unlike the Senate, with its rules endowing the Minority – even a single Senator in the minority – with tremendous power, the larger House is dominated by the Majority so long as it can control at least 218 of its own members, the bare minimum in the 435-member chamber required to pass something. Certainly, parliamentary maneuvers can be used to slow down the process and frustrate the speaker's aims, but typically, such tactics are very hard to maintain over an extended period of time. Speaking to the interviewer on a Monday morning, one Democratic leadership aide from the 2000s noted:

> "In the minority, in the House, it sucks because if the Majority has 218 votes they can call today 'Tuesday' and there's nothing the minority can do about it. Two hundred eighteen is what you need and they have all the power. They have the chairmen's gavels. The Minority is regarded as a red-headed step-child that's an annoyance to the Majority more often than not, which is very unlike the Senate, which is, at least on the surface, much more collegial."[829]

The power bias – again, the tendency of the media to give disproportionate coverage to the House majority leadership vis-à-vis the House minority leadership – always shaped coverage of Congress by focusing attention on those most likely to influence outcomes. Therefore, coverage of the House largely followed the majority party. While it was relatively easy for the speaker or other top leaders in the majority to secure press coverage, it was much more difficult for the minority leadership in the

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[828] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.
[829] Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012.

House to do the same. As mainstream media outlets began devoting less time, space, and

resources to political coverage at all, this challenge became even greater. Some

Republican staff members, from throughout the 30-year period covered in this

dissertation, maintain that they faced the additional hurdle of the media's alleged

preference for Democrats. One Republican communicator from 1980s and 1990s argued

that "there's a real bias against Republicans" in the mainstream press.[830]

> "I'm not a wing nut but I believe there is liberal bias in the general media and
> back then all we had was the general media. Reporters did have a point of view,
> which they still have, but generally speaking, I think that most of the people
> reporting and editing the news back then were liberal and just were very cozy
> with the Democratic leadership. [The media] pretty much would cover anything
> they asked. That was kind of the way it was."

Though this dissertation's quantitative analysis provides mixed evidence to

support this charge, GOP communicators clearly believed it. A former Michel aide

linked partisan bias with the journalists' preference for reporting on conflict.[831] Most

political reporters, the communicator noted, can figure out the outcome of a vote before it

happens in the House, and that makes it unworthy of any real coverage of the minority

position, since it has no effect on the outcome. Therefore, the press "would come to us

with all the wrong things, like, 'so, your conference is divided?'" According to this

Michel staffer, it was the frustration with the media's coverage – or lack thereof – of the

House Republicans' messages that,

> "....led to a majority [of the GOP members] embracing Newt, the way he
> approached being in the minority. He was much more willing to be critical of the
> speaker. Whereas, up to that point, my boss had thought that part of his role was
> to work with the speaker on the agenda for the floor, on the schedule, on all the
> things that they had to work together on."

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[830] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.
[831] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.

GOP conference members had grown so frustrated with their inability to secure what they considered balanced reporting on Capitol Hill that the appeal of an iconoclast like Gingrich grew. It wasn't always like that. In the 1980s, an era of entrenched Democratic majorities, some former leadership communicators recall that the competition for coverage was not particularly bitter. "Back then, reporters weren't always looking for the fight," explained an ex-Michel staffer.[832] "The environment was different, the standards were different, and to a certain extent the ethic was different then." A Democrat from the era agreed. "Part of leadership's job," explained the aide, "is to make the life of the average member as predictable and comfortable as possible."[833] Toward this end, the Democratic majority of the era would have weekly meetings between a representative of its leadership and someone from the Republican leadership. The meeting location would alternate between the offices of each side's top leader. The agenda for the week would be discussed and other issues would be raised or negotiated as necessary. "Nobody was giving away with store, but it was done with a degree of comity that would not exist in today's world," the Democrat emphasized.[834] Communications by House caucus leaders was a routine part of each side's operation, but since the top leaders got along with each other and since the mainstream media wasn't preoccupied with conflict, the level of hyper-partisanship in communications was kept to a minimum. It was a relatively serene time and place that would quickly dissipate.

Regardless of the level of collegiality among House leaders, the lack of power tests the perseverance of every House communicator who works for the Minority. Many

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[832] Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012.
[833] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.
[834] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.

who were interviewed for this dissertation recalled their tenure out of power as exasperating. A Michel staffer claimed, "We used to have to fight for that one paragraph that was usually the penultimate paragraph of the story."[835] "When you're in the minority," recalled a GOP aide from the 1990s, you can't drive anything. All you can do is obstruct. It's almost impossible to get covered."[836] A Democratic communicator from the 2000s remembered the challenges of generating press conference coverage when they were in the minority: "We had to beg reporters to come [when we were in the minority]. Literally, like, 'Please, my boss is going to yell at me. I've got nobody in this damn press conference, please!'"[837]

Not all interviewees cited a frustration with the press coverage. A Gingrich staffer from his early years in leadership recalled getting coverage for the Georgia representative never really being a problem,[838] though his situation might more accurately be seen as the exception that proves the rule. A Democrat from the latter half of the 1990s found that the mainstream press didn't cover the minority caucus as much as the majority, but believed it to be "fair" and noted that the party found coverage easily in the Washington-focused media outlets like *The Hill* and *Roll Call*. Indeed, this former aide enjoyed – from a communications standpoint – working in the minority.[839] "Insurgency is a lot of fun," he argued, while "governing [as the majority] is not as much fun." The key to garnering coverage in the minority, said the Democrat, was to cater to the needs of the media by giving them the colorful, biting quote that would be too good to be buried:

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[835] Republican staffer, July 24, 2012.
[836] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.
[837] Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012.
[838] Republican staffer B, July 30, 2012.
[839] Democratic staffer, July 31, 2012.

"We said interesting stuff. We understood the dynamics of the story, and always were ready to play the part that they needed to have played. That's why we were getting quoted before the jump, not at the end of it or not at all. I think that was actually a big part of it. I think we were very savvy about how reporters wrote stories, what they needed, and got into it and gave good quote. We were a highly partisan operation, and that's what the reporters wanted. They were looking for that. It doesn't endear you to the other side and it doesn't endear you to people outside of Washington as much, but it was what the press corps wanted."

Most communicators operating in the minority did not come away with such a positive experience, despite their creative efforts to secure coverage of their messages. Under Michel, press staff would put together four or five sentences each day, "using sharp language" to be pushed into the next day's coverage.[840] Three decades later, Republican staffers in the minority would engage in similar tactics, employing a "flood the zone" strategy that would aggressively provide so many GOP messages to the media that they could not be ignored. "We were constantly creating mechanisms for us to be able to push things in the press," explained a former aide to then-Minority Whip Eric Cantor.[841] Competing for coverage with the Majority was not easy, but nearly every communicator who had experience in the minority cited the lack of pressure of governing as liberating from a messaging standpoint. One Democrat explained, "A lot of media relations activity and communications activity in the majority was about the nuance of bills, which doesn't get you very far," in terms of press coverage.[842] However, after the Democrats became the Minority in January 1995, "it became much more about communicating the big picture – what do we believe as opposed to which amendment may or may not be considered."

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[840] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.
[841] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.
[842] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.

Given the fundamentals of the power bias, it would be rational for leaders in the majority to simply ignore the communications efforts of their opponents across the aisle. The thinking would be, "Why engage them at all? The noise they make is hardly covered in the mainstream press and therefore is not likely to have any impact on the outcome of legislation or the upcoming election." In theory, this is what majority leaders should have done. However, within the insular world of Capitol Hill, majority communicators often believed that they had to respond to the Minority's verbal fisticuffs. A Democratic staffer who worked for his party's majority leadership in the late 1980s and early 1990s recalled their opinion of the House GOP leadership's communications, especially that which came from Gingrich: "We thought they were extremely effective. They were agile. They were creative. They were persistent. They were indecorous and insulting, and they were out for blood."[843] Author and screenwriter William Goldman's famous adage that the reason why Hollywood studios make the movies they do is that "no one knows anything," seems to have a place in the world of Capitol Hill communications as well.[844] No one really knows the actual effect of their communications efforts, or those of their partisan opponents, so everyone continued to push and respond, creating a competitive messaging environment when the fundamentals of who got covered did not support one in the first place.

For the House majority, control the legislative calendar and the hearing schedule is "what drives the news."[845] Thus, by virtue of being in charge, "you're really kind of judged by your results [on the floor]," said another Republican who worked in the same

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[843] Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012.
[844] William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting* (New York: Warner Books, 1983).
[845] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.

era. "If you focus first on PR and second on results, you're hurting yourself. You've got to focus first on how to get things done and then, from there, PR it after you're done getting the things done."[846] The governing obligation takes up a large amount of the focus of the House majority leadership and it shapes their ability to communicate, not only because they have to talk about the things they are doing – if nothing else than to inform the public – but also because their comments are considered differently than those coming from the Minority. The inappropriate remark by a minority leader in the House might raise an eyebrow, but coming from a leader in the majority, the same comment can cause a media feeding frenzy, dramatically divert attention from one's legislative agenda, and even impact the national and, indeed, the global economy. In the majority, explained a former aide to Speaker Hastert, "you have to be much more careful in what you say. If you're in the minority, no one cares if you say something a little bit crazy. If you're in the majority and responsible for governing, people care about everything you have to say."[847] The Republican continued:

> "There's a difference between Newt Gingrich being the minority whip and saying crazy things, and Newt Gingrich being speaker of the House and saying crazy things. He was saying the same things all along, but when he was speaker, people actually paid attention. There's a sense that if you're actually running things, people pay much more attention to what you say. You have to be much more careful in how you say it. That's the great thing about Hastert, because he didn't make that many mistakes. He was very careful in his language, and he's boring, which is what we [wanted; to make] him boring."[848]

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[846] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012. It should be noted that not everyone agrees with this strategy. Scholars have found that public relations efforts are critical to building support to passing legislation, and that leaders make a mistake if they relegate media outreach to after-the-fact credit claiming. See Sellers, 2010.

[847] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.

[848] Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012.

In this sense, a third irony of House leadership communications emerges. The Majority receives more coverage, but the obligations of governing mean that your communications are much less exciting, less engaging for the electorate, and less salient in the pursuit of larger electoral goals. In other words, at the very moment congressional leaders have the easiest time receiving media attention, they actually become much more boring, and that makes it more difficult for them to achieve potential long-range objectives.

Communicators working for the Majority recognize this, which may explain why they continued to feel vulnerable enough to have to respond at all to what the House minority might be saying. At the same time, using the media to project one's *legislative* agenda in the majority is an effort that involves multiple power centers in the Washington area. Thus, competition for coverage "depends to a certain extent on who holds the other chamber and who sits in the White House."[849]

(4) House leaders vs. the White House

As communicators, House leaders are forced to contend with the two other players in Washington, DC lawmaking – the Senate and the White House. As others have noted, one of the fundamental variables in the Washington power hierarchy is the size of the three power centers.[850] The House, with 435 members, is quite simply harder for journalists to cover. Members are less well known and party-line discipline takes away much of the excitement of roll call votes. The Senate, in contrast, with just 100 members, is still difficult but certainly easier to follow. The strong traditions favoring the rights of the Senate's legislative minority (e.g., the filibuster) provide drama that is often

[849] Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012.
[850] Baker, 3rd ed., 2001.

lacking on the other side of Congress. Finally, the White House, by virtue of being

defined by a single person, with all of the power, pomp, and circumstance that comes

along with the position, has a much larger soap box from which to insert its messages

into the press. Therefore, as House leaders continually fight a battle for relevancy among

power centers in Washington, they do so on a battlefield in which the House is the

perhaps the weakest institution of the three in its ability to generate coverage.

"You're always at a disadvantage on the Hill," noted a former Armey aide,

because the White House has "a more unified communicational function. It's one guy.

One guy is the President, very hierarchical. No one's going to differ. No one's going to

get out of line, and on the Hill, you're always going to have a disparity of voices."[851] The

communicator also cited the physical setup of the White House vs. Capitol Hill as a

reason why the Presidency would always dominate coverage with a unified message.

> "There's the White House Press Room and [reporters] can't leave that room and
> they're not wandering the hallways, whereas on the Hill, they hang out in the
> speaker's lobby. They talk to any member they find who answers a question in
> passing and there it is in the news. It still is so much harder to control the
> message [in the House]. It's not like we ever fooled ourselves into thinking that
> we could have the same impact that Mike McCurry[852] or whoever had standing at
> the podium at the White House every day. It was very easy for the President to
> make one remark in the Rose Garden and that was it. It was on the air for the
> news cycle."

Competing with the Senate and the White House for coverage takes on additional

variables that fluctuate over time. These variables include majority/minority status and

partisan affinity among the three power centers. In other words, to highlight just two

examples, messaging when you are the GOP House minority, as Michel did, but there is a

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[851] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.
[852] Mike McCurry served as press secretary to President Bill Clinton from 1995 through 1998. As such, he was the President's top spokesman during the initial public debates with the new Republican majority in the House.

Republican majority in the Senate along with a Republican president presents different

dynamics than when one party controls all three branches of government, as was

Hastert's experience. Even with the shifting kaleidoscope of DC power center

arrangements, communicators interviewed for this dissertation remained far more focused

on the disproportionate influence of the White House over their efforts in the House. The

Senate, for those who once worked as communications staff for House leaders, was an

afterthought when it came to the competition for coverage.

The abundance of coverage generated by the House majority was a key strategic

asset for its leadership. Still, they were also part of a larger media arena and that meant

competing for attention with the press operations in the White House, and to a lesser

extent, from the Senate. "A state of natural conflict always exists," between the

legislative and executive branch, suggested a former GOP House leadership staffer.[853]

"Even if Republicans control the House and a Republican is in the White House or

Democrats control the House and Democrats in the White House, you still have conflict.

There's never a time where it's just Kumbaya." A Democratic who worked on the Hill in

the 1990s agreed: "Any time the White House steps in and wants to do something, there's

a bit of friction there," even with the President's fellow partisans in the House.[854]

According to those interviewed for this dissertation, covering three decades of

Capitol Hill life, the White House was always seen as the dominant voice in the

competition for coverage. In the 1980s, when there was more coverage from the print

media, a former Michel aide noted that "it was certainly President Reagan who had the

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[853] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.
[854] Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012.

biggest bully pulpit."[855] The White House has "the bully pulpit. There's no question about it," echoed another GOP staffer from the 1990s.[856] A Democrat, who worked for Pelosi a decade later, endorsed a similar sentiment. "The president was George Bush and he had the megaphone," the House communicator explained. "People report everything just by virtue of him being the President. It was twice the work, twice the challenge, getting [Pelosi's messages] to reporters."[857]

When House leaders – in the majority or the minority – were of the same party as the president, they would typically try to coordinate a messaging strategy with the White House in advance. By doing so, they hoped to address their own imperative to provide national messaging while still working with the voice that was largest on the stage. Sometimes, according to former leadership staff, this coordination was as simple as a weekly phone call between House caucus leadership communicators and White House communications staff. Other times, it would involve House leadership visits to the White House. For Michel and other GOPers in the 1980s, those trips up Pennsylvania Avenue were "a bit of a day in the sun because, even though we were in the minority, we got attention."[858] Being in the meeting allowed House leaders to make suggestions about what kind of messaging would come from the President's office and thereby protect vulnerable members and maximize the electoral chances of others in the upcoming elections. Republican conference leaders in the 1980s "got to say to the President, 'don't

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[855] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.
[856] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012.
[857] Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012.
[858] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.

talk so much about this, and talk about this. It's going to help the guys out.' They were able to have those kinds of conversations."[859]

Despite what might have been the best of intentions, keeping everyone on the same page was often difficult. For example, message coordination often involved setting up a schedule on what issues would be focused over the course of several weeks. Frequently, news events would knock House leaders off their planned course. A "theme week" effort by the majority GOP in 2006 was quickly nixed by leadership.[860] Kevin Madden, spokesman for Majority Leader John Boehner, suggested the ill-fated two week effort was "by-and-large….successful," but he added that, "rather than pigeonholing ourselves anymore…. We'll continue to sketch out our priorities as we move through the legislative year."[861] One of the problems was that "it was almost impossible" to get in a politics story when the White House was talking, regardless of the advanced coordination with fellow partisans in the House minority, concluded a Democrat who worked for the House minority during the Clinton era.[862] As an alternative to coordination, he explained that House Democrats would occasionally try what might best be described as "coattail messaging," assuming that a good way to get covered in the minority was simply to talk about whatever the White House was talking about, even if you didn't know about it beforehand. However, this too proved frustrating. We tried, said the Democratic aide,

> "….to take advantage of things that were going on at the White House and that the President was doing, to try to amplify it and, on the Hill, get into the story. It wasn't that successful. It usually was not a big enough story…. to include the

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[859] Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012.
[860] Jeff Dufour, "Boehner tolls bell for 'theme weeks,'" *The Hill*, June 29, 2006.
[861] Ibid.
[862] Democratic staffer, July 31, 2012.

Hill. They included the other side, of course, but there was never anything from the cheering section."[863]

Other times, there simply was neither coordination nor coattail riding, often leaving House leaders scrambling to react in a unified way with the leader of their own party. A Democratic leadership aide who worked in the House majority during the early years of the Clinton presidency explained: "A president comes into office with basically a presidential agenda. Sometimes that supports a Democratic legislative agenda. Sometimes it does not."[864] He cited Clinton's first public press conference after his 1992 victory during which the President-elect restated his commitment to repeal the ban on gays and lesbians from serving openly in the United States military.[865] "This was not, from a congressional point of view, an issue that [House leaders] wanted to have front and center," the staffer recalled. "Nonetheless, when the president rolled it out there, it was going to become front and center."[866] Another example he cited was the assault weapons ban that was included in the omnibus crime bill later that year. Congressional leaders argued unsuccessfully with the White House that it the provision should be considered as a free-standing bill, which would have made it much easier to rally support for the remaining parts of the anti-crime legislation and – more importantly – allowed Democrats in vulnerable districts to vote "no" on the assault weapons ban but "yea" on the larger bill.[867] It was the view of this aide that by agreeing to Clinton's political agenda and including the ban in the overall legislation produced a massive negative reaction from the National Rifle Association (NRA) and other supporters of a broad

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[863] Democratic staffer, July 31, 2012.
[864] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.
[865] Adam Nagourney, "Clinton's agenda overshadowed; Off guard on gays in the military," *USA Today*, November 18, 1992.
[866] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.
[867] Ann Devroy and Kenneth J. Cooper, "Clinton Opens Fight to Save Crime Bill; House Democrats Split on Strategy," *Washington Post*, August 13, 1994.

interpretation of the 2nd amendment. Unable or unwilling to vote no on a popular bill, despite the gun ban provision, many incumbent Democrats, including Speaker Foley, lost their bid for re-election in 1994, and thus the party's four-decade majority status in the House.[868]

As previously mentioned, coordinating a message over time was already challenging for House caucus leaders, as the vagaries of the legislative and political calendar often interfered whatever plans were designed by staff. Attempting to further coordinate such messages with the White House – controlled by your party, but often responsive to very different political calculations – made it that much more difficult. On the Republican side, Gingrich seldom held back from offering his views on what the George H.W. Bush administration should be doing, even when he was in leadership. There seemed to be little fear in revealing intra-party divisions for the Georgian. "Newt was trying to coordinate" with his fellow Republicans in the White House, explained a former staffer, "but he was trying to get them to coordinate to do what *he* wanted them to do." [Emphasis added][869]

Democratic leadership staff who worked during the first two years of the Obama presidency of 2009 and 2010 expanded the use of coattail riding to serve as an argument for party unity in the House. During the contentious debate over national health care legislation, both Obama and the Democratic majority leadership emphasized the inescapability for members in swing districts, often described as moderate or conservative Democrats, from the partisan label. Pelosi, according to a senior aide, told caucus members that, though they might be upset with the legislation or the President, in

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[868] Kenneth J. Cooper, "Gun Control Backers Are Tuesday's Targets; NRA Shelling Out Big Bucks Across U.S.," *Washington Post*, November 7, 1994.
[869] Republican staffer B, July 30, 2012.

the end, Obama "is our guy, and you are a Democrat, and [Republicans] are going to tar you with him whether you vote for [the ACA] or not…. So you might as well vote for [the bill] to get the benefit if it, rather than opposing it."[870]

This anecdote reveals a striking transformation in the relationship between communications and House members since the early 1980s. The assumption, at the highest levels of leadership, was that national messaging was now so powerful and pervasive, that one's "home style" mattered little. While Sinclair concluded in 1983 that "the leadership's ability to influence the reelection chances of its members, although not negligible, is usually marginal," everything had changed 25 years later.[871] The fight over control of the House of Representatives was both localized to the specifics of each district's politics and the quality of the candidates, and nationalized, in which the national parties – and increasingly national interest groups – promoted broader themes backed by tens of millions of dollars in campaign spending. This development in the nation's politics would seemingly reinforce the drive of House caucus leaders on both sides of the aisle to further emphasize their own efforts in national messaging.

As other scholars have noted, presidents frustrated with congressional inaction have increasingly "gone public" to rally support among the electorate.[872] Such a strategy seeks to capitalize on the president's ability to focus media attention on him and thereby rally support for his agenda. Of course, the mere ability to "go public" doesn't make the argument itself more effective, and therefore doesn't necessarily change the communications perspective of the congressional leaders. House caucus leadership,

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[870] Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012.
[871] Sinclair, *Majority Leadership*, 1983, 24.
[872] Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies in Presidential Leadership*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2006).

according to one former Republican aide from the late 1990s, understand when the

president has a losing hand and therefore can respond – even in unified government –

with intransigence in the face of prolonged presidential public outreach. The example

this staffer offered was President George W. Bush's efforts, fresh off his solid re-election

victory in 2004, to reform the Social Security system.[873] The House majority

Republicans had absolutely no interest in such an effort, which they considered political

foolish, given that senior citizens were their "weak center of gravity;" that is, a large

national constituency with whom they believed they were most susceptible to effective

attacks by Democrats.[874] In the end, Bush's efforts to shape the policymaking landscape

through his own national communications did little to change the minds of congressional

leaders, who remained far more concerned with protecting their majority status than with

the potential for a policy victory.

The competition for coverage between House caucus leaders and the White House

is, of course, different when the President was the opposite party. A Foley staffer argued

that, "it would be a mistake to assume that working with a president of the other party is a

totally dark landscape when in fact there were times when that was an advantage rather

than a disadvantage."[875] During periods of unified government, a party arguing among

itself might not derail the passage of new legislation, but the appearance of a lack of

internal cohesion would be considered embarrassing, reflecting poorly on the overall

party brand. Further, it provided the party out-of-power more incentive to rail against the

entire process, and to harshly criticize whatever agreement is eventually made. This

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[873] Mike Allen, "Confident Bush Vows to Move Aggressively; Second-Term Agenda Includes Social Security, Tax Code," *Washington Post*, November 5, 2004.
[874] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.
[875] Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012.

sentiment falls in line with recent scholarship on partisan communications in the federal government. Groeling's conclusion was "institutional power often begets communication weakness,"[876] and it would seem that senior communicators had the same idea from their perch on Capitol Hill. For example, House Democrats, who fought with President George H.W. Bush over taxes and spending found that far easier to handle – from a communications perspective – than the challenges presented when Democrat Bill Clinton pushed for the repeal of the gays/lesbians in the military and the creation of a ban on assault weapons. Even if Democratic House leaders lost the battle to Bush, the Republican president would still prove to be a good foil for campaign messaging. Arguing with your own party's president rarely offered positive communications outcomes, if ever.

With no need to coordinate a message with a White House of a different party, House leaders of the opposite party still faced presidential competition to be covered, but they were freer to communicate strategically. Sometimes this involved coordination with fellow partisans in the Senate, while other times, according a House GOP communicator whose leadership was up against the Clinton White House, "it was just a matter of introducing the right bill at the right time with a splash. Sometimes, it was the PR stunt that went along with it. So every once in a while, we could set the tone."[877] In many circumstances, the House leadership simply reacted to the agenda set by the White House and "then it kind of became that back and forth over who said it more clearly, who had the better event, who had the better picture to make their point, who had the more compelling family at their event to explain food stamps, who had all those type of

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[876] Groeling, 2010, 95.
[877] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012.

things."[878] Another Republican communicator, who had to face Barack Obama in the

beginning of his term, near the height of his popularity, was happy to let the new

administration set the news agenda, as the House GOP leadership team "was not afraid to

aggressively contrast with this 70% [approval] president."[879]

The deference to the White House of the opposite party and its ability to drive

messaging in the media because it has "the dominant microphone,"[880] was perhaps only

seriously challenged in the immediate aftermath of the Republican takeover in the 1994

elections. The sheer novelty of GOP majority leadership, after four decades of minority

status, helped produce large amounts of press coverage and allowed Gingrich and his

allies to present themselves as a co-equal branch of government, rather than one that was

subservient to the presidency. It was a unique set of circumstances, explained a Gingrich

staffer from the era.[881]

> "Newt, all of a sudden, is the face of the new Republican majority. The stories
> were fun then about how Newt got the keys to offices in the Capital he never
> knew. He didn't know 'what was behind the door?' kind of a thing. There was
> this huge interest in, who are these Republicans? Who is Newt? How are they
> going to lead? How are they going to govern? Bill Clinton was just two years
> into his term. The country had rejected health care. They've now elected
> Republicans into the majority. It was so all-consuming for a while there. The
> nation was wondering who these people were."

Cable news shows, the aide recalled, for the first time, put the White House press

secretary and the speaker's communications director on a split-screen, thereby literally

and symbolically making the two positions equal in stature. "Whatever the executive

branch had, we had," said a former communications staffer for Armey. "They had Mike

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[878] Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012.
[879] Republican staffer, July 23, 2012.
[880] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.
[881] Republican staffer, July 27, 2012.

McCurry. We had Tony Blankley or Ed Gillespie,[882] and they were really able to deal with the media at that same level."[883] Another GOP communicator who worked for the new majority leadership, added:

> "It was a big transition for them because you go from being the Minority, where everyone ignored you, and nobody but your local paper ever wrote anything you said, to suddenly being a majority, and it's this megaphone. The national media was so fascinated with them, especially in 1995/1996. It was, 'Who are these people?' It had never happened. There's never been a Republican majority…. These guys were those kind of characters who went around and threw bombs on the House floor, but nobody really cared because they were in the minority."[884]

Despite the surge in media attention, the novelty of a House Republican majority seemed to wear off after a few years and this led some GOP communicators who were facing Clinton in his second term to reason again that it was pointless to try and compete for coverage at all. For them, in the end, the fundamentals remained. It is a case of "one microphone versus 435. It's easy to have message clarity at the White House."[885] "I think you have to set realistic expectations," suggested a former Gingrich staffer, "for how much your leadership will be in the story when you are competing with a White House controlled by the other party. The best thing to do is to try an eliminate mistakes as best you can."[886]

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Understanding and appreciating the dynamics of House caucus leadership communications efforts requires that scholars go beyond examining the processes

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[882] Ed Gillespie was an aide to Majority Leader Rep. Dick Armey (TX) and served as his Communications Director for a period of time.
[883] Republican staffer, August 2, 2012.
[884] Republican staffer, July 26, 2012.
[885] Republican staffer, August 16, 2012.
[886] Republican staffer A, July 30, 2012.

involved with generating, disseminating, and evaluating messages. Such a study

necessitates the recognition that these efforts do not occur in an isolated setting, but

rather in an ever-changing competitive environment. The competition for coverage takes

place on both an internal and external stage. Internally within the chamber, House caucus

leaders have often been rivals themselves and while this dissertation measures their

coverage as a collective body, it is not uncommon that they think of themselves as uneasy

partners, often angling for a better political position among each other and within the

party at large. Sometimes, the top House leaders also will face competition from the

ranks of their own fellow partisans who are not defined caucus leaders. Building off the

Gingrich-led Conservative Opportunity Society model from the 1980s, today there are

other sub-groups within the House – such as the Republican Study Committee (RSC), a

self-described "conservative caucus of House Republicans – that operate with their own

messaging agenda and seek to duplicate the communications capabilities of the caucus

leadership themselves.[887]

Then, of course, House caucus leaders face competition for coverage from their

counterparts across the aisle. It is worth and additional irony of leadership in

congressional communications: Despite clear evidence and widespread recognition by

House communicators that majority leadership would receive the bulk of the press

coverage, they still respond to critiques from the Minority as if they were on equal

footing, acting as if there was a competitive media environment. One long-range

objective of your House leadership – achieving majority status – has obviously already

been achieved, but given that position of power, Hill communicators in the majority

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[887] One former Armey aide described the RSC this way: "They have infrastructure and staff designations and overt strategies that are designed to [say], 'Leadership does this. We do the same kind of thing but we may have a different take on the issue.'" Republican staffer, August 2, 2012.

remained skeptical about their competitive advantages with the press and often acted as if they didn't exist.

Further, majority status made effective messaging much tougher because one was obligated to speak about a slow-moving legislative agenda. This is newsworthy and important information to be sure, but it also lacks the excitement of unrestrained messaging that was possible when one stood in the minority. This seems to be another irony of congressional leadership communications: When one is in the majority, the obligations of governing mean that your communications are much less exciting to the press, less engaging for the electorate, and less salient in the pursuit of Stage 2 messaging goals.

Those interviewed for this dissertation overwhelmingly viewed the external competition for coverage as largely being with the White House, and not with the Senate. The ability of the President to command media attention produced a variety of challenges for House caucus leaders seeking coverage. In a contest between one voice and many, the singular microphone almost always won. This competition with the White House was affected by the House leaders' position; namely, whether or not they were in the majority and whether or not they shared partisan affiliation with the President. If only for a fleeting moment, the Republican takeover of 1994 created a dynamic during which the GOP House leadership and the Democratic White House were perceived to be on somewhat equal footing. However, as the novelty of a Republican majority wore off, the power of the White House communications operation was re-asserted, and the President returned to his perch as the dominant messenger within the competitive media landscape among Washington, DC power centers.

Recognizing these dynamics may allow House caucus leaders, as well as students of Congress and the media, to set realistic goals for what kind of coverage might be expected given the alignment of power in Washington.   Such goals would then help one assess the significant communications efforts that are being made, which would in turn allow leaders to make better data-driven strategic communications decisions. Appreciating the interplay that goes on in the competition for coverage is important because the messaging efforts of House caucus leaders have increased dramatically between 1981 and 2010. Making such efforts more efficient would therefore have ripple effects on everything that House caucus leaders do.

CHAPTER 10

**MEASURING THE EFFECTIVENESS
OF HOUSE CAUCUS LEADERS' MEDIA OUTREACH**

<u>Introduction</u>

Between 1981 and 2010, the core leaders in the House of Representatives, on both sides of the aisle, dramatically increased their efforts to generate positive media coverage of their respective caucuses. We have gone from a time when Chris Matthews was the solitary outspoken press aide to Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, one of a handful in that position among members of Congress, to press secretaries being ubiquitous in the House and Speaker Nancy Pelosi having no less than six full-time staff to handle press relations.

This dissertation is an attempt to trace the history and context of this development, and to assess the results of these efforts. In this chapter, I will review that assessment in an effort to answer these fundamental questions: Under what conditions was the coverage of the top House leadership affected? And if it was affected, how so? Using quantitative analysis, I will test different variables for their correlation with media coverage of House caucus leaders. I hope to establish a clearer understanding of when majority and minority leaders will see better or worse coverage. My qualitative analysis established that such assessments were rarely done by the leadership staff members, and when it was done, the process was cursory and haphazard. The findings provided is this chapter will form the basis for new considerations of the field's understanding about the House leadership's efforts.

To review what was elaborated on in Chapter 3, this quantitative analysis is based on a review of 3,096 coded news articles that appeared in either the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times* between 1981 and 2010. I first present a contextual independent variable – the distinction between majority and minority leaders – and then assess 11 different conditions that might affect coverage, using the majority/minority distinction as an additional layer of analysis.

Concept Measurement

Several scholars have examined levels of media coverage generated by Congress. Defining what constitutes media coverage, however, presents its own challenges. Variations over what sources to use, the timing of the data collection and the data to be counted abound. Looking for "mentions" of legislators is among the more popular data measurements. However, there are a variety of alternative measurements to consider – each of which can be reasonably considered an appropriate measurement of press coverage. As previously noted, this dissertation seeks to produce a more robust assessment by using five separate measures as dependent variables:[888]

Mentions – Was a leader's name, or House leadership as a group, mentioned?

Messages – Did a leader, or House leadership as a group, deliver a message?

Message Paragraphs – How many paragraphs include a message from a leader or leaders?

Location of First Message Paragraph – Exact – In what number paragraph does the first message appear?

Tone – What is the tone of the article towards each party?

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[888] A more detailed description of these variables can be found in Chapter 3.

<u>The Majority / Minority Distinction</u>

Not all congressional leaders are the same. One major distinction is between those House leaders in the majority and those in the minority. My quantitative analysis begins its examination with this distinction, and then employs it as a layer for assessment when considering the impact of various conditions on coverage.

For many years, scholars conflated majority and minority leaders in the House, when, in fact, they can each have very different objectives, motivations and strategies in pursuit of those objectives. Lumping them together resulted in the House minority being an understudied and underappreciated part of political science. It is not hard to understand why this occurred. For much of the latter part of the 20th century, there was little doubt about who was in control of the House of Representatives, and who was expected to be in control following the next election. Democratic leadership, in effect, defined the House leadership because its hegemony that lasted from 1946 through 1994, nearly five decades that, at the time, seemed unending. Further, the minority party in the House didn't matter to scholars because its members weren't responsible for anything and had the most marginal of influence on congressional action. Unlike the smaller Senate, the sheer size of the House diminished an individual member's ability to effect change. More importantly, while the minority party in the Senate had a filibuster with which to leverage influence, the House minority party was devoid of any such ability, thereby making membership in such a caucus one of the least, if not *the* least, powerful elected positions in Washington.

These factors contributed to a general dearth of scholarship on the House minority party. Indeed, studies of congressional leadership rarely broke down the differences

between the two. Observers of Congress focused instead on the majority and typically generalized that the same rules, assumptions, and findings were attributable to the minority's leadership – if they were acknowledged at all.

All of this came about despite some very significant differences between the majority and the minority leadership teams. The majority leadership in the House is expected to play its role of governing the nation by passing laws, managing the chamber and the flow of legislation, providing oversight, organizing committee meetings, allocating internal resources, as well as seeking to maintain its majority status. Of these, only the last item is similar for the minority: its leaders seek to win the majority for themselves, just as the majority aims to protect its status. But the minority party has no such obligation to either govern the nation or manage the Congress.

This is not to say that the House GOP during the 1946 to 2004 period did not contribute to national governance. There were House Republican leaders, such as Rep. Robert Michel, who felt a civic duty to work with the majority towards the majority's goals, despite having their own particular political agenda and objectives. This was done even though Michel's GOP caucus had, as outlined above, different objectives. An additional motivation for minority House caucus leaders to work with the majority is the universal desire to be re-elected. The pursuit of legislation is one way for a member to enhance his or her reelection prospects. Representatives in the minority will rationally do this while operating within the context of the formal and informal rules established by the majority party. In effect, the House majority was running the only game in town, and if you wanted to have any chance of making a difference, thereby having something to show the voters back home at election time, you had to play along. Such behavior

probably reinforced the attitude of many scholars that the House minority really didn't matter.

In the 1980s, however, the House began to see a rise in partisanship, perhaps best characterized by the ascendancy of Rep. Newt Gingrich as a force within the GOP. He would eventually be elected Minority Whip in 1989. Gingrich brought forth a new attitude for a powerful and vocal block within the House Republican minority. The "go along to get along" attitude of moderates like Michel was pushed aside for a more confrontational, strong conservative approach. By the early 1990s, the distinctions between majority and minority leadership became so pronounced that even those who remained ready to work with the majority found it a much more difficult because of internal caucus pressures.

Appreciating the difference in goals between majority and minority leadership is critical to understanding each side's approach towards garnering media coverage. The majority seeks to promote its agenda, its accomplishments, demonstrate party cohesiveness and the orderliness of House activity, so as to properly manage the government and build a record that can be presented in the next election. The minority leadership's press objectives are to undermine all of these things through media coverage of its actions and/or critiques of the majority leadership. Of course, the minority's ultimate goal on behalf of its membership is to establish the political conditions to become the majority. Election victories remain the primary focus for both the majority and the minority in the House.[889] But for the minority leaders, it takes on added significance because – unlike the majority – they have no other governing obligations.

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[889] These elections need not be only for the House, though, as previously stated, that is the first and foremost priority. House leaders on both sides of the aisle, in the majority and the minority, recognize the

While the House majority has to be responsible because it has to govern, the minority party has no such requirement and – freed as it is from those burdens – its leaders can be as colorful, hyperbolic and dramatic as it wants in reaching out to the media. Because of these differences between the majority and minority leadership in the House, it is important to distinguish between the two when considering the media coverage generated by House caucus leadership.

In my analysis, the assumption is that being in the majority is always better for generating press coverage. As described in Chapter 3, this dynamic reflects the power bias of the media; that is, their tendency to prefer to cover those who can most affect outcomes in Congress.[890] Therefore, I hypothesized that:

> *H5: Media coverage of House caucus leaders will be better for the majority than the minority.*

In the House, the media's decisions on who to cover are driven by its internal routines. These routines focus on the "who, what, when, where and why" resulting in much more coverage of those in Congress in positions of power. As the minority leadership in the House will typically have very little power to affect anything, the overwhelming amount of media coverage should focus on the majority leaders. These same routines often help ensure that that minority's perspective is presented in press

importance of having their respective party control the White House as well. Thus, the Democratic majority, following the blowout loss of presidential candidate Gov. Michael Dukakis in 1988, were less focused on maintaining what was seen as a safe majority status and much more concerned with winning the White House in 1992. Presidential elections became, in effect, proxy wars between the House majority and minority.

[890] Hess, 1986; Hess, 1991; Cook, 1989; Kuklinski and Sigelman, 1992; Harris, 1998; Arnold, 2004; Sellers, 2010.

coverage because controversial topics call for a response from "the other side," in accordance with media norms. The minority is not completely ignored, just largely ignored.

As a scholarly finding, media bias towards House majority leaders is not new. What this dissertation seeks to do is to ascertain under what conditions that power bias will be affected. The summation of findings below is an important first step in this analysis because it lays out an initial context for further inquiry.

In the basic counting of mentions among the randomly selected articles from 1981 through 2010, there is strong support for the hypothesis that the majority will be favored. (Table 10a) Of the 3,096 articles, 77% (2,381) of the articles mentioned the majority leadership, and 42% (1,302) of the total mentioned the minority leaders. When one looks beyond mentions to use the inclusion of a "message paragraph" for the House majority leadership, the House minority leadership, or both, a similar trend emerges. Among the 2,988 articles in the dataset that have at least one message paragraph, 64%, or 1,927, include a message paragraph attributed to majority leadership. The House minority, as expected, received far less coverage: 1,061 stories, or 36% percent.

Table 10a
Mentions and Messages in Coverage of Majority and Minority House Leadership

	Stories with Mentions	Stories with Messages
House Majority Leadership	77% (2,381)	64% (1,927)
House Minority Leadership	42% (1,302)	36% (1,061)

Note: Frequencies in parentheses.
 Mentions N = 3,096. Messages N = 2,507. Because some articles included mentions of / message by both the House Majority and House Minority leadership, the total number of mentions and the total number of message do not add up to the actual number of stories.

Media coverage can include how many message paragraph either leadership team receive in the average article. The more message paragraphs, the better the coverage. Table 10b shows that the number of message paragraphs for the majority part over a 30-year period is 1.42. The mean for minority House leaders, over that same time period, is .69. The majority leadership averages just over twice the quantity of paragraphs with messages than does the minority.

Table 10b
Average Quantity of Message Paragraphs for House Leadership (Majority and Minority)

	Message Paragraphs for House <u>Majority</u> Leadership	Message Paragraphs for House <u>Minority</u> Leadership
Mean	1.42 (std. error .036)	.69 (std. error .026)

N = 3,096

In media coverage, it is not only the message that matters, but the placement of that message. This dissertation therefore looks at the location of the first message paragraph for both the majority and the minority. The lower the number of the paragraph, the closer the message is to the headline. The closer the message is to the headline, the better the coverage. Since readership is assumed to fall off after the first few paragraphs, it is considerably better to have your message included there, rather than buried deeper in the article. (Table 10c)

The mean location of the House majority leadership's first message paragraph is 8 paragraphs from the headline, while the mean location for the House minority leadership is, as expected, deeper in the story, about 10 paragraphs away from the headline.

Table 10c
Location of First Message Paragraph for Majority / Minority House Leadership

	Location of First Message Paragraph for House Majority Leadership (N = 1,928)	Location of First Message Paragraph for House Minority Leadership (N = 1,062)
Mean	8.17 (std. error .157)	9.79 (std. error .209)

The tone of the article towards the majority or minority party can add a new element into any kind of media coverage analysis. Lots of message paragraphs don't mean much if the tone is strongly negative to the recipient of the coverage. In this data set, Tone was assessed on a 5-point scale where 1=mostly negative and 5=mostly positive. (Table 10d)

Table 10d
Tone of Coverage Towards Majority / Minority Party

	Tone toward Majority party (2,728)	Tone towards Minority party (2,326)
Mostly negative	1.8% (55)	.8% (24)
Somewhat negative	19.7% (611)	12.6% (389)
Neutral / Mixed	37.6% (1,163)	41.1% (1,272)
Somewhat positive	23.7% (735)	16.8% (520)
Mostly positive	5.3% (164)	3.9% (121)
Mean	3.13 (Std. error .017)	3.14 (Std. error .016)

Note: Frequencies in parentheses.

The measurement of the tone of the articles towards the party of both the majority and minority are normally distributed over the 30-year period of my dissertation. However, the House majority's party tended to receive a bit more positive coverage (33%

"somewhat positive" or "mostly positive") than the party of the minority in the House

(28%).

Interestingly, while the majority received more positive coverage than the

minority, it also received more negative coverage: 24% vs. 18%. It would seem that once

you are in charge, there are bigger potential benefits in terms of positive media coverage,

while also more accountability and scrutiny, leading to increased negative coverage.

When comparing the mean tone of articles that mention House leadership over 30 years,

the tone of the coverage for the majority and the minority is virtually identical. The

majority leadership in the House receives more coverage, but it is not necessarily better

coverage.

The Conditions

As explained in Chapter 3, this dissertation looks at the impact on media coverage

for House majority and minority leaders under 11 different conditions. These

independent variables include:

1. Year (ranging from 1981 – 2010)

2. Election Year (ranging from a non-election year to an election year)

3. Margin of Seats Held by the Majority (ranging from 7 to 105)

4. Isolation (ranging from "most isolated", when the opposite party is in control

    of the House, the Senate and the White House to "least isolated", when one's

    party is in control of the House, the Senate and the White House.)

5. Party (ranging from Republicans to Democrats)

6. Economy (ranging from the story's focus not being about the economy to being about the economy)

7. Foreign Affairs (ranging from the story's focus not being about foreign affairs to being about foreign affairs)

8. Scandal (ranging from the story's focus not being about a congressional scandal to being about a congressional scandal)

9. Presidential Popularity (ranging from 30% to 73%)

10. Change in Economic Growth (ranging from -3.3% to 7.8%)

11. Unemployment (ranging from 4% to 9.7%)

<u>Summary of Correlational Findings</u>

The data produced by examining 11 independent variables against five dependent variables is a significant. To summarize these findings, I created Table 10e. While the 11 independent variables are listed specifically, along with their corresponding hypotheses, I chose to collapse the five dependent variables into three categories:

- <u>Quantity of Coverage</u> (existence of Mentions, Message Paragraph, and the quantity of Message Paragraphs),

- <u>Location of Coverage</u> (location of the first Message Paragraph) and the

- <u>Quality of Coverage</u> (Tone).

By doing this, I hope to reflect the essence of what each group was intended to measure. It should also make the material easier to digest. In each box, I graded the level of support for the relevant hypotheses using four designations:

Strong – indicating that there is statistically significant support for the hypothesis.

Mixed – indicating that there is some statistically significant support for the

hypothesis, but that some results make overall assessment inconclusive.

Alternative (Alt) – indicating that the results produced a different result that that

which was expected.

Little / No – indicating that there is limited or no statistically significant support

for the hypothesis, or that the effect itself is marginal.

Following an examination of these results, I will summarize and discuss the

multivariate analysis that was subsequently done.

Table 10e
Summary of Assessment of Correlations:
Types of Media Coverage of House Majority/Minority Leaders and Various Conditions

		Correlational Findings for House Majority Leaders				Correlational Findings for House Minority Leaders			
Condition	**Hypothesis Prediction**	**Quantity of Coverage**	**Location of Coverage**	**Quality of Coverage**		**Hypothesis Prediction**	**Quantity of Coverage**	**Location of Coverage**	**Quality of Coverage**
Year	H6a: Over time, majority leaders will see improved coverage.	Alt	Little / None	Alt		H6b: Over time, minority leaders will see worse coverage.	Alt	Strong	Alt
Election Year	H7a: In an election year, media coverage of the majority will be worse than in a non-election year.	Mixed	Strong	Little / None		H7b: In an election year, media coverage of the minority will be better than in a non-election year.	Mixed	Little / None	Little / None
Margin	H8: As the margin of seats between the two parties decreases, the media coverage for House leaders improves.	Alt	Little / None	Alt		H8: As the margin of seats between the two parties decreases, the media coverage for House leaders improves.	Alt	Strong	Strong

Isolation	H9a: As the majority becomes more isolated, its media coverage will be better.	Alt	Little / None	Strong	H9b: As the minority becomes more isolated, its media coverage will be better.	Alt	Little / None	Alt
Party	H10: Coverage of House leaders will be better for Democrats than Republicans.	Alt	Little / None	Strong	H10: Coverage of House leaders will be better for Democrats than Republicans.	Alt	Little / None	Strong
Economy	H11: When the story is about the economy, media coverage will be better for Democratic leaders than Republican leaders.	Alt	Little / None	Mixed	H11: When the story is about the economy, media coverage will be better for Democratic leaders than Republican leaders.	Mixed	Little / None	Little / None
Foreign Affairs	H12: When the story is about foreign affairs, media coverage will be better for Democratic leaders than Republican leaders.	Little / None	Little / None	Mixed	H12: When the story is about foreign affairs, media coverage will be better for Democratic leaders than Republican leaders.	Little / None	Little / None	Little / None
Scandal	H13: When the story is about a congressional scandal, media coverage will be better for the non-scandal party than the scandal party.	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	H13: When the story is about a congressional scandal, media coverage will be better for the non-scandal party than the scandal party.	Little / None	Little / None	Little / None
Presidential Popularity	H14: As the President's popularity, media coverage of the House leaders in the President's party will improve.	Mixed	Little / None	Strong	H14: As the President's popularity, media coverage of the House leaders in the President's party will improve.	Mixed	Little / None	Mixed

Economic Growth	H15a: As the economy grows, media coverage of majority leadership will improve.	Strong	Little / None	Mixed		H15b: As the economy grows, media coverage of minority leadership will worsen.	Strong	Little / None	Mixed
Unemployment	H16a: As unemployment increases, media coverage of majority leadership will worsen.	Strong	Little / None	Alt		H16b: As unemployment increases, media coverage of minority leadership will improve.	Strong	Little / None	Alt

Bivariate Correlations – Condition: Year

In 1981, Chris Matthews was serving as the press secretary for Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill. By many accounts, Matthews redefined the position and forever changed the way House leaders handled press relations. At the time, relatively few members of Congress even had press secretaries. Those that did largely had these staffers handling basic inquiries, sending out press releases, and talking to the local district political reporters. In contrast, Matthews became widely known for aggressively pushing the political perspective of his boss into the national media outlets. He was not a traditional press secretary, but an aggressive spokesman and advocate who would be engage reporters, editors and news producers on a completely different level than anyone had done before.

Thirty-years later, the congressional press secretary position was not only ubiquitous in Washington, DC, but members, especially leaders, were investing significantly more resources into their press operations.

Because the passage of time saw House caucus leaders devote many more resources – time, effort, staff, etc. – towards their press operations than they did in 1981, there should

be more coverage over this time frame, across the board, for both the majority and minority. Leaders would expect a return on their larger investment.

In addition, the passage of time saw two other significant developments that may shape predictions of coverage:

(1)   The rise in partisanship. Over the three-decade time period covered in this dissertation, there has been an increase in the partisan rancor within the House of Representatives. Matthews himself wrote a best-seller history book extolling the virtues of politics in the 1980s when liberals like his boss, Speaker O'Neill, and conservative Republicans like President Ronald Reagan would be able to reason together despite ideological differences, and lamenting the loss of those working relationships in the more recent congressional era.[891] The rise in partisanship can be defined by the rise in party-line voting; that is, over this 30-year period, House Democrats and House Republicans became much more likely to vote with each other's parties than to cross the aisle on bills.[892]

In terms of garnering press coverage, the increase in partisanship strengthens the majority and hurts the minority leadership in the House of Representatives. Press coverage of the House typically follows those who have the power to affect outcomes. Thus, in the highly-structured House, the majority receives the overwhelming share of the coverage. Regardless of high-minded media notions of equal coverage to both sides, the quantity of press coverage – no matter how it is calculated – always favors the majority over the course of a given year. For the House minority to be covered beyond what is routine therefore requires forging coalitions with sub-sets of the majority caucus in order

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[891] Matthews, 2013.
[892] "CQ Roll Call's Vote Studies – 2013 In Review." http://media.cq.com/votestudies/ February 3, 2014. Accessed May 28, 2015.

to leverage some legitimate influence on House outcomes. In the early 1980s, we saw dramatic examples of this as the Republican majority, led by Rep. Robert Michel, maximized its opportunity for coverage through a coalition with conservative Democrats who also supported the Reagan agenda, especially on budget and tax cuts.

However, as noted above, the steady rise in partisanship meant the parties in the House were more disciplined in terms of voting. Therefore, over time, minority caucus leaders had fewer opportunities to find sub-sets of the majority with whom they could work to affect outcomes. With fewer opportunities to affect the outcome of legislative action, the minority has fewer opportunities to generate coverage over time. Thus, as partisanship has increased, so should the amount of coverage generated by the majority over the minority. This development over time was a countervailing force against the simultaneous heavier investment being made by minority House leadership in media outreach. In sum, while the heavier investment in media outreach by House caucus leaders should have increased the amount of coverage for both sides, the growth of party-line voting should widen the disparity in coverage between majority and minority leaders.

(2)   A more competitive media landscape. In 1981, national news coverage of Congress was dominated by the three major television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC), two daily newspapers (the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*) and two wire services (AP and UPI). Thirty-years later, the television universe is one with 500+ channels. *USA Today* and the *Wall Street Journal* are major players in the daily print world. UPI is out of business, but there are now a plethora of radio programs devoted to covering politics, along with countless e-zines, web sites and blogs. This kind of explosion in the news media breaks down barriers to coverage, but they do not eliminate

the role of the traditional media. From the House majority leadership's perspective, a broader media landscape should not fundamentally change their dominance in the coverage. While the minority leadership in the House might have some newfound ability to generate coverage with ideological/partisan outlets, the routines of reporters that favor the majority leadership over those from the minority will not go away simply because there are more avenues for coverage.

Furthermore, any effort to ignore traditional media outlets would lead to less coverage overall because of the major role played by such outlets in setting the top storylines for other media. If you aren't talking to the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, then you risk not being able to set the agenda for media coverage in the host of other outlets who take their cues on what to cover from those papers. Communication staffers working for caucus leadership on both sides of the aisle indicated that while they expanded their outreach efforts to handle the growing number of reporters, they never stopped pushing their messages with mainstream media.

*   *   *   *   *

Given these dramatic developments – the increase in dedicated resources, the rise in partisanship, and the more competitive media landscape – I expect that the House majority leadership should receive better coverage over time. I also expect that, despite its own investments in media outreach, the House minority leadership should see a decrease in coverage between 1981 and 2010. This is because the rising partisanship in the House reinforces the media's power bias and diminishes the minority leadership's opportunities for coverage. Even the expansion of media outlets doesn't change that dynamic. Indeed, it can actually reinforce it if minority leaders in the House choose to

ignore the traditional, mainstream media altogether. These expectations are expressed in two hypotheses:

H6a: Over time, there will be better coverage of House majority caucus leaders.

H6b: Over time, there will be worse coverage of House minority caucus leaders.

A summation of the most relevant correlational findings follows.

Table 10f offers a line graph of the two far right columns of Table 10g, a year-by-year breakdown of the percentage of mentions in the data. It shows that there is little support for this hypothesis. Coverage for both the majority and minority fluctuate over time. More interesting, it appears that coverage of each set of House leaders is quite sensitive to the other: An increase in one side's coverage seems to correspond starkly with a decrease in the other side's coverage. While this was not expected, it lends support to the political importance of House leaders being able to generate media coverage. Successfully garnering press attention not only allows one to promote key messages, but it typically is matched with less coverage of one's opponents' messages. In effect, when you get covered as a House leader, it's a double-win for your side.

The large divergence in 1995 reflects the switch in control of the House to the Republicans after nearly 50 years in the minority. The drama of this change seems to have dramatically reinforced the power bias dynamic, and trumped all other influences that would typically temper it. For the next four years, more than 90% of all media coverage involving House leadership mentioned the GOP majority somewhere in the article.

Table 10f
Percentage of Mentions for Majority and Minority House Leadership Over Time (1981 – 2010)
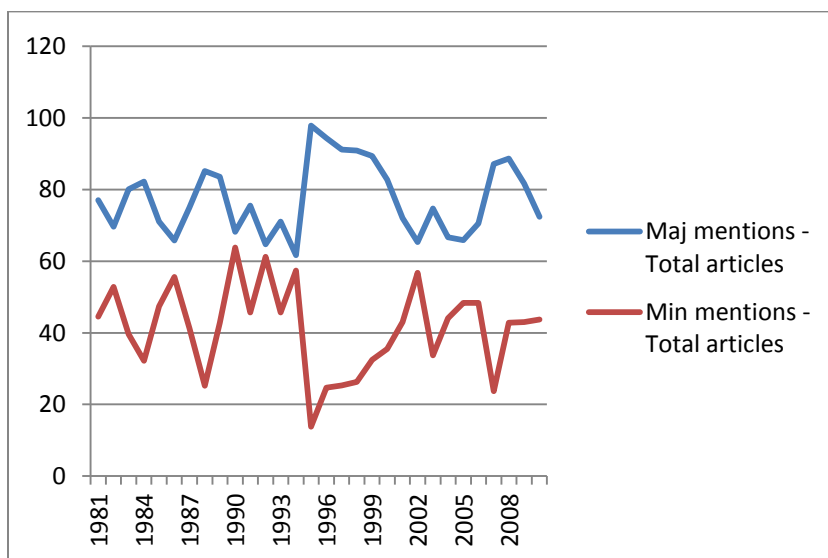
Table 10g
Majority and Minority House Leadership Mentions Over Time (1981 – 2010),
Including Articles that Mention Both

YEAR	% Maj Only	% Both	% Min Only	Maj mentions - Total % (% Maj Only + % Both)	Min mentions - Total % (% Min Only + % Both)
1981	55.6	21.4	23.1	77	44.5
1982	47.2	22.4	30.4	69.6	52.8
1983	60.3	19.8	19.8	80.1	39.6
1984	67.9	14.3	17.9	82.2	32.2
1985	52.5	18.6	28.8	71.1	47.4
1986	44.4	21.4	34.2	65.8	55.6
1987	58.7	16.3	25	75	41.3
1988	74.7	10.5	14.7	85.2	25.2
1989	57.1	26.5	16.3	83.6	42.8
1990	36.3	31.9	31.9	68.2	63.8
1991	54.4	21.1	24.6	75.5	45.7
1992	38.8	25.9	35.3	64.7	61.2
1993	54.2	16.9	28.8	71.1	45.7
1994	42.6	19.1	38.3	61.7	57.4
1995	86.2	11.7	2.1	97.9	13.8
1996	75.3	19.1	5.6	94.4	24.7
1997	74.7	16.5	8.8	91.2	25.3
1998	73.7	17.2	9.1	90.9	26.3
1999	69.5	19.9	12.6	89.4	32.5
2000	64.5	18.3	17.2	82.8	35.5
2001	57	15	28	72	43
2002	43.2	22.1	34.7	65.3	56.8
2003	66.3	8.4	25.3	74.7	33.7
2004	55.9	10.8	33.3	66.7	44.1
2005	51.5	14.4	34	65.9	48.4
2006	51.6	18.9	29.5	70.5	48.4
2007	76.3	10.8	12.9	87.1	23.7
2008	57.1	31.6	11.2	88.7	42.8
2009	57	24.7	18.3	81.7	43
2010	56.3	16.1	27.6	72.4	43.7

When it comes to measuring the effect of each passing year on the location of the

of House leaderships' first message paragraph, the real impact is for the minority. Over

time, the minority leadership in the House has seen its first message buried almost 10%

deeper into the story. (Chi-square sig. at the .044 level with a Pearson's R of .096 at a significance level of .002.) Despite the increase in dedicated resources towards media outreach by minority leaders, the overall impact of the passage of time has been poorer placement of its first message paragraph in a given article, as hypothesized.

There is a correlation between the tone towards the majority party in the House and the passage of time (chi-square=368.213, df=116, p<.001). However, while my hypothesis predicted an improved tone for the majority party, the opposite was found. The tone of a given article actually worsened by 9% for the majority party over time (Tau-c is -.089, p<.001 sig. level). The opposite was true of the minority party, again contradicting my hypothesis. Rather than seeing worse tone in the coverage, House minority leaders saw a slight improvement (chi-square=255.555, df=145, p<.001, Tau-c is .046 at a .002 sig. level.) over the 30-year period.

These findings may result from the media becoming more cynical towards politics and Congress between 1981 and 2010. The political alternative – i.e., the minority party in the House – may see an uptick in the tone of its coverage because reporters are reflecting displeasure with the outcomes provided (or not provided) by the majority.

Bivariate Correlations – Condition: Election Year

Within each two-year congressional term, the dynamics of media coverage can change, especially given that one year is an election year. It has been widely understood that the media covering Congress looks for engaging stories to report. A congressional election is an entire period of such storylines, including campaign process and maneuvering, the electoral horse race (who's up? who's down?), partisan conflict, and legislative gridlock designed to influence voters or stall action until after November, etc.

For the enterprising reporter, it is a period in the political calendar ripe for coverage that can generate readership.

This dissertation's seventh hypothesis is broken down between expectations for the majority and the minority House leadership:

H7a: Media coverage of House caucus leaders in the majority will be worse in election years than non-election years.

H7b: Media coverage of House caucus leaders in the minority will be better in election years than non-election years.

How the media reports on congressional leadership should be fundamentally different in an election year than non-election years, where the focus remains on the routine business of the House. While the power bias predicts that the majority leaders in the House will dominate press coverage because they have the most opportunity to affect outcomes, the minority can be expected to receive improved coverage in an election year. The majority should receive less coverage, though it should nonetheless – by virtue of the power bias – receive a higher quantity of coverage than the minority. In an election year, the media would want to promote interest in the competition between the two parties and that requires an adjustment in how it covers both sides.

In my initial bivariate analysis, there appears to be support for this kind of relationship. (Table 10h)

Articles that mentioned House majority leaders decrease slightly in election years (79% to 75%), while this number increases for House minority leaders rather significantly (39% to 46%). Total coverage of the majority, as measured by the inclusion

of a majority message paragraph, tends to drop a bit in an election year, from 80% to

74%. Coverage of minority House leaders, increased to 45% from 39% of the articles.

Perhaps most interestingly, in an election year, articles that contain minority leadership

paragraphs exclusively jump to 26% from 21% in an election year. Clearly, election year

coverage helps minority House leadership, but not the majority leaders.

Table 10h
Inclusion of Mentions and Messages for Majority / Minority House Caucus Leaders
Broken Down by Election Year and Non-Election Year

	Articles that Mention House Caucus Leadership (3,096)		Articles with a Message Paragraph involving House Caucus Leadership (2,507)	
	Non-Election Year	Election Year	Non-Election Year	Election Year
Majority only	61.3% (954)	54.5% (840)	60.8% (759)	54.6% (687)
Both Majority and Minority	17.7% (275)	20.3% (312)	18.7% (234)	19.6% (247)
Minority only	21.0% (327)	25.2% (388)	20.5% (256)	25.8% (324)
Total Majority only	79.0% (1229)	74.8% (1152)	79.5% (993)	74.2% (934)
Total Minority only	38.7% (602)	45.5% (700)	39.2% (490)	45.4% (571)

Note: Frequencies in parentheses.
For inclusion of a Mention, Chi-square=.001 sig., Tau-c= .070 p<.001
For inclusion of a Message Paragraphs, Chi-square= .003 sig., Tau-c =.070 p=.001

These percentages are statistically significant for both categories. Chi-square is

.001 for articles that mention House caucus leaders and .003 when those leaders have at

least one message in the story. Tau-c is .070 for both, indicating that there is a 7% shift

in the amount of coverage towards the minority leadership in an election year.

My hypothesis also predicts that in an election year, the House minority

leadership's first message paragraph should be a lower number; that is, place higher in

the story, while the majority's first message paragraph should be deeper in the story,

expressed by a high number. For the House majority, this variable ranged from 1 to 72 (N=1,828). For the minority leadership in the House, N=1,062 and the range is from 1 to 41.

A comparison of the mean paragraph location of each leadership's first message shows that House <u>majority</u> leaders see their first message shift from the 7th paragraph to the 9th paragraph in an election year, in line with my hypothesis. (T-score = -4.045, p = <.001) The mean location of the first message paragraph for <u>minority</u> leaders, however, was not significant.

Bivariate Correlations – Condition: Margin

Assuming media coverage is driven by the power bias, then coverage should be affected when the majority is in a stronger or weaker position, relative to the minority. One way to measure this position is to examine the margin of seats controlled by the majority over the minority in the House. During the 15 congressional terms covered in this dissertation, the House majority's margin over the House minority ranged from 7 to 105.

The level of the margin affects the ability of the majority leadership to control activity in the House. A smaller margin requires much more party discipline from the majority caucus. Its leaders cannot afford to have too many of their members straying from the party line. Anything more than a handful of renegades and the majority loses its working control of the House. In these cases, I expect that both majority and minority leaders will receive more press attention because both can have an influence on what happens.

When the majority's margin is larger, one could expect that House minority leaders would have more opportunities to create coalitions with sub-sets of the majority party. Such coalitions would in turn give the minority leadership more power to influence over what happens in the House, thus generating more coverage. However, I would argue that the majority leadership, as its margin grows, is actually in a better position to secure press coverage because can afford a larger number of free agents without losing control of the floor. Cross-party coalition building may be more likely when the majority's margin is significant, but the result is likely to be less influence for the minority, not more.

For House majority leadership, the larger margin will not upend the power bias – they should still see more coverage than the minority party's leadership – but it will make House activity less exciting and less newsworthy. Therefore, even as the margin increases, coverage the Majority should be less than when the margin is smaller.

As a result, my hypothesis is:

H8: *Media coverage of House caucus leaders will be better when the margin of seats between the Majority and the Minority is small.*

The bivariate data offers evidence that is contrary to my expected result. For both articles that included the mention of a House caucus leader and those that included a message paragraph, I found that the numbers fluctuate. The expected increase in majority mentions as the margin of the majority rises from 7 to 105 over a thirty-year period does not exist.

With mentions, chi-square=192.145, df=28, p<.001 and tau-c is .075, p<.001.

With Messages, chi-square=145.580, df=28, p<.001 and Spearman Correlation is .062, p<.002. Alternative explanations of coverage may include the personalities among House leaders, the party in control of the White House, and the issues involved in the congressional debates of the day.

The quantity of message paragraphs for the <u>majority</u> House leadership is not correlated to the majority's margin in the House at a statistically significant level. There is a significant correlation for <u>minority</u> House leadership (chi-square=348.462, df=252, p<.001 and Spearman Correlation at .068, p<.001). (Table 10i)

Table 10i
Mentions and Message Paragraphs Inclusion for House Leadership Under Margin Condition

Mentions (3,096)	Message Paragraphs (2,507)	Quantity of Message Paragraphs (2,507)	
		Majority House Leaders	**Minority House Leaders**
Tau-c = .075 p<.001	Spearman Correlation = .062 p<.002	No statistical correlation	Spearman Correlation = .068 p<.001
chi-square=192.145, df=28, p<.001	chi-square=145.580, df=28, p<.001		chi-square=348.462, df=252, p<.001

Note: Frequencies in parentheses

Table 10j offers a clearer graphical expression of the changes in Mentions over time. The numbers used in this line graph are reflected in the far right columns of Table 10j1.

Table 10j
Percentage of Articles that Mention House Caucus Leaders at Varying Levels of Majority Margin
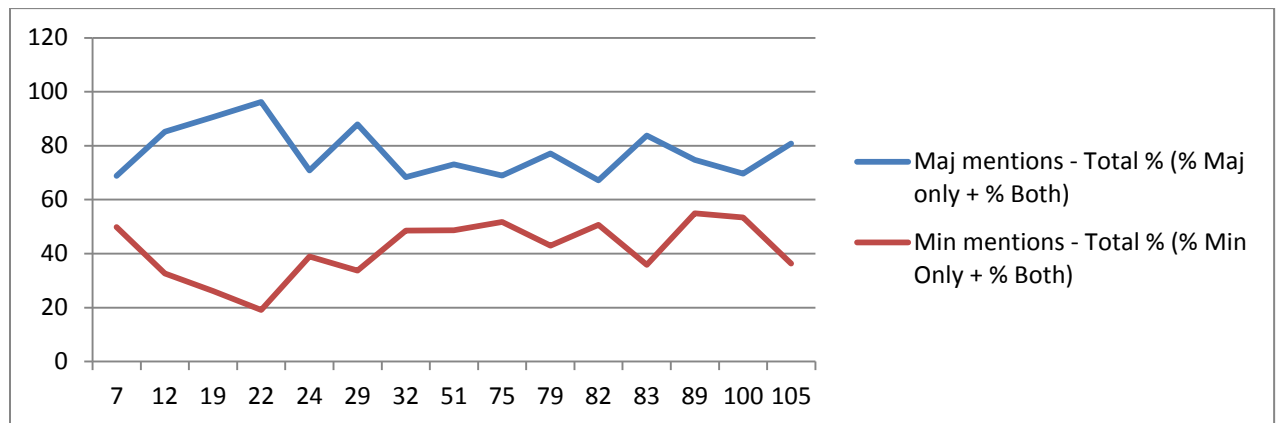
Table 10j1
Percentage of Articles that Mention House Caucus Leaders at Various Levels of Majority Margin,
Including Articles that Mention Both

Majority Margin	% Maj Only	% Both	% Min Only	Maj mentions - Total %	Min mentions - Total %
				(% Maj only + % Both)	(% Min Only + % Both)
7	50.3	18.5	31.3	68.8	49.8
12	66.7	18.5	14.08	85.2	32.58
19	74	16.7	9.4	90.7	26.1
22	80.9	15.3	3.8	96.2	19.1
24	61.2	9.6	29.3	70.8	38.9
29	66.3	21.6	12.1	87.9	33.7
32	51.6	16.7	31.8	68.3	48.5
51	51.3	21.8	26.9	73.1	48.7
75	48.3	20.6	31.1	68.9	51.7
79	57	20.1	22.9	77.1	43
82	49.3	17.8	32.9	67.1	50.7
83	67.2	16.6	19.2	83.8	35.8
89	45.1	29.6	25.3	74.7	54.9
100	46.6	23.1	30.3	69.7	53.4
105	63.7	17.1	19.2	80.8	36.3

The relationship between the location of the first <u>majority</u>'s message paragraph and the size of the majority's margin over the minority in the House is statistically significant (chi-square =.022 sig.), however one cannot determine the strength and direction of this relationship because tau-c is not significant.

The tone[893] of the article towards the majority or minority party may change as the margin between the two changes. After all, the power of the majority to drive the House's activity should be significant when its majority is larger. With the stronger ability to enact its agenda, the House majority would be seen as reflecting the will of the American people, and demonstrating leadership as it moves forward. Thus, the tone of the articles should be more favorable for the majority as its margin increases.

The minority, as I have hypothesized, should receive poorer coverage when the margin between it and the majority is greater. Therefore, I would expect to see a poorer tone towards the House minority's party as the majority's margin increases.

There is a statistically significant relationship between the margin of the majority and the tone towards the majority party generally (chi-square=272.507, df=56, p<.001). In addition, there is small, but statistically significant evidence that this relationship is positive, as predicted. (Tau-c is .036 at a .017 significance level.) For the minority party in the House, the tone of its coverage is also significant (chi-square=159.857, df=56, p<.001) and moves in the expected direction. As the margin between the two parties increases, the tone of the coverage towards the House minority decreases by almost 8% (tau-c= -.076, p<.001 sig.) Thus, it would appear that there is mixed evidence to support my hypothesis. As the majority's margin grows over the minority in the House, the quality of the tone towards the House majority's party improves – contrary to my prediction – while the tone towards the minority party gets worse, as expected.

Bivariate Correlations – Condition: Isolation

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[893] The tone of the article does not apply solely to the portrayal of the majority or minority leadership teams in the House. It covers the entire party for both of these groups. Therefore, a negative portrayal of the Democratic president or Democratic governors would be reflected in the coding of the "tone" variable in these articles within the dataset relating to the House.

The House of Representatives operates within a competitive institutional environment in Washington, DC. The White House and the United States Senate engage in an ongoing interplay with the House, each seeking media coverage. Since House leaders believe that they are being judged, in part, by their respective partisan members on how well they can secure high quantity and high quality coverage, it is important to assess their levels of success under the different conditions reflected in the other "power centers" that are simultaneously competing for coverage. The assumption here is that, while media coverage is not a zero sum game between the White House, the Senate and the House leadership, there is a limited amount of column inches devoted to national political coverage in a given day, week, year, and congressional term. Both the quantity and the tone of the coverage may well be dependent on who else is generating news among the other power centers in Washington.

"Who else" can be broken down further by party; that is, for House leaders on both sides pursuing a media outreach strategy, it matters whether the same or opposite party controls the White House and the Senate. Legislatively, a party may wish to control all three power centers, thereby having the best chance to impose a partisan agenda. But from a communications perspective, the opposite is true. As Groeling notes, "unified government presents the greatest challenge to unified communication."[894] This dissertation extends Groeling's conclusions by noting that, in addition to mixed – and therefore less effective – messages, unified government should be expected to lead to a hierarchy of who gets covered. Because of the House's membership size, short terms,

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[894] Groeling, 2010, 3.

and limited powers granted to the minority, its leaders should receive less media coverage than that granted to the White House and the Senate.

Thus, we should expect to see <u>majority</u> leaders in the House receiving the highest quantity and quality of coverage when the other two power centers are controlled by the *opposite* party. A historical example of this would be the Democratic majority under Speaker Tip O'Neill in the early 1980s, when the Republicans controlled both the White House and the Senate. In this situation, the House majority is most isolated and therefore should receive the most coverage.

In a situation of unified control, the quantity and quality of coverage for the House majority should be at its lowest level. Examples of this would be the Republicans under Speaker Dennis Hastert from 2001 through 2006, when the GOP controlled all three power centers, or the Democrats in 2009 and 2010, when their party controlled all three.

Coverage of <u>minority</u> leaders in the House should move in the opposite direction of the majority. I would expect minority leadership to see their highest quantity and quality of coverage when the White House and Senate are controlled by the House majority's party as well. Unified control by the other party is better for the minority leadership, in terms of press coverage, because they form the vanguard of the opposition. This should make them more interesting to reporters. For example, House minority leader John Boehner in 2009 – 2010, and House minority leader Nancy Pelosi in the early 2000s should be expected to receive more coverage when the majority party is least isolated. It's never good to be in the House minority, and no one wants to stay in that

condition. But if you are in the minority, you should get the most coverage when your opponents control the White House and the Senate as well as the House.

On the flip side, for minority leaders in the House, the *lowest* quantity and quality of coverage will come when its fellow partisans are in control of the White House and the Senate, but not the House. Minority leader Bob Michel faced this situation in 1981 to 1986 when Ronald Regan was president and Republican Bob Dole (KS) was Senate Majority Leader. In effect, Michel's House minority was most irrelevant when there were other Republicans who were actually in charge of other power centers (i.e., the White House and the Senate). The press spoke to the Reagan administration and Bob Dole in the Senate to offer the Republican perspective. Under these circumstances, coverage of the majority Democrats in the House should be highest while coverage of Michel and his leadership team should be lowest.

* * * * *

To summarize, my hypothesis is that as the House majority grows more isolated, coverage of its leadership should increase; that is, there is a positive correlation between House majority isolation and House majority media coverage.

At the same time, as the House majority grows more isolated, my hypothesis predicts that coverage of the minority HCLs should decrease. There is a negative correlation between House majority isolation and media coverage of the House minority.

These are expressed in the following hypotheses:

H9a: Media coverage of House caucus leaders in the majority will be better when their caucus is most isolated among other power centers in Washington, DC.

H9b: Media coverage of House caucus leaders in the minority will be better when their caucus is most isolated among other power centers in Washington, DC.

Table 10k clarifies how these hypotheses are operationalized.

Table 10k
Identifying levels of House Majority Isolation from other Washington, DC Power Centers and Predictions of Coverage

White House Controlled by	Senate Controlled by	For <u>Majority</u> House leadership, this results in	For <u>Minority</u> House leadership, this results in
House Majority party	House Majority party	**Lowest Coverage for Majority House leaders – Least Isolated** (ex. Pelosi under unified Dem control in 2009-10)	**Highest Coverage for Minority House leaders – Most Isolated** (ex. Boehner when Democrats had unified control in 2009-10)
House Majority party	House Minority party	The only times when this condition was satisfied was for brief periods during 2001 – 2002, when control of the Senate switched within the session. Therefore, this category was coded as "somewhat isolated"	
House Minority party	House Majority party	**2nd highest Coverage for Majority House leaders – Somewhat Isolated** (ex. Wright, when Democrats controlled House & Senate, but not the White House – 1987 in 88)	**2nd lowest Coverage for Minority House leaders – Somewhat Isolated** (ex. Michel when Democrats controlled House and Senate, but not the White House in 1987-88)
House Minority party	House Minority party	**Highest Coverage for Majority House leaders – Most Isolated** (ex. O'Neill, when Republicans controlled the White House and the Senate, but not the House in 1981 – 82)	**Lowest Coverage for Minority House leaders – Least Isolated** (ex. Michel, when Republicans controlled the White House and the Senate, but not the House in 1981 – 82)

Contrary to my hypotheses, what I found with the raw numbers was that majority leadership coverage actually increases to its highest levels when the House majority is somewhat isolated, and not when it is most isolated, as expected. When the House majority is of the same party as the Senate, and the opposite party of the President, then it received greater coverage. (Table 10L)

This might be because that situation combines two critical elements of interest to the media: first, the interparty conflict between the Congress and the White House, and second, the intraparty conflict between the House and the Senate. We've seen a few examples of this dynamic, including 1987 through 1992, when Democratic Speakers Jim Wright and Tom Foley led the House while Democratic colleagues ran the Senate and Republican George H.W. Bush was President. From 1995 through 2000, Republicans, including Speakers Newt Gingrich and Dennis Hastert, controlled both houses of Congress while Democrat Bill Clinton resided in the White House. And from 2007 through 2008, as the White House was controlled by President George W. Bush, Speaker Nancy Pelosi led the Democratic majority in the House as Democrats also controlled the Senate.

Table 10L
Coverage of House Leadership Under Varying Conditions of House Majority Isolation
Among Washington, DC Power Centers

		Isolation Status of House Majority		
		Least Isolated	Somewhat Isolated	Most Isolated
Mentions (3,096)	**House Majority**	70.2% (678)	82.8% (1,174)	74.3% (529)
	House Minority	46.4% (448)	37.4% (53)	45.5% (324)
Message Paragraph (2,507)	**House Majority**	68.5% (550)	81.6% (937)	79.2% (440)
	House Minority	47.9% (385)	38.3% (440)	42.5 (236)

Note: Frequencies in parentheses. Counts for each party include stories that mentioned both parties.

Articles that mentioned the minority leadership also presented output that was contrary to my hypothesis. Instead of a decrease in coverage, as I had expected to happen when the House majority increased its isolation, the coverage of the minority remained virtually unchanged.

Raw numbers aside, this is a statistically significant relationship when measuring articles that mention House leaders (chi-square=56.482, df=4, p<.001). However, the strength and direction of the relationship cannot be confidently predicted as tau-b is not statistically significant.

For the inclusion of Message Paragraphs, there is statistical significance, as chi-square=49.538, df=4, p<.001. Tau-b is negative (-.069) and significant (T= -3.694, p <.001). The results are similar to those found when measuring Mentions. Under unified control, the House majority received message paragraphs in 68.5% of the articles, and this goes up considerably, to 81.6% when the majority is "somewhat isolated." Contrary to my initial hypothesis, coverage of majority leaders drops to 79.2% when it is "most isolated", though this change is very slight.

The minority leadership's coverage actually increases when the majority is "most isolated": 42.5% of articles from 38.3% of articles when the majority is "somewhat isolated". Here again, I anticipated a more consistent downward slope and found something different.

When measuring coverage by the quantity of message paragraphs in a given article, my bivariate analysis shows no significance in terms of coverage of the <u>majority</u> leadership in the House. However, the relationship between the amount of message paragraphs for the <u>minority</u> House leadership, under various stages of House majority isolation, finds that that both chi-square (.007) and tau-c (.005) are significant with a t-score of -2.832. Furthermore, tau-c is small (-.040), but it is negative, as I predicted. The number of message paragraphs for the minority goes down as the majority's isolation within the Washington power structure is maximized.

Coverage, in and of itself, can offer some insights into the House leadership's relationship with the media, but it also misses a part of the story being told here. One also needs to examine the tone of the article. Lots of message paragraphs mean little if the tone of the article is mostly negative towards that party.

The 5-point tone scale was applied to each article and ranges from strongly negative (1) to strongly positive (5). My prediction is that as the House majority becomes more isolated among the Washington power centers, reporters will want to build up the partisan conflict in their coverage and therefore the tone towards the House majority should improve.

For the majority House leadership, I found that chi-square is statistically significant (chi-square=116.661, df=8, p<.001). Tau-c value is .156 (T=9.623, p<.001) indicating that as the House majority becomes more isolated, there is a 15.6% positive impact on the tone of coverage for that party, as I would expect according to my hypothesis.

The tone of the coverage towards the party of the House Minority also found statistical significance. Tau-c is. -.061, indicating that the average tone of press coverage towards the House Minority gets 6.1% more negative as their counterparts in the House majority become more isolated within Washington. This is in line with my hypotheses. (Table 10m)

Table 10m
Change in Tone of Coverage Towards Each Party Under Various Conditions of Isolation for Majority Party

Tone towards House Majority Party		Tone towards House Minority Party	
Chi-square =116,661 df=8 p<.001	Tau-c = .156 T=9.623 p<.001	Chi-square =41.089 df=10 p<.001	Tau-c = -.061 t=-3.524 P<.001

Bivariate Correlations – Condition: Party Label

Over the last several decades, a number of observers have argued that there is a distinct partisan bias in media coverage of Washington, DC. Specifically, they maintain the mainstream press coverage of Congress is slanted towards the liberal/Democratic perspective.[895] Therefore, in assessing the efforts of House leaders to deliver their respective partisan messages in the press, one would want to see if this independent variable – Party Control – has an effect on which leaders receive coverage in all seven of my categories of assessment.

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[895] Goldberg, 2001; Groseclose and Milyo, 2005; Reynolds, 2012.

The *Washington Post* and especially the *New York Times* are often specifically targeted for accusations of partisan bias. As it was articles from these two newspapers that form my current data set, there might be some concern that this section of my quantitative analysis will be skewed. However, this dissertation assumes that the *Post* and the *Times* together serve as a proxy for most media coverage. Therefore, they should not be considered different from the rest of the media when assessing their coverage of each specific party.

My premise is that the power bias will overwhelm any partisan bias that might exist. But because of allegations of partisan coverage that favors the Democrats remains a persistent part of the political culture, my working hypothesis is:

> **H10: Media coverage will be better for Democratic caucus leadership in the House than Republican caucus leadership in the House.**

My expectation that there will be little to no support for this hypothesis can be found both when considering the inclusion of a leadership mention and with the inclusion of a message paragraph. (Table 10n)

Table 10n
Inclusion of Mention and Message Paragraphs for House Caucus Leadership Broken Down by Party Label

	Article includes a mention of House leadership (N=3,096)		Article includes a message paragraph from House leadership (N=2,057)	
	Majority caucus leadership	**Minority caucus leadership**	**Majority caucus leadership**	**Minority caucus leadership**
Under a Democratic majority in the House	75.2% (1,472)	45.5% (891)	76.1% (1,208)	44.7% (709)
Under a Republican majority in the House	79.8% (909)	36.1% (411)	78.0% (719)	38.2% (352)
	Chi-square =26.600, df=2, p<.001 Tau-c = -.086, T=-4.878, p<.001		Chi-square = .002 sig. Tau-c = -.054 at .006 sig.	

Note: Frequencies in parentheses. Percentages and frequencies are larger than N because articles with both Majority and Minority caucus leadership were counted in each category.

The evidence indicates that the <u>majority</u> leadership, regardless of party, continues to dominate the coverage. Indeed, as opposed to the charges of Democratic bias, when the Republicans are in control of the House, they actually receive a little bit more coverage than the Democrats: 79.8% vs. 75.2% for mentions, and 78.0% and 76.1% for inclusion of a message paragraph. For coverage of <u>minority</u> leadership, Republicans also do better. Under mentions, the GOP minority leaders are included in 45.5% of the articles, and 44.7% of the articles where there is a message paragraph, in contrast to 36.1% and 38.2% for Democrats leadership in the minority.

The correlations are statistically significant with tau-c being small but negative, indicating that as party control shifts from the Democrats to the Republicans, there is an 8.6% shift (Mention) and a 5.4% shift (Message Paragraph) towards the GOP. This data undermines support for the hypothesis that press coverage would favor the Democrats, regardless of their majority / minority status.

My hypothesis does see some support when measuring the tone of the article.[896]

(Table 10o)

Table 10o
Tone of Coverage Towards Each Party Distributed by Partisan Control

	Majority Party (N=2,728)		Minority Party (N=2,326)	
Tone of Coverage	**Democrats**	**Republicans**	**Democrats**	**Republicans**
Mostly Negative	2.2% (37)	1.7% (18)	0.5% (4)	1.3% (20)
Somewhat Negative	18.9% (320)	28.1% (291)	10.9% (91)	20.0% (298)
Neutral / Mixed	42.1% (714)	43.4% (449)	56.6% (472)	53.6% (800)
Somewhat Positive	29.9% (507)	22.1% (228)	25.9% (216)	20.4% (304)
Mostly Positive	6.8% (116)	4.6% (48)	6.1% (51)	4.7% (70)
	Chi-square =45.404 df=4, p<.001 Tau-c = -.126 T = -6.284 at .000 sig.		Chi-square =40.362 Df=4, p<.001 Tau-c = .119 T = 5.903 at .000 sig.	

Note: Frequencies in parentheses.

When the Democrats are in control of the House, 36.7% of the articles are somewhat positive or mostly positive. For the GOP majority leadership, only 26.7% of the articles fall into that category. The difference is largely made up in the negative side of the ledger. Republican majority leaders saw 29.8% of the articles during the timeframe of this dissertation categorized as somewhat negative or mostly negative, but Democrats only saw 21.1% of stories fall under these labels when they were in the majority.

The relationship is statistically significant with chi-square=45.404, df=4, p<.001and tau-c with a -.126 value (T=-6.284, p<.001); that is, as one moves from

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[896] As a reminder, the tone of the article was assessed on the whole party, not just its House leadership.

Democratic to Republican control of the House, the GOP majority is likely to see a 13% shift towards a more negative tone in coverage.

If the hypothesis is true, and the press does cover the Democratic Party more favorably then the Republican Party, it will be seen when the Democrats are in the minority as well. Democratic minority leaders received 32% of their coverage classified as somewhat or mostly positive, while Republican leaders in the minority only saw 25.1% of their coverage classified this way. Negative coverage was also higher for the Republican minority leadership (21.3% of all articles) while it was only 11.4% of all articles for the Democratic minority.

The relationship between the tone of a given article towards the House minority party is statistically significant (Chi-square=40.362, df=4, p<.001). Tau-c has a value of .119 (T=5.903, p<.001), meaning that as one moves towards Republican control, the minority – in this case, the Democrats – will see an 11.9% improvement in the tone of the article towards their party. Tables 5o1 and 5o2 give a more graphic illustration of the differences in the tone of the article.

Table 10o1
Comparison of Tone Distribution When Each Party is in the Majority
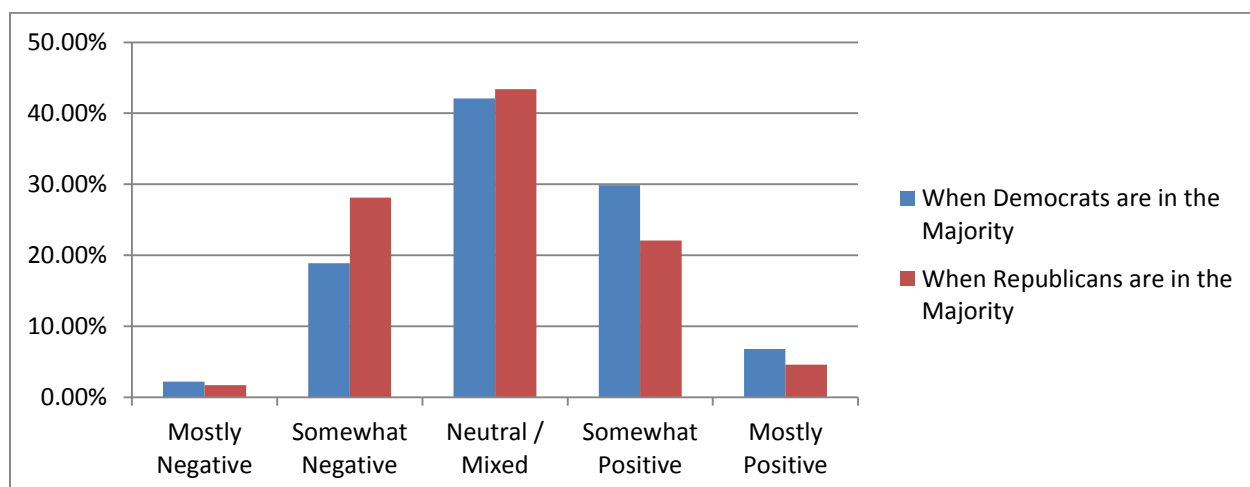
Table 10o2
Comparison of Tone Distribution When Each Party is in the Minority
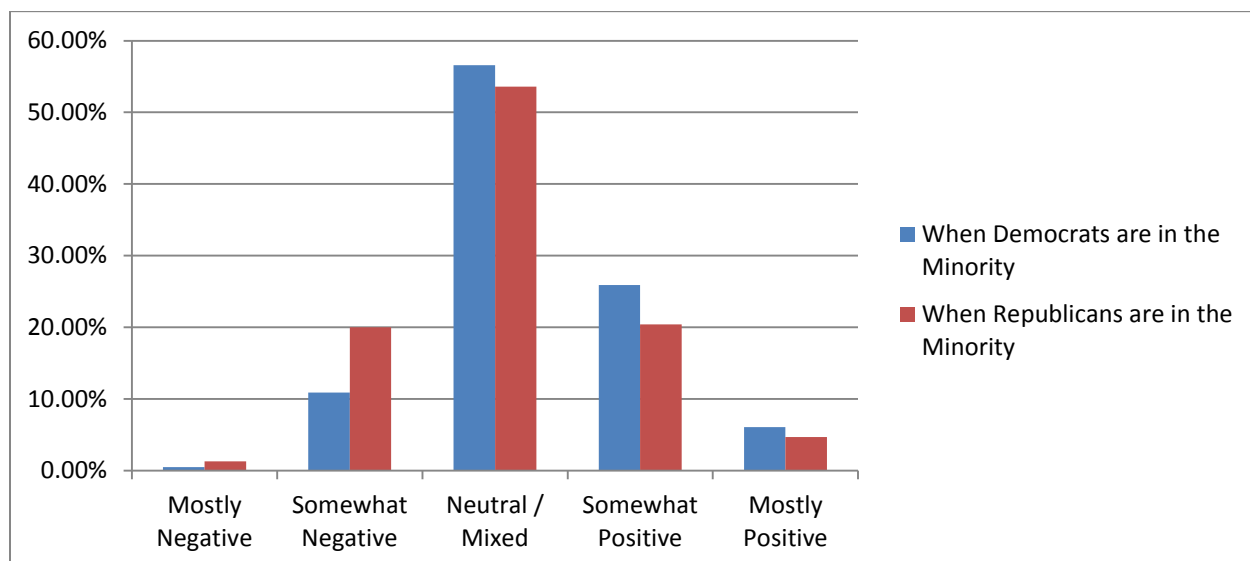
Bivariate Correlations – Condition: Subject Matter is Economy

Many scholars have come to understand that, over time, parties tend to "own" certain subject areas. Voters link certain parties with certain issues, and thus reward or punish them based on a given issue's saliency at election time.[897] As a result, issue ownership is one of the largest variables that Congressional leaders face in their efforts to have an effective media strategy on behalf of their respective caucuses. If their respective party owns the issue, they seek to prime the electorate by talking about that issue in the hope of generating enthusiasm among supporters of their position.[898] If their party does not own the issue, these leaders can try to 'trespass' on the topic, and perhaps change the ownership dynamic, at least temporarily.[899] The non-owning party leaders

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[897] Campbell et al, 1960; Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Petrocik, 1996.
[898] Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007.
[899] Damore, 2004; Sigelman and Buell, 2004.

face a difficult task because the press tends to follow its own perceptions of issue ownership: those who own the issue are considered worthy of coverage on that issue.[900]

Thus, it is appropriate to examine the effectiveness of House leaders in generating coverage in key subject areas. If, during the bulk of the period examined in this dissertation, Republicans own the issues of foreign policy and the economy, then does coverage flow towards their leadership in the House when the articles are about those topics? Or is the non-owning House Democratic leadership able to generate its own press attention by trespassing on these issues?

Articles about the Economy

The 30 years covered in this dissertation begin with the transformative Reagan era and the rise of a Republican party pursuing supply-side economics; that is, policies that attempted to spur national economic growth by leaving more money in the hands of individual consumers.

This, of course, is a cursory description of Reaganomics, as it came to be popularly called. But the larger point is not the policy itself, but rather the party branding that took place under Reagan. The Republican party could no longer be criticized for having a staid and uninspiring economic agenda that pursued balanced budgets as its primary goal. Rather, it was the party of popular tax cuts, and Democrats were on the defensive, frequently portrayed as a party with an old-fashioned and unpopular economic agenda.

The specific focus on taxation policy allows me to assert that, in this era, the GOP owned the economy issue.[901] For the three decades following Reagan's 1980 victory, the

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[900] Walgrave and De Swert, 2007.

Republican party largely had a partisan advantage in this subject area. Therefore, as House leaders pursued or opposed Reaganomics, we should expect to see Republicans receiving more and better coverage than Democrats whenever the topic of the news article was the "economy."

For the purposes of this dissertation, stories about the "economy" include articles involving national economic conditions and policy, including the budget, jobs, minimum wage, taxes and overall spending. It includes articles about general defense spending, but not foreign aid. It also does not include stories on international trade, stories about federal salaries and benefits, spending in specific areas, such as articles about health care spending.

My hypothesis is:

H11: Media coverage of House caucus leaders will be better for the Republicans than the Democrats when the subject matter is the economy.

My bivariate analysis shows very limited support for this hypothesis.

While, by a percentage basis, Republican leaders in the House are more likely to be mentioned in a story about the economy than Democrats (Tau-c = -.066 at .042 sig.), chi-square was not significant. This prevents me from recognizing this as a true relationship.

When I measured coverage by the tone of the article towards either majority party's leadership, only the Democrats were statistically significant, thereby making it difficult to make a valid comparison between the two parties. In one examines the tone in articles about the economy, both Democratic and Republican minority leaders see a

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[901] Petrocik 1996; Pope and Woon, 2009.

statistically significant chi-square, but at the same time, tau-c is not significant for either, thus limiting our ability to understand the strength and direction of this relationship.

Bivariate Correlations – Condition: Subject Matter is Foreign Affairs

The Reagan era began with his election in 1980 and dramatically influenced the national political scene for decades after he left office in 1989. His tenure not only transformed how Washington, DC handled the economy, but also re-set the terms of the national debate over foreign affairs. By arguing for a robust military buildup, a confrontational approach when dealing with the Soviet Union, and an internationalist foreign policy that sent U.S. troops to countries across the globe, Reagan transformed the political realities of diplomacy and warfare. Here again, Democrats were on the defensive, as the GOP dominated the issue of foreign affairs, thereby "owning" it for a generation.[902] As a result, one should expect to see Republican leaders more successful in all the measures of their ability to produce media coverage when the stories involve foreign affairs.

In this dissertation, "foreign affairs" articles include topics such as international trade and free trade agreements, arms talks, foreign military operations, foreign aid (military and non-military) and the Iran-Contra operation. This topic does not include articles about domestic base closings, or funding for individual programs unless the article relates to the United States' international response to other countries or international politics. For example, the MX missile funding debate from the 1980s is not

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[902] Petrocik 1996; Pope and Woon 2009. It should also be noted that Goble and Holm (2009) found that the Republican Party lost much of its credibility and ownership over foreign affairs in the aftermath of the highly unpopular Iraq and Afghanistan War launched during the administration of President George W. Bush. However, they also conclude that "most of the media remain firmly committed to the traditional lens, despite the evidence suggesting a fresh look." (226) Thus, for the purposes of this dissertation, which is focusing on the media's role in giving voice to the House leadership, I will remain with the assertion that that the GOP owned the issue of foreign affairs throughout the 1981 – 2010 period.

included unless the article covered the response from the USSR or other international players.

My hypothesis is:

H12: Media coverage of House caucus leaders will be better for the Republicans than the Democrats when the subject matter is foreign affairs.

Here again, I found that issue ownership (in this case, foreign affairs) does not seem to significantly affect press coverage. When examining the quantity of message paragraphs in an article, only majority Democratic leadership shows statistical significance, thereby making a reliable party-by-party comparison impossible to make.

The data is significant when measuring the tone of an article on foreign affairs for majority party leadership.[903] Democratic and Republican leaders, when in the majority, receive almost the same about of positive coverage in articles that are focused on foreign affairs; 38.3% for Democrats and 38% for Republicans. The larger difference comes when looking at the negative tone. Republicans leaders in the House majority are much more likely to see a negative tone towards their party in the coverage of foreign affairs than Democrats; 19.8% vs. 10.9%. (Table 10p)

Table 10p
Tone Towards Party of House Majority When Coverage is on Foreign Affairs

	Mostly Negative	Somewhat Negative	Neutral / Mixed	Somewhat Positive	Mostly Positive	
Democratic Majority (329)	0.6%	10.3%	50.8%	31.6%	6.7%	Chi-sq. =28.051 df=4, p<.001 Tau-c = .059 at .002 sig. T = 3.043
Republican Majority (121)	0.0%	19.8%	42.1%	32.2%	5.8%	Chi-sq. =.013 sig. Tau-c = .072 at .001 sig. T = 3.340

Note: Frequencies in parentheses.

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[903] There was no statistically significance for either party's minority leadership.

Bivariate Correlations – Condition: Subject Matter is Scandal

Congressional scandals provide a unique media outreach opportunity for the party that is not being accused of ethical impropriety. Suddenly, there is much greater chance for additional and positive press coverage within the competitive messaging landscape.

Scandals *involving the House majority* are most significant because the minority gets what is usually never has: a chance to put its messages into the press coverage of the day, and thereby strengthen its chances to become the majority itself. Modern examples abound. Newt Gingrich helped bring about the fall of 46 consecutive years of Democratic control in the House by filing the changes against Democratic Speaker Jim Wright and then using the press to present his party's case for change. A similar dynamic occurred in 2006 as the minority Democrats, led by Nancy Pelosi, successfully accused the GOP leadership of fostering "a culture of corruption" that necessitated a change in party control.

Articles about scandal, for this dissertation, refer to specific allegations, trials, and investigations of members of the House of Representatives relating to ethical issues. It does not refer to stories about ethics reform. The focus for this category is on stories about the alleged infraction, not the proposals to fix the overall problem. This category also does not include mistakes made by members of Congress that are not ethical in nature. For example, controversy sometimes surrounded representatives who gave comments that might be construed as anti-Semitic. These are not included in the scandal category. Finally, this category does not include Iran-Contra or any of the Clinton

scandals, including the Monica Lewinsky affair and Whitewater. This is an area for scandals involving members of Congress, not the White House.

Overall, I expect that with scandal coverage, non-scandal party leaders will receive more and better coverage than the leadership of the scandal party. My hypothesis is:

H13: When the subject matter is a congressional scandal, media coverage of House caucus leaders will be better for the non-scandal party.

What I found at every level that was statistically significant was that there was little evidence to support this hypothesis. When the press writes about a congressional scandal, the non-scandal party does not receive better coverage. Rather, the coverage follows the scandal party.

Of my data set of 3,096 articles, only 190 were about a congressional scandal. A total of 143 involved the majority party only, 18 involved the minority party only, and 29 involved both parties. When looking at the relationship between mentions of House caucus leaders and a scandal involving the majority party, there was a relationship (chi-square=65.296, df=4, p<.001), but tau-b was not significant, so we cannot ascertain the strength and direction of this relationship. When the scandal involves the House minority party, we see evidence that coverage follows the scandal party, not its opposition. There is a 6% shift in mentions towards the minority party leadership when the House minority is involved with a scandal. (Chi-square=49.462, df=4, p<.001 and tau-b=.060, T=3.542, p<.001)

As I considered coverage of House caucus leaders as measured by the inclusion of a message in the article, I found similar results. For a scandal involving the majority, there was a relationship (chi-square=42.249, df=4, p<.001) but tau-b was not statistically significant. However, a coverage of a minority party scandal again shows a statistically significant relationship (chi-square=27.654, df=4, p<.001) and a tau-b value of .075 (T=3.647, p<.001), indicating – as with mentions – when coverage is of a House minority party scandal, the messages shift towards the House minority leadership. Both of these findings are contrary to my predictions.

Of course, no party wants to be involved with a scandal. It is always a negative. However, in the competitive partisan world of Congress, seeing one's opponents suffer under the burdens of scandal coverage is beneficial to the non-scandal party. My theory involving scandal stories begins with the assumption that the tone[904] will be worse for the party involved with the scandal and better for the party not involved with the scandal. That would appear to be self-evident.

More interesting to this dissertation is whether there is a partisan difference in this negative coverage. In essence, given the strong accusations of partisan bias in the media, does coverage of a GOP scandal in the House generate even worse tone of coverage for that party than coverage of a Democratic scandal?

My working hypothesis is that in scandal stories, the tone of the scandal coverage involving House Democrats will be better than the tone of articles covering scandals involving Republicans.

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[904] As a reminder to the reader, the variable of tone is a done on a five-point scale and is assessed to the entire party, not just party's leadership, or its members, in the House.

I began by examining the relationship between the tone towards the majority party and those cases in which the House majority was involved with a congressional scandal. I added an additional layer in the cross-tabulation to separate those times when the Republicans were controlling the House and those moments when the Democrats were in charge.

I found that there is virtually no difference in the tone towards Democrats and towards Republicans when the scandal involves their members and they are in the House majority. When the Democrats control the House, chi-square=347.397, df=8, p<.001, and when the Republicans control the chamber, chi-square=140.888, df=8, p<.001. The tone of the scandal articles involving the majority generate a tau-c value of -.118 (p<.001) for the Democrats and -.119 for the Republicans (p<.001).

I then looked at the tone of the coverage towards the House <u>minority</u> when the scandal involved the House <u>majority</u>. The results were mixed. While chi-square is statistically significant for both a Republican minority (and a Democratic scandal) – chi-square=108.546, df=8, p<.001) – and for a Democratic minority (and a Republican scandal) – .035 sig., tau-c is not significant in either circumstance. There is a correlation, but its size and direction cannot be determined.

<u>Bivariate Correlations – Condition: Presidential Popularity</u>

The interplay of the power centers inside Washington – the House, the Senate and the White House – affects the amount of coverage we would expect given to House leaders relative to the others. At its most basic level – considering the size of each – it is more difficult for House leaders to generate media attention. With 435 members, leaders represent caucuses with well over 100 members, and at times over 200 on each side,

which makes them unwieldy in terms of media outreach efficiency. The White House, with all of its singularity, can be much more effective in terms of getting its message into the press, and the Senate, with only 100 members, allows for more strategic media outreach than an institution with more than four times as many.

As a consequence, there is no balance of power when it comes to garnering coverage in the press. Further, as previously noted, the partisan control of each of these institutions can have a dramatic effect on who gets covered. For example, the fluctuating approval ratings of the president can embolden his fellow partisans in the House when he is popular, or make them shy away from media attention when he is unpopular. In addition, the opposite party's House leaders may have to stay low in terms of media coverage when he is popular, waiting for moments of vulnerability before pushing for coverage. It is in this way that presidential approval ratings can affect House leadership coverage.[905]

Therefore, my hypothesis is:

H14: When the President is popular, media coverage of House caucus leaders will better for those in the president's party.

From 1981 through 2010, the average yearly presidential approval has ranged from 40 to 73.

I found that support for this prediction was mixed. When the House majority and the president are of the same party, chi-square is significant at a .043 level, but tau-c is

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[905] For the purposes of this dissertation, I took the presidential approval score as determined by the Gallup Poll for every month over the 30 year period of 1981 to 2010. There were seven months out of 360 that had no Gallup presidential approval number. For January 1981, the first month in my dataset, I used the same number as February 1981. For the other six months, I averaged the month before and the month after. With 12 numbers for each year, I compiled an annual average for each of the 30 years.

not significant so we cannot fully understand the strength and direction of this relationship. However, when the House of Representatives and the White House are controlled by opposite parties, the president's rising popularity results in a small, but statistically significant shift in mentions towards the president's fellow partisan leaders in the House minority. (Chi-square =162.178, df=32, p<.001 and tau-c=.039 at .040 sig., T = 2.053)

Examining articles that included a message from either House caucus leadership also showed a statistically significant relationship, regardless of whether the House majority and the presidency were of the same party (chi-square = .049) or of the opposite party (chi-square = .000). Unfortunately, in neither case was tau-c significant.

The only other statistically significant bivariate analysis emerges when looking at the overall tone of the article for the House <u>majority</u> leadership. When the House and White House are governed by the same party, the relationship with the tone towards the majority party is significant (chi-square=79.084, df=28, p<.001). Only in this case is tau-c also significant (tau-c = .067, p<.013, T = 2.490). While the tau-c value is small, it is positive, the direction I predicted.

While the relationship between presidential popularity and the tone of the coverage towards the minority party in the House is statistically significant (chi-square = .019 when they are ruled by the same party, and .000 when they are not), tau-c is not significant in either case.

<u>Bivariate Correlations – Condition: Change in GDP Growth</u>

It is often asserted that the state of the economy affects the fortunes of candidates. As House congressional leaders on both sides of the aisle attempt to protect their

incumbent members and maximize the chances of their challengers across the country, they must contend with the economic realities felt by the voters. Thus, it is important to determine what impact, if any, certain economic conditions have on the ability of leaders in the House to get their messages out through the press.

Conventional wisdom is that a good economy benefits congressional incumbents of both parties, who – whether they were responsible or not – can lay claim to "good things are happening when they were in office." At the same time, not all incumbents are created equal. The House majority, being the ones with actual power, have perhaps a stronger claim on being responsible for a good economy. Of course, the opposite should also be true: In a bad economy, incumbents, especially in the majority party, should suffer.

This section is designed to examine if leadership efforts to secure media coverage are helped or hindered by the state of the economy.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I operationalized the economy as two separate variables. The first is the average annual change in the growth rate of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). GDP is a broad-based measure of American economic activity. The more economic activity, the better the economy. I looked at the "quarterly change in GDP" data, as reported by the federal Bureau of Economic Analysis, and then produced a yearly average. I specifically looked at the growth level; that is, the change from one quarter to the next, because that seemed to be a better indicator movement in the economy that might be felt by the electorate. Simply looking at the GDP for a given year flattens out these dynamics.

Between 1981 and 2010, the average annual change in growth of GDP ranged

between -3.3% during the Great Recession of 2008 and 7.8 in 1983 during the height of

the Reagan economy.

My hypothesis is:

H15: When economic activity is strong, media coverage of House caucus

leaders will be better for those in the majority.

There is strong support for this hypothesis when examining both the inclusion of a

House leadership mention and a House leadership message in a given article. (Table

10q)

Table 10q
House Leadership Mentions and Messages Related to Change in GDP

	Chi-square	**Tau-c value**	**Tau-c sig.**	**T-score**
Mention inclusion	231.054 df=52, p<.001	-.066	p<.001	-4.290
Message inclusion	168.054 df=52, p<.001	-.067	p<.001	-3.920

Thus, the analysis suggests that as the economy improves, there is almost a 7%

shift in coverage towards the majority, as measured in these two ways.

Additional bivariate analysis shows no other statistically significant measure of

coverage. While the Tone variable offers a statistically significant chi-square for both

majority and minority House leaders, tau-c is not significant in either case.

Bivariate Correlations – Condition: Unemployment

To get a better understanding of the impact of the economy on the effectiveness of

House caucus leaders to generate media coverage, it is important to look at multiple

measures. In addition to the change in GDP growth, the national unemployment rate, as a

figure that is widely reported, perceived to be widely understood, and therefore well

retained by the electorate, is another condition to consider.

My theory of the power bias applies here. When the national unemployment rate

goes down, whoever is in the majority will get the benefits from the electorate and from

the press coverage. The minority will not enjoy such benefits, even if their policies and

legislative influence have much to do with good economic conditions. However, when

the unemployment rate goes up, so should minority coverage as they will be given more

attention because, presumably, they will be drawing attention to their critiques of the

majority's handling of the national economy. Majority leaders in the House of

Representatives should see less coverage as the unemployment rate goes up.

My hypothesis is articulated this way:

H16a: As unemployment falls, media coverage of House caucus leaders will be better for those in the majority.

H16b: As unemployment rises, media coverage of House caucus leaders will be better for those in the minority.

My unemployment variable was generated by taking the national unemployment

rate for each month in the calendar year, as published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor

Statistics, and producing an annual average variable. It is against this annual average

variable that I am measuring House leader effectiveness in generating media coverage.

Table 10r lends support to my hypothesis: When looking at articles that mention

House caucus leaders, the minority will receive a 9% shift in mentions of its leaders as

the unemployment rate goes up. In terms of articles that include a leadership message, House minority leaders see a 6% shift in coverage.

Table 10r
House Leadership Mentions and Messages Related to Unemployment Rate

	Chi-square sig.	Tau-c value	Tau-c sig.	T-score
Mention inclusion	126.092 df=42, p<.001	.087	p<.001	5.586
Message inclusion	85.647 df=42, p<.001	.064	p<.001	3.702

Using the measurement of the quantity of message paragraphs in a given article, the House majority sees its coverage reduces as well, albeit only very slightly, as tau-c is .039 at .017 significance. (Chi-square is .039 and T = -2.378)

Ironically, the tone of coverage towards each party moves in the opposite direction as anticipated when unemployment increases. The tone towards the majority party improves by 8% as the unemployment rate increases and the tone towards the minority party in the House worsens by almost 6%, contrary to my expectation. (Table 10s) Thus, thought the amount of coverage appears to shift, the quality of the coverage actually improves for the majority party in the House.

Table 10s
Tone towards House Majority and House Minority Related to Unemployment Rate

	Chi-square sig.	Tau-c value	Tau-c sig.	T-score
House Majority leadership	255.907 df=84, p<.001	.081	p<.001	5.482
House Minority leadership	p≤.001	-.056	p<.001	-3.732

One possible explanation for this might be that under conditions of divided government, blame is apportioned differently. Furthermore, though the majority is getting less coverage, it might still be able to blame the minority's party for the poor

economic condition of the nation, resulting in a better tone for the majority and a worse one for the minority.

Multivariate Analysis

Having examined the binomial relationship between my 11 independent variables and my five dependent variables, I turned to multivariate analysis. The objective is to consider the effects of all variables on overall coverage. Several of the dependent variables – location of the first message paragraph, the quantity of message paragraphs, and tone – are broken down between majority and minority status, to provide a more appropriate understanding of the relationships being examined.

For those dependent variables that are ordinal, the coefficients found in the applied nested model can be seen in Table 10t.

For those dependent variables that are continuous, I was able to generate coefficients as well as incidence rate ratios (IRR) for the appropriate nested model. This data can be found in Table 10u.

Table 10t
Coefficients for Independent Variables Applied to Ordinal Dependent Variables

Independent variables	Inclusion of mention of leader(s)	Inclusion of message from leader(s)	Tone towards party of House majority	Tone towards party of House minority
Year	-0.02*	-0.01	0.01*	-0.01
Party Control	-0.16**	--[b]	-0.10	--[d]
Margin	--[a]	0.00**	--[c]	-0.00*
Election Year	0.18*	0.17*	-0.01	-0.04
Isolation	-0.29*	-0.24*	0.33*	-0.11
Topic: Economy	0.36	0.00	0.02	-0.09
Topic: Foreign Affairs	-0.15**	-0.10	0.16*	-0.00
Topic: Scandal	-0.04	0.11	-1.37*	-0.30*
Presidential Approval	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
GDP Change	-0.02**	-0.03**	-0.01	0.02**
Unemployment	-0.04**	0.05**	0.03	0.00
	Log Likelihood: -2955.3839	Log Likelihood: -2402.9418	Log Likelihood: -3349.7395	Log Likelihood: -2684.828

Note: N = 3,096 articles.   * p≤.01   ** p≤.05

[a] I also investigated alternative specifications of this model, adding in Margin and dropping Party Control because of high levels of colinearity. The model remained essentially the same with the exception of Unemployment, which ceased being statistically significant. The inclusion of Margin found that it was statistically significant with a coefficient of 0.00 (p≤.05).

[b] I also investigated alternative specifications of this model, adding in Party Control and dropping Margin because of high levels of colinearity. The model remained essentially the same, except that GDP Change was no longer statistically significant. The inclusion of Party Control was not statistically significant.

[c] I also investigated alternative specifications of this model, adding in Margin and dropping Party Control because of high levels of colinearity. The model remained essentially the same and the coefficient for Margin was not statistically significant.

[d] I also investigated alternative specifications of this model, adding in Party Control and dropping Margin because of high levels of colinearity. The model remained essentially the same with the exception of GDP Change, which ceased being significant, and House Isolation, which had a coefficient of -.05, but as with the nested model, was not statistically significant. The inclusion of Party Control found that it was statistically significant with a coefficient of .25 (p≤.01).

Table 10u
Coefficients – in parentheses – and IRR for Independent Variables Applied to Continuous Dependent Variables

Independent Variables	Location of message from majority leader(s)	Location of message from minority leader(s)	Quantity of paragraphs with a message from House majority leader(s)	Quantity of paragraphs with a message from House minority leader(s)
Year	(-0.01) 0.99	(0.01**) 1.01**	(0.01*) 1.01*	(-0.01) 0.99
Party Control	(-0.08) 0.92	--[b]	(0.03) 1.03*	(-0.27**) 0.76**
Margin	--[a]	(0.00) 1.00	--[c]	--[d]
Election Year	(0.17*) 1.19*	(-0.04) 0.96	(-0.10**) 0.90**	(0.27*) 1.31*
Isolation	(-0.10**) 0.91**	(0.01) 1.01	(0.19*) 1.21*	(-0.21*) 0.81*
Topic: Economy	(-0.05) 0.95	(0.11) 1.11	(0.36*) 1.44*	(0.27*) 1.31*
Topic: Foreign Affairs	(-0.01) 0.99	(0.04) 1.05	(0.22*) 1.24*	(0.05) 1.05
Topic: Scandal	(-0.27*) 0.76*	(-0.07) 0.93	(0.58*) 1.78*	(0.49*) 1.64*
Presidential Approval	(0.00) 1.00	(0.00) 1.00	(0.00) 1.00	(0.01**) 1.01**
GDP Change	(0.00) 1.00	(0.02) 1.02	(0.02**) 1.02**	(-0.03) 0.97
Unemployment	(-0.01) 0.99	(-0.00) 1.00	(-0.03) 0.97	(0.01) 1.01
	Log Likelihood for IRR -5947.9783	Log Likelihood for IRR -3391.4715	Log Likelihood for IRR -5031.1659	Log Likelihood for IRR -3410.0788

Note: N = 3,096 articles. * p≤.01   ** p≤.05

[a] I also investigated alternative specifications of this model, adding in Margin and dropping Party Control because of high levels of colinearity. The model remained essentially the same, except that Isolation was no longer statistically significant. The inclusion of Margin was not statistically significant.

[b] I also investigated alternative specifications of this model, adding in Party Control and dropping Margin because of high levels of colinearity. The model remained essentially the same. The inclusion of Party Control was not statistically significant.

[c] I also investigated alternative specifications of this model, adding in Margin and dropping Party Control because of high levels of colinearity. The model remained essentially the same. The inclusion of Margin was not statistically significant.

[d] I also investigated alternative specifications of this model, adding in Margin and dropping Party Control because of high levels of colinearity. The model remained essentially the same. The inclusion of Margin found that it was statistically significant with a coefficient of 1.00 (p≤.05).

There was at least some multivariate statistical significance between the various

measures of coverage and all of my independent variables, with presidential approval

finding the least support.   The isolation of the majority or minority in the House, relative to other power centers in Washington, DC, found the most statistically significant support, with six such relationships. Other conditions, including the occurrence of an election year and a congressional scandal found five statistically significant relationships.

The following considers each of the 11 independent variables with a focus on significant or surprising results in my multivariate analysis.

*   *   *   *   *

As predicted, coverage over **time** improves for the House majority and worsens for minority House leaders. When holding for all other variables at their mean, as one moves from 1981 to 2010:

- the chances of the House majority party leadership being mentioned exclusively in an article increases by 21%,

- the chances of both the House majority and the House minority party leadership being mentioned in an article decreases by 4.8%, and

- the changes of the House minority leadership being mentioned exclusively in an article decreases by 16%.

When it came to measuring press coverage by looking at the mean location of the first message paragraph for the minority House leadership, time has a dramatic impact. Of the 1,062 articles that qualified, initial placement of a message paragraph ranged from 1 to 41. With an IRR of 1.012778 ($p \leq .05$), the net change over the three decades covered by this dissertation was 46% ($1.012778^{30} = 1.463618$). This translated into a

significant worsening of the placement of the House minority's first message in coverage: moving from about 8 paragraphs away from the headline in 1981 to 12 paragraphs away by 2010. This lends support to my hypothesis that over time, the minority party will receive poorer coverage.

In measuring the tone of the coverage of House leadership towards a given party over time, there were stark differences between Democratic and Republican majority leadership. For the Democratic majority, the passage of time seemed to help. When one moves from 1981 to 2010, the tone of the coverage towards the Democratic House majority leadership is:

- 1%   less likely to be mostly negative

- 12%   less likely to be somewhat negative

- 6%   less likely to be neutral or mixed

- 12%   more likely to be someone positive

- 6%   more likely to be mostly positive

In contrast, Republicans in the House majority are much more likely to see a harsher tone towards their party over time. As one moves from 1981 to 2010, and holds all other variables at their mean, the tone towards the Republican Party, when its members are in charge of the House, is:

- 3%   more likely to be mostly negative

- 22%   more likely to be somewhat negative

- 4%   less likely to be neutral or mixed

- 15%   less likely to be someone positive

- 5%   less likely to be mostly positive

Thus, for Republican majority leaders in the House, there is a 25% chance that coverage will be more negative over time and only a 20% chance that it will be more positive, while Democratic House leaders, when in the majority, saw a 13% chance of their coverage being negative and an 18% chance of being more positive. As the data comes from the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, this may be evidence to support claims that those papers have a partisan bias in favor of the Democrats.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *   *   *</p>

To the degree that statistically significant relationships could be identified, the difference between election year and non-election year coverage affected coverage minimally. I predicted that in an **election year**, House caucus leadership in the majority will have worse coverage and those in the minority will have better coverage, as compared with non-election years. In accordance with my hypothesis, the number of articles that mentioned the House majority leadership decreased in an election year and increased for the minority leadership. As you move from a non-election year to an election year:

- The chances of the majority party's House leadership being mentioned exclusively decreases by 7%.

- The chances of both the majority leadership and the minority leadership being mentioned in the same article increases by just under 2%.

- The chances of the minority party's leadership in the House being mentioned exclusively increases by 5.5%.

Thus, partisans who complain that they "never get covered" when their party is in the House minority[906] should take solace that every election year, the dynamics change just a bit in their favor. The increase does not mean that majority leadership does not still get more coverage than the Minority. It does. However, it also indicates that in election years, the Majority receives a little less than the previous year, and minority caucus leaders receive a little more.

For articles that include a message paragraph, statistically significant results were only generated for the House majority leadership. These results suggested support for my hypothesis.

- Majority House caucus leaders are 7% less likely to see its message(s) in its coverage as you move from a non-election year to an election year.

- Articles that contain message paragraphs from both majority and minority House caucus leaders are 2% more likely to occur as you move from a non-election year to an election year.

- Minority House caucus leaders are 5% more likely to see its message(s) in its coverage as you move from a non-election year to an election year.

*   *   *   *   *

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[906] Alexander Bolton, "Frustrated Democrats complain of media bias," *The Hill*, July 15, 2003.

As with my bivariate correlations, multivariate analysis shows little support for my original hypothesis involving the **margin** between the two parties in the House: *The smaller the margin of seats between the two parties in the House, the better the coverage for the Majority and the Minority.* In fact, when I isolated this condition, I found that both articles that mention House leaders and articles that included a message from House leaders moved in the <u>opposite</u> direction as expected. The wider the margin, the better the coverage for minority leaders in the House and the worse it is for House majority leaders. The direction of the coverage is virtually identical using either measurement of coverage.

Holding all other variables at their mean, as the House majority's margin gets bigger:

- The majority House leadership is 9% <u>less</u> likely to be mentioned exclusively in an article.

- The chance of an article including both the majority and minority House caucus leaders increases by 2%.

- The minority House leadership is 7% <u>more</u> likely to be mention getting mentioned exclusively in an article.

Similarly, as the Majority's margin in the House increases:

- Majority House leaders are 9% <u>less</u> likely to have an exclusive message paragraph in its coverage.

- Articles that contain both minority and majority leadership message paragraphs are 2% more likely to occur.

- Minority House leaders are 7% <u>more</u> likely to have at least one message paragraph including in its coverage while the Majority has none.

While I had dismissed the idea that a larger margin would allow the minority leadership in the House to generate more coverage because of its ability to cut deals with sub-sets of a more diverse majority party, it appears I should reconsider it in future research. The statistically significant data offers little support for my current hypothesis.

*   *   *   *   *

When one looks at the relative **isolation** of the House majority and minority – the degree to which it is in power along with fellow partisans in the White House and the Senate – I hypothesized that the greater the isolation, the better the coverage. In terms of the number of articles the mention House caucus leadership, I found support for my prediction. As the House majority party moves from "least isolated" to "most isolated":

- The House majority leadership's chances of being mentioned exclusively in an article increases by 22%.

- The chances of an article containing a mention of both the House majority leaders and House minority leaders decrease by 5%.

- The House minority leadership's chances of being mentioned exclusively in an article decreases by 17%.

Similar results were found when operationalizing coverage by looking at the inclusion of a message paragraph. As the House majority moves from least isolated to most isolated:

- Majority leaders in the House see an 18% increase in the likelihood of its message(s) being covered exclusively in an article.

- Articles that include messages from both the majority and minority leadership teams are 4% less likely to occur.

- House minority leaders see a 14% drop in the likelihood of being covered exclusively with a message paragraph.

The tone towards the majority party also improves as its isolation increases. The data suggests that the Majority is 7% more likely to have mostly positive coverage and only 2% more likely to find the tone of its coverage mostly negative.

I then broke down these numbers for each party. When the Democrats were in control (N=1,694), I found results that are virtually identical to those found when all cases were included. When moving from least to most isolated status, and holding all other independent variables at their mean, the tone of the coverage towards the Democratic Party is:

- 2%   less likely to be mostly negative
- 17%   less likely to be somewhat negative
- 5%   less likely to be neutral or mixed
- 17%   more likely to be someone positive

- 7%   more likely to be mostly positive

Interestingly, I did not find similar results with the Republicans when they were in the majority of the House (N=1,034). When moving from least to most isolated status, holding all other independent variables at their mean, and looking at only those moments when the Republicans were in charge of the House, the tone of the coverage towards the Republican Party is:

- 0%   likely to be mostly negative

- 5%   more likely to be somewhat negative

- 0%   likely to be neutral or mixed

- 4%   less likely to be somewhat positive

- 1%   less likely to be mostly positive

While there is a slight uptick in the chance of negative stories and slight drop in the chance of garnering some or mostly positive stories, the impact is not nearly as dramatic as when the Democrats are in charge. This may be the result of one unique circumstance. The only time Democrats held the House in the most isolated status was from 1981 through 1986, when Rep. Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill (MA) was speaker. The positive coverage that the Democratic Party received back then may have been more of a result of the seminal transition to the Reagan era than a result of stronger ongoing partisan bias.

*   *   *   *   *

Allegations of media bias towards the Democrats, multivariate analysis led me to hypothesize about the effects of **party control** on press coverage. Coverage of House

leaders will be better for the Democrats than the Republicans, regardless of other circumstances. There does not appear to offer much multivariate quantitative support for such a claim.

When measuring coverage by the inclusion of a mention of House leaders, holding all other variables at their mean, and moving from Democratic control to Republican control of the House, the GOP leadership actually generates more coverage. My hypothesis, based on the allegations of partisan bias, predicted the opposite.

Table 10v
Likelihood of Coverage that Mentions House Leaders when Republicans are in the Majority

Inclusion of Mention of House Leadership	Mean	Standard Error
Republicans only	0.06	.0261633
Republicans and Democrats	-0.01	.0064821
Democrats only	-0.05	.0197593

As seen in Table 10v, Republican leaders, when they are in charge of the House, see a 6% bump in coverage, as counted by articles with leadership mentions.

Further, the chances of both parties being mentioned in an article decreases by a scant 1%, and the chances of the Democratic leadership, now in the minority, winning exclusive mention in an article decreases by almost 5%. So, as seen above, not only does the GOP leadership in the House receive more coverage when they are in control but the Democratic minority leadership receives almost 5% less coverage than the Republicans did when they were in the majority. This would seem to offer additional evidence that no partisan bias exists.

The tone towards the party of the House minority is one of the few other statistically significant measurements, using the independent variable of party label. I

examined the mean score for the tone towards the minority party tone at each level, while moving from Democratic to Republican control, and holding all other independent variables at their mean, and found that there is some support for my hypothesis. After controlling for all other variables, when Republicans control in the House, the tone of the coverage towards the Democrats is:

- 0% likely to be mostly negative

- 6% less likely to be somewhat negative

- 2% less likely to be neutral or mixed

- 6% more likely to be somewhat positive

- 3% more likely to be mostly positive

Though these numbers are small, it would seem that even when in the minority, the tone towards the Democratic Party is slightly improved, as predicted. Democrats, even when in the minority, should receive better coverage because of the partisan bias of the press. This is also important for the objectives of Democratic House caucus leaders – despite the small numbers – because the House minority is rarely covered. From the Democratic Party perspective, if you are going to be shut out of coverage, you might has well enjoy a little bump in the chance to have a positive tone with what coverage there is.

*   *   *   *   *

My hypothesis predicts that because the Republican Party owns the **economy** issues, articles about that issue would provide better coverage for the GOP than for the Democrats. Unfortunately, my multivariate analysis was limited by my data because I was unable to break down my regression between parties. Therefore, I was unable to

conclude much more than that which has already been established with my bivariate correlations. In the multivariate analysis, the few results that showed a statistically significant relationship told us little about the effect of GOP ownership of the economic issue area.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *   *   *</p>

My prediction, as articulated in my hypothesis, is that because the Republican Party owns the issue of **foreign affairs**, it should receive better coverage when foreign affairs is the topic of the article. Here again, I was limited in my analysis because I was usually unable to break down my regressions by party in either the majority or the minority.

However, there were some exceptions that led to interesting results. For example, when looking at the coverage during periods when the Democrats had the majority, I found statistically significant data for articles that mention House leadership (p=.001).

Holding all other variables at their mean, I was able to determine the change that occurs in coverage when Democrats are in charge of the House and the article focuses on foreign affairs.

As seen in Table 10w, when the Democrats control the House and the coverage is about foreign affairs, Democrats have a 9% chance of seeing increased number of articles that mention their caucus leadership.

The number of articles that mention both majority Democrats and minority Republican leaders drops in likelihood by 2%.

Significantly, foreign affairs articles that mention the minority Republicans exclusively are 7% less likely to occur. Issue ownership theory would dictate that the

GOP House leaders should receive <u>more</u> coverage, even when in the minority. However, the data suggests that the power bias (i.e., majority status) trumps issue ownership and therefore contradicts my stated hypothesis.

Table 10w
Likelihood of Coverage that Mentions House Leaders When Coverage is on Foreign Affairs and Democrats are the House Majority

Inclusion of Mention of House Leadership	Mean	Standard Error
Democrats only	0.09	.0283667
Republicans and Democrats	-0.02	.0078165
Republicans only	-0.07	.0207711

If one assesses coverage by the tone of the article towards either party, it appears that when the Republicans are in control of the House, the tone for the GOP overall gets slightly better when the coverage moves to focus on foreign affairs. This is what I would expect because, over this period, from 1981 through 2010, it was argued that the Republicans owned the foreign policy issue.

In cases when the Republicans are the House majority, as you keep all other variables at their mean, and move from non-foreign affairs articles to foreign affairs articles, the average article's tone towards the Republican Party is:

- 0% likely to be mostly negative

- 7% less likely to be somewhat negative

- 0% likely to be neutral or mixed

- 6% more likely to be somewhat positive

- 2% more likely to be mostly positive

While these numbers are small, they nonetheless offer support for those who say that the Republican Party owns the issue of foreign affairs and therefore coverage of foreign affairs benefits its party's leaders.

This also might be explained by the power bias – the Republicans, after all, are in the majority in these cases. Therefore, I looked to see if the Democrats had the same kind of positive tone for their party when the coverage related to foreign policy and they were in the majority, or was my hypothesis correct and because the GOP owned the issues, coverage of Democrats was more negative.

The data shows very similar numbers for the Democratic Party when they control the House as for the Republican Party when there is a House GOP majority.

In cases when the Democrats are the House majority, when you keep all other independent variables at their mean, and the subject of the coverage shifts to foreign affairs, the article's tone towards the Democratic Party is:

- 0%   likely to be mostly negative

- 3%   less likely to be somewhat negative

- 1%   likely to be neutral or mixed

- 3%   more likely to be someone positive

- 2%   more likely to be mostly positive

These numbers are even smaller than the Republican Party's numbers, but because they do not skew towards a more negative tone, the data would seem to suggest that issue ownership in foreign affairs doesn't have as much explanatory power when assessing the tone of coverage of House majority leadership.

* * * * *

My hypothesis predicts that when the subject matter is a **congressional scandal**, coverage of House caucus leaders will be better for the non-scandal party. To properly assess explanatory power, I broke down the few scandal stories into those about the Majority and those about the minority party in the House.

Using the appropriate nested model for measuring coverage by the quantity of message paragraphs by the House majority leadership, I was able to generate a statistically significant incidence rate ratio (IRR) of 1.43109 for stories involving a majority party scandal (p≤.01). Out of the 3,096 articles in the data set, 143 involved a House majority scandal and 29 reported on a scandal involving the Majority as well as the Minority.

This IRR statistic means that at each level of House majority involvement with a congressional scandal, the House majority leadership's coverage – in terms of the number of message paragraphs it receives, increases by 43%. Thus, as coverage moves from no coverage of a congressional scandal to one involving only the Majority, there will be a statistically significant increase in the quantity of message paragraphs for the House majority leadership (1.43109^3 = 2.930898).

As seen in Table 10x, when the article is not about any scandal at all, or is about a congressional scandal involving the House minority, House leaders in the majority will receive, on average, a little more than one message paragraph. However, when the coverage is about a congressional scandal involving both the majority and the minority in the House – such as the House bank scandal of the early 1990s[907] – majority leadership

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[907] In April 1992, following several months of negotiations and political posturing, the House ethics committee released the names of 247 current and 56 former members who overdrew from their checking

receives two message paragraphs of coverage on average. And in those cases when the article is about a congressional scandal that only involved the House majority, its leadership receives, on average, three paragraphs, twice of what it receives when the coverage didn't involve them at all.

Table 10x
Quantity of Message Paragraphs for House Majority Leadership When Coverage Involves a Congressional Scandal and the House Minority

Topic of article	Mean	Standard Deviation
Article is NOT about scandal involving House majority	1.33	42.22
Article is about scandal involving House majority and minority	2.03	4.48
Article is about scandal involving House majority only	2.67	10.29

After turning my attention to how many message paragraphs were usually received by the House <u>minority</u> leadership when the coverage involved a congressional scandal, I found that there is a statistically significant relationship between the number of message paragraphs for the House minority and coverage related to a scandal involving the Majority, as well as coverage involving a scandal with the House minority. The key finding here is that there is no negative number – below 1.0 – for either. Coverage goes up for minority leadership, regardless of whether which party is involved. But it goes up much more when its party is caught up in the scandal. This lends mixed support for my hypothesis. On one hand, coverage of the non-scandal party improves, as predicted, but at the same time, coverage of the scandal party also improves.

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accounts maintained by the House bank. Even though no laws or ethics rules were violated (the House bank routinely allowed members to have free overdraft protection and did not notify them when it was done), the service "crystallized a perception that representatives are pampered by perquisites out of reach of the average citizen." Clifford Krauss. "Committee Names All Who Overdrew at the House Bank." *New York Times*. 17 April 1992. A1.

With an IRR of 1.194994 (p<.05), House leaders in the <u>minority</u> can expect to see a 19% bump at each level of scandal coverage involving the <u>Majority</u>. This would mean that from the lowest level – the scandal either involves the Minority or the coverage isn't about a scandal at all – to the highest level, when the scandal involves the Majority exclusively, the House <u>minority</u> leadership will see a 71% increase in the number of message paragraphs. (1.194994^3 = 1.706464)

When the scandal involves the <u>minority</u> party in the House, its leaders see an even greater jump in the amount of coverage, as measured in message paragraphs: 372%. The statistically significant IRR is 1.678003 (p≤.01). Thus, 1.678003^3 = 4.724743. This dramatic increase may be because the House minority so rarely is deemed worthy of coverage at all that when a scandal erupts involving its members, the sudden attention is even more pronounced.

The percentages are large, but it would help researchers to understand what this means in terms of the mean number of message paragraphs being generated. Unfortunately, because of colinearity issues and my very small N[908], I was unable to generate the mean number of paragraphs for each level.

In terms of assessing coverage by looking at the location of each leadership team's first message paragraph, my hypothesis includes four possible situations. (Table 10y)

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[908] There were only 18 articles involving a minority scandal included in the data set, and 29 involving both the House majority and the House minority

Table 10y
Expectation of Location of House Leadership's First Message Paragraph in an Article about Congressional Scandal

	Location of Majority's first message paragraph	Location of Minority's first message paragraph
Scandal involves House majority	Expected to be further away from the headline	Expected to be closer to the headline
Scandal involves House minority	Expected to be closer to the headline	Expected to be further away from the headline

Using the appropriate nested model, I found an IRR of .819374 (p≤.01), indicating that there is an 18% decrease in the average distance between the headline and the Majority's first message paragraph, at each level of involvement with the scandal. Thus, when stories are exclusively about House majority member(s) involved in a scandal, the House majority leadership see its first message location become 55% closer to the headline (.819374^3 = .550106).

This would seem to contradict my expectations. I had posited that a scandal involving one party benefits the press coverage of the other party. The aforementioned output indicates that coverage of the scandal party increases when the article is about the scandal.

When I delved deeper to see what these percentages meant in terms of the mean location of the majority leadership's first message paragraph, I found that when the Majority was not involved with the congressional scandal, the mean paragraph of the majority leadership's first message was 8.3 paragraphs away from the headline. (Table 10z)

When the story is about both the majority and minority parties' involvement with a House scandal, the average placement of the Majority's first message paragraph is 8.2 paragraphs away from the headline. When the story was exclusively about the Majority

and its scandal, then the majority leaders' first messages typically appear between the

fifth and 6th paragraph.

Table 10z
Location of the House Majority Leadership's First Message Paragraph in Coverage Involves a Congressional Scandal and House Majority

Type of Scandal Coverage	Mean	Standard Deviation
Article is NOT about scandal involving House majority	8.28	52.64
Article is about scandal involving House majority and minority	8.17	4.34
Article is about scandal involving House majority only	5.49	11.59

Thus, as one moves towards coverage of a scandal involving the Majority, the

majority's leadership is more likely to see its first message paragraph closer to the

headline.

Using the appropriate nested model, I found a statistically significant relationship

when examining the <u>tone</u> of the coverage towards the <u>majority</u> party when there was

coverage of a scandal involving the House majority ($p \le .01$) and coverage of a scandal

involving the House minority ($p \le .05$).

I then examined the mean statistic at each of the five levels of my tone variable,

when looking at scandal coverage, and focusing first on the Majority. My expectation is

that when the focus is on a House scandal involving the majority party, the tone of the

coverage towards that party will decrease. The output clearly supports this hypothesis.

Under these circumstances, the tone towards the party of the majority is:

- 17%   more likely to be mostly negative

- 4%   more likely to be somewhat negative

- 24%   less likely to be neutral or mixed

- 26% less likely to be somewhat positive

- 6% less likely to be mostly positive

As stated previously, this is rather self-evident and therefore not surprising. I then considered the tone towards the <u>minority</u> party when the Majority is involved with the scandal. I expect that the tone of the coverage should be much more favorable towards the Minority in these cases. Unfortunately, there is no statistical significance to support this prediction.

At this point, I turned my attention to measuring the tone of coverage towards the minority party when the scandal involved the minority party. As expected, when articles move towards a scandal involving the House minority, coverage of the House minority party is:

- 26% more likely to be mostly negative

- 37% more likely to be somewhat negative

- 36% less likely to be neutral or mixed

- 22% less likely to be somewhat positive

- 5% less likely to be mostly positive

I then looked at how the tone towards the party of the House <u>majority</u> would be affected when the scandal involves the House <u>minority</u>. In this case, I am expecting the tone to improve as the other party is wrapped up in the negative story. The data, however, doesn't offer strong support for this hypothesis.

Interestingly, it seems that even when the scandal involves the minority party in the House, the tone towards the majority party is more likely to be negative. When coverage involves a House <u>minority</u> scandal, the tone towards the <u>majority</u> party is:

- 4%   more likely to me mostly negative

- 19%   more likely to be somewhat negative

- 5%   less likely to be neutral or mixed

- 14%   less likely to be somewhat positive

- 4%   less likely to be mostly positive

These results may possibly be explained because press coverage holds the House majority leadership responsible for the overall management of the institution, so any scandal – even one affecting the other party – that comes on their watch is reflected with more negative than positive coverage.

*   *   *   *   *

Using multivariate analysis, I isolated the **presidential popularity** condition to measure its effect on the coverage of House leadership. My hypothesis predicts that when the president is popular, media coverage will be better for the president's fellow partisans in the House. Unfortunately, I found only statistically significant relationship. When looking at the quantity of message paragraphs for House caucus leaders in the <u>minority</u>, there was a statistically significant relationship that translated into an incidence rate ratio (IRR) of 1.008754, which means that as the president's approval ratings go up, the only thing we can say with is that there will be almost no difference in the amount of message paragraphs received by the minority leadership in the House. Given virtually no

difference in this one significant measure, I chose not to continue this analysis with partisan break downs.

<p align="center">*   *   *   *   *</p>

In looking at the effect of media coverage on House leaders as **GDP (Gross Domestic Product) growth changes**, I predicted that as the economy grows, the press coverage will be better for majority caucus leadership. Those in charge of the House of Representatives should receive the lion's share of the credit for the improving economic conditions, and therefore more press coverage. Media attention of the minority leadership in the House, whose policies have less chance of being integrated, should be expected to decrease as the economy improves.

Using the appropriate nested model, my GDP growth variable was shown to be statistically significant when regressed against articles that include a mention of House caucus leadership. The analysis of my data lends support to my hypothesis. When average annual growth in GDP increases:

- Articles that exclusively mention the House majority leadership are 10% more likely to appear.

- Articles that mention both the House majority and House minority leaders are 2.2% less likely to appear.

- The likelihood of articles appearing that only mention the House minority leadership drop by 7.6%.

Thus, a growing economy clearly favors the House majority, and actually punishes the House minority leadership in terms of mentions.

When operationalizing media coverage as those articles that include a message paragraph, I found a statistically significant relationship and support for my hypothesis. House majority leaders are indeed more likely to receive more coverage as the annual GDP growth rate increases from the lowest to the highest over the period of 1981 to 2010.

- Majority leaders in the House of Representatives are 12% more likely to receive exclusive coverage (as counted by the inclusion of a message paragraph) when the annual GDP growth rate increases from the lowest to the highest.

- Articles that contain message paragraphs from both majority and minority leaders in the House are 3% less likely to occur when the annual GDP growth rate increases from the lowest to the highest.

- House minority leaders are 9% less likely to receive exclusive coverage (as measured by the inclusion of message paragraphs) when the annual GDP growth rate increases from the lowest to the highest.

Finally, one can assess press coverage by examining the tone of the article towards either party. The appropriate nested model showed that there was only a statistically significant relationship between the tone towards the minority party and the change in GDP growth. In this case, I took the additional step of breaking down the tone

measurement between times when the Republicans were in the House minority

(N=1,492) and when the Democrats were in the minority (N=834).

The differences between the two parties were stark. When the Republicans were

in the minority in the House of Representatives, and GDP growth change is adjusted from

its lowest to its highest, the tone of a given article towards the Republican Party is:

- 3%   less likely to be mostly negative

- 17%   less likely to be somewhat negative

- 1%   less likely to be neutral or mixed

- 14%   more likely to be somewhat positive

- 7%   more likely to be mostly positive

So, in contrast to my hypothesis that expected poorer coverage for the House

minority and the economy grows, the data shows that under these circumstances, the tone

of articles covering House leaders is more likely to be favorable towards the Republicans

in the House minority. This may be because of perceptions that the GOP "owns"

economic issues and therefore can take credit for economic growth even when they are

not in charge.

I then broke down my dataset to see if tone changes for the Democratic Party

when the Democrats are the House minority. Under this circumstance, the tone for the

Democratic Party in a given article improves, as you move from the lowest change in

GDP to the highest, and holding all the other independent variables at their mean. This

improvement, however, is quite minimal and certainly not as much as was generated for

the GOP when Republicans were the House minority.

- 0%   likely mostly negative

- 4%   less likely somewhat negative

- 3%   less likely neutral or mixed

- 5%   more likely somewhat positive

- 2%   more likely most positive

*   *   *   *   *

Poor economic conditions, as expressed by the national **unemployment** rate, may also affect the press coverage of House leaders. My hypothesis is that coverage as the unemployment rate increases will improve for the House minority leadership and worsen for those in the majority.

Using the appropriate nested model, I found that articles that include a mention of House leadership have a statistically significant relationship with the national unemployment rate. In support of my hypothesis, I found that as the unemployment rate increases, coverage that:

- Mentions the House majority leadership exclusively drops by 8%;

- Mentions both the House majority and minority leaders increases by a very slight 2%; and

- Mentions the House minority leadership exclusively increases by 7%.

Therefore, the impact of the economy on press coverage works both ways, in terms of mentions. Previously, I found that when the economy is growing, the Majority benefits with more coverage and the Minority receives less coverage. Here, I found that as the economy does worse, the Majority receives less coverage and the Minority receives more coverage, though not at the same levels as a growing economy generated.

When I operationalize press coverage as those articles that include a message paragraph by House caucus leadership, there continues to be a statistically significant relationship with the national unemployment rate.

What is suggested by this data is evidence to support my hypothesis that as the unemployment rate goes up, there will be more coverage of the House minority. Holding all other variables at their mean:

- Majority House caucus leaders are 10% less likely to receive exclusive coverage as the unemployment rate goes from its lowest to its highest level over the 30-year period of the study.

- Articles that contain both minority and majority leadership messages are 2% more likely to occur as the unemployment rate goes from its lowest to its highest level over the 30-year period of the study.

- House caucus leaders in the minority are 8% more likely to receive exclusive coverage as the unemployment rate goes from its lowest to its highest level over the 30-year period of the study.

In conclusion, my quantitative data consists of 3,096 news articles that were coded. These articles were randomly selected from search terms that included the eight caucus leaders at the time (four for each side) as well as group references, such as "Republican leaders in the House" or "House Democratic leadership." The sources for these articles were the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. Other scholars have found that these two newspapers are media leaders whose coverage sets the agenda for

other news outlets.[909] Looking at how they reported on Congress can serve therefore as a stand-in for how the media overall covers Congress. The final data set has an average of 103 articles per year: 54% from the *New York Times* and 46% from the *Washington Post*.

My analysis begins by assessing coverage for the majority leadership and compared it to that which was generated by the House minority leadership. This dissertation predicts that the power bias will be present throughout the time period studied.   I then developed hypotheses for 11 separate "conditions" under which leaders in the House would receive better or worse coverage.

These conditions included:

- **Year** – I expected the passage of time to allow majority leaders to receive better coverage and minority leaders to receive worse coverage.

- In an **election year**, I expected majority leaders to receive worse coverage and minority leaders to see an improvement in coverage.

- I predicted that the smaller the **margin** between the two parties in the House, the better the coverage would be for both the Majority and the Minority.

- My hypotheses said that as each side becomes more isolated within the larger Washington, DC power structure, the better the coverage. **Isolation** refers to where one party stands in terms of control of the House, the Senate, and the White House at a given moment in time.

- I examined the effect of the **party label** and predicted that Democrats would receive better coverage than Republicans.

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[909] Sinclair, 1995; Cook, 1989; Johnson and O'Grady, 2012.

- I looked at two categories of issues and hypothesized that, as the Republicans can claim they "own" the **economy** and **foreign affairs** during this time period, they would receive better coverage when the article focused on either of those issues.

- **Scandals** involving members of the House can completely upend the expected coverage. The party that is not being accused of ethical impropriety has a chance, especially if it is the minority, to push forward with its messages and receive better coverage in the press.

- Jacobson and Kernell write about the impact of national conditions on congressional elections.[910] Basically, if it is perceived to be a "good year" for one party, then its most talented and ambitious challengers will step up to run, giving that party a much better chance to actually win seats. Since the public's perception of what is, or is not, a "good year" can be affected by media coverage of Congress, this dissertation examines coverage under different scenarios, including **presidential popularity**, **economic growth**, and the national **unemployment** rate. Thus, when the president is popular, media coverage of House leadership should be better for those in the president's party. And when economic growth is strong or when unemployment is down, it was predicted that media coverage would be better for the Majority.

In order to provide a more robust assessment of "coverage" of House leadership, I utilized five different measurements:

- Was a House majority or minority leader **mentioned** in the article?

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[910] Jacobson and Kernell, 1982.

- Was there a **message** from a House leader in the article? A message was a quotation from a House caucus leader or a description that showed him or her as actively pushing a message.

- **How many paragraphs with messages** were found in the article? When a House leader is quoted again and again in one story, it makes for much better coverage.

- Where was the **placement of the first paragraph with a message**? If one were to count mentions in an article, then a story that quotes a majority leader in paragraph two and quotes a minority leader in paragraph 22 would be considered as equal. Both sides were mentioned. But this dissertation argues that there is a big difference in the coverage in that example. By operationalizing coverage this additional way, the analysis is both broader and deeper.

- What was the **tone of the article**? I chose to examine the tone towards the overall party, and not just towards the House leaders. When assessing tone, one needs to consider the entire article and not just the sentences where House leaders were referenced. So, for example, if the article was on the Iran-Contra scandal, the tone towards the Republican Party might be coded as negative, even if the GOP leaders in the House weren't involved with the controversy.

Overall, the use of five different measures of coverage showed mixed results. Under some conditions, there was strong support, weak support, and unexpected results depending on how coverage was measured. Clearly, relying on one kind of measurement might not fully capture the true scope of media attention. Nonetheless, this initial

examination provides scholars with some insights into how one might assess messaging efforts by Congress in the future.

Additional findings that emerged include:

Majority leadership continues to receive more coverage than minority leadership, and this occurred even in election years when control of the House was about to switch, reflecting the pervasive nature of the power bias. A strong economy, as measured by the change in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth will assist the majority's advantage and produce even more coverage in the press.

With one exception, the party label does not seem to have as strong as an effect as those who believe there is a media bias towards the Democratic Party would suggest. Rather, I found that majority leadership, regardless of party, continues to dominate the coverage.

Under some condition, the dominance of the majority party in generating press coverage can be reduced. This occurs in election years, when the president is popular and is of the same party as the House minority, and when there is a weak economy, as demonstrated by a high unemployment rate.

Over time, I expected – with the rise in partisanship and increasingly ideologically unified parties – the Majority's advantage in press coverage would grow. But instead, the data shows that – at least in terms of mentions – it fluctuates and often moves in opposite directions. It was also predicted that when the margin between the two parties is smaller, both the majority and the minority leaders would see improved coverage. However, again, when coverage is measured by mentions, it fluctuated.

For the minority leadership in the House, the most coverage was generated not when it was most isolated, as predicted, but when it was least isolated (e.g., when its fellow partisans were in control of the Senate and the White House. For majority leaders, coverage is best when it is somewhat – not most – isolated within the Washington, DC power structure.

Finally, issue ownership doesn't seem to have a big effect on coverage and, while there was limited coverage of House scandals within the dataset, my results showed little evidence to support my prediction that coverage would be generated for the non-scandal party. Instead, the media attention is clearly on the party involved with the scandal.

CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSIONS AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The development the communications efforts of House caucus leaders stems, as many advances in politics do, from the loss of an election. The campaign of 1980 was not a good one for the Democratic party. Not only did Ronald Reagan deny Jimmy Carter a second term in the White House, but Senate Republicans picked up 12 seats, allowing them to take control of that chamber for the first time since the Eisenhower administration in 1955. More importantly for the focus on this dissertation, Democrats in the House of Representatives lost 36 seats. While Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill (MA) and his fellow partisans continued to have a significant voting margin over the Republicans, there were concerns that the ground was shifting underneath them. O'Neill was ready to try new approaches and subsequently began to utilize polling data more extensively than leadership had ever done before. He and other House Democratic leaders were looking for an edge in their fights with the transformative new Republican president and they utilized survey data to help them find it. By his side, and encouraging him to go even further, was Rep. Tony Coelho, the young, tech-savvy representative from California, who O'Neill had appointed as head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC). They were among the first to recognize that in order to ensure continued Democratic dominance in the House, effective national messaging was needed. Reliance on each member's home style was no longer enough. Reagan had nationalized the political debates of the day and congressional Democrats needed to respond.

This was a significant shift in emphasis in House leadership behavior not just because it had not been done before, but because it was behavior motivated by the pursuit of electoral success. Past scholarship that has examined the nexus between Congress and the media typically focuses on the drive to pass legislation. While such a connection is evident, it is increasingly clear that in the 1980s, passing new laws was not the exclusive motivation for House leadership communication activities. As Reagan's success at national communications forced the Democrats to rethink and revamp their own operations, the concerns for O'Neill, Coelho and others were with electoral outcomes, not simply legislative ones. Such behavior was also motivated by congressional reforms that reduced power of committee chairs but strengthened the power of core leadership; namely, the speaker. This required House caucus leaders to be more engaged in the "outside game" of building their respective party's brand, so as to positively shape the electoral landscape faced by their members and candidates. Their effectiveness in presenting their caucus and party in a positive light could also translate into the best candidates running for Congress against incumbent Republicans, as well as improved fundraising. Recognizing that House caucus leaders are motivated by the desire to do more than just pass legislation is critical for understanding what they did and how they assessed what they did when it came to press outreach.

This dissertation is driven by two fundamental questions. First, **what was the scope and context of media outreach efforts by House caucus leaders from 1981 to 2010?** Clearly, more time, resources, and personnel were dedicated over the years to garnering press attention. These efforts were shaped by five contextual elements that

came about during this era, including the aftereffects of 1970s reforms, key House caucus leadership personalities and their ambitions, increasing sophistication in messaging technology, the changing media landscape, and the rise in partisanship in Congress. House caucus leaders navigated the changing terrain as they pursued coverage that will allow them to achieve their goals.

These goals, for the majority leadership in the House, include a primary focus on maintaining their majority, running the day-to-day operations of the House, and passing legislation. Though frequently ignored, or assumed to be identical to those of the Majority, the minority caucus leadership has an alternative set of goals, including taking over the majority, influencing House operations, and influencing legislation. Within each of these goals, minority leaders may pursue a traditional or contrarian approach. For example, as a minority leader in the House, one can either compete for open seats and challenge vulnerable opponents during election season (traditional approach) or attack the Majority as part of a permanent campaign and draw stark distinctions between the two parties as a whole and not just with individual members (contrarian approach). Similarly, how one influences House operations can be approached differently. On one hand, minority leaders traditionally negotiate with the Majority for seats on committees, office space, funding for staff, etc. The contrarian approach would be to prevent the House from operating smoothly, thereby bringing about dysfunction and chaos that reflect poorly on the Majority's leadership. This weaker image, in turn, makes it less likely that the electoral landscape for the majority party's candidates will be favorable. Finally, in terms of passing legislation, traditional minority leaders would typically negotiate with

the Majority to shape a bill. In contrast, a contrarian leader in the minority would seek to obstruct the passage of legislation favored by the majority leadership.

Because majority status is the prerequisite for influencing the House operations and legislation, caucus leaders would naturally prioritize the electoral objective over the others. As several scholars have noted, successful elections in the post-reform House result not just from one's home style, but also from the quality of challengers."[911] The quality of challengers, in turn, is influenced heavily by "national conditions," such as presidential approval and the state of the economy.[912] These national conditions can fluctuate over time and therefore, their political impact is highly susceptible to public interpretation. Since public opinion has such a strong influence in how national conditions are understood, House leaders have a strong, vested interest in shaping it, and thus, aggressive media outreach has grown to be a major part of leadership activities. While voters might not know all the details of major policy debates, they use the party label to help guide their decisions on election day. This dynamic of decision-making, in turn, affects the objective of House leaders: To be most effective in winning elections – their primary objective – they need to promote the party brand, and thereby improve the political landscape for their party's candidates in the future. There are three primary areas in which House caucus leaders promote their respective party's image to assist their members' electoral chances: agenda setting, issue ownership, and public relations. The nature of the first two infer the necessity of the third; that is, anyone seeking to set the agenda and own an issue is naturally going to focus public attention on those items

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[911] Jacobson and Kernell, 1983; Cox and Katz, 1996.
[912] Jacobson, 1989; Jacobson and Kernell, 1983.

through public relations. Leaders' public relations efforts can be done most efficiently though ongoing media outreach.

A second question asked by this dissertation is, **under what conditions will House caucus leaders be more or less effective in garnering coverage?** Any number of exogenous forces can impact one's ability to be covered. Fundamentally, this begins with whether or not a House leader is in the majority. Probing deeper, I looked at other conditions that fall under five categories, including **Time** (specific year; election year), **Status** (margin between the Majority and Minority; isolation among other Washington power centers), **Party** (Democrat/Republican), **Issue** (economy; foreign affairs; scandal), and **National Dynamics** (presidential approval; change in GDP growth; national unemployment rate).

In addition, the media outreach efforts of House caucus leaders are shaped by a number of alleged biases of the press. The "routines bias" proposes that reporters follow certain industry-accepted rules in an effort to protect themselves from allegations of bias. The irony that's been found is that the result of following routines is coverage that provides some members, issues, and perspectives more attention than others.[913] In effect, news is affected by reporters trying to do the opposite. Groeling offered evidence of another kind of bias; one based a party's "isolation" in the House vis-à-vis which party controls the Senate and which party controls the White House.[914] While unified control helps with passing legislation, he argues, the more isolated one is as a leader of the House, in comparison to other power centers in Washington, DC, the better the news coverage.

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[913] Kuklinsky and Sigelman, 1992.
[914] Groeling, 2010.

"Conflict bias," the pitting of the two parties against each other so as to tell a more engaging story in the media, is another allegation offered by some scholars.[915] Reporters, they say, are looking for the provocative comment that best hypes the battle motif. As the media turns to incorporating congressional campaigns in its coverage every other year, horse race journalism contributes to the alleged "conflict bias" as well. There is, of course, no shortage of allegations of "partisan bias," usually arguing that the mainstream media favor Democrats/liberals and are downright hostile towards Republicans/conservatives. Finally, the "power bias" charges that reporters focus their attention on those who have the most ability to shape final outcomes of activities in the House. Rather than offering balance, as "routines bias" might do, the "power bias" would largely ignore the House minority leadership, for example, because they have so little power to affect the results of any particular action. It is this last bias – the power bias – that I chose as a fundamental assumption in my hypotheses and analysis.

Taken together, understanding when House leaders will receive better or worse coverage involves measuring the impact of these conditions and acknowledging the potential biases that might contribute to the output as well.

There are four primary reasons why answering these questions are important for scholarship.

First, if party image affects electoral outcomes, then it is important to understand how leaders shape that image. Majority and minority leaders prioritize maintaining or gaining majority status in the House of Representatives. The party label remains a widely assumed heuristic for voters, especially those who are more

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[915] Tidmarch and Pitney, 1985.

sophisticated and therefore more likely to cast ballots in a congressional election. Thus, it behooves caucus leaders to shape the respective image of their party though all means, and indeed, scholars have found that party images become embedded in the mind of the public because of such activities.[916] Doing this well should contribute to electoral success. Between 1981 and 2010, the public relations efforts of House caucus leaders have been significantly expanded. With so much riding on each election, it is important for scholars to have a full understanding of how leaders develop, disseminate, and assess messages, as well as how they perceive this obligation as a leader, and how well they navigate others within the Washington power structure to win coverage.

Second, if democracy requires an informed citizenry, we need to understand how well media covers both parties in Congress. The press plays a fundamental role in educating the electorate on the parties, candidates, and issues. However, only through a proper assessment of the actual coverage can one begin to look critically at whether the press is doing its job within our democracy. If, as a result of the power bias, the House majority receives far more attention than the House minority, how does the Minority ever succeed in getting its messages out to the public for consideration? The fact that there have been three recent switches in partisan control of the House – 1994, 2006, and 2010 – counters the theoretical expectation that little coverage of the House minority should doom its members to permanent minority status, and necessitates additional study. The results of such research may influence future studies of media coverage, and shape the decision making of reporters and editors covering Congress as well.

A third reason that this study is important is because while we know that House caucus leaders have expanded their efforts to promote messages in the media,

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[916] Woon and Pope, 2008; Brewer, 2009.

we don't know how much success they are having in being covered. Serving as national spokespersons for their respective parties and leading the efforts to develop and disseminate national messages became readily accepted parts of a caucus leader's job description during this period of time. However, the leaders their staffs rarely examined the effectiveness of all their efforts. Quantifiable assessments of communications work were almost always unsophisticated and cursory. What this dissertation provides is a more robust examination of the communication effectiveness of House leaders. The data provided is necessary because House leaders and scholars may shift how they do their work in light of the analysis.

The fourth and final reason why this dissertation is needed is because it fills in the gaps that currently exist in the literature. There are several areas in which past efforts to examine the relationship between congressional leadership and the press falls short. To begin, previous scholarship seldom looks at press coverage of Congress over multiple decades. Usually, analyses cover a much shorter time frame, often consisting of a few months. Using an extended period provides an opportunity to look for trends and to account for the significant exogenous changes that have occurred (e.g., increasing partisanship, changing media landscape, etc.).

Further, current research tends to ignore the differences between majority and minority House leaders, even though each has very different motivations and available tools. During the 40-year run of Democratic hegemony in the House (1955 to 1995), it was perhaps easy to discount the role of the Minority. The House GOP had no power and no one expected them to gain some anytime soon. All that mattered, it seemed, was what the Democratic majority did. However, since 1994, the House has fully entered into what

I suggest is a competitive era, and therefore it is more important than ever to study the differences between each side's efforts and effectiveness.

In addition – and perhaps tangentially related to the tendency to not distinguish between the Majority and the Minority – congressional scholars have often talked about Republicans and Democrats in the majority as if they were interchangeable. This occurred despite each party having its own issues and internal dynamics. In particular, partisan distinctions matter because coverage can be affected by which party has control of other power centers in Washington, such as the White House and the Senate. Finally, it is impossible to assess the persistent allegations of partisan bias in the press without collecting data that applies a partisan filter.

Finally, the current scholarship tends to lump all sorts of congressional leaders together, when, because of different agenda, responsibilities, and constituencies, committee leadership should be considered separately from caucus leadership. Only the top caucus leaders are duly elected by their fellow partisans in the House. They are the ones most responsible and accountable for the collective health of their caucus, and therefore they assume the most responsibility for collective communications. While caucus leaders on both sides of the aisle have expanded their communications efforts by enlisting the support of other members, it is only the top leaders who are held accountable if the caucus is unhappy with messaging effectiveness.

To address the two fundamental questions of this study, and further, to account for the gaps in the current literature, this dissertation provides both qualitative and quantitative data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 former

communications staff members for top House leaders who served during the period of 1981 through 2010. Twelve Republicans and nine Democrats were included. The interviews began with a conversation about the process – how messages were developed, disseminated, and assessed by House leadership. The interviews then turned to the assumptions held by the communicators and their bosses on what they thought would be effective, why they did certain things and not others, their perceptions of their responsibilities as those responsible for the entire caucus, and the dynamics of a competitive newsmaker landscape in which House leaders seek coverage while several others do the same.

In addition, a database was created of 3,096 news articles that mentioned a specific House caucus leader or referenced them as a group. These stories all come from either the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*. Using the Lexis/Nexis Academic database, approximately 50 stories were randomly selected from each newspaper, each year, for all 30 years covered by this dissertation. Every article was coded using five different measurements of media "coverage," including mentions of House caucus leaders, inclusion of a message from those leaders, the location of their first message within a story, the quantity of paragraphs with a message, and the tone towards the party as a whole (not simply congressional caucuses). These five dependent variables were then examined, using bivariate and multivariate analysis, against 11 possible "conditions" under which leaders could expect to receive more or less coverage.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Members of Congress require caucus leadership as a response to two collective action problems. First, working alone, a member will find it much more difficult to

achieve policy goals. Centralized leadership in the House is best positioned to organize its respective caucuses on behalf of a unifying legislative agenda. Second, a member's primary goal – winning reelection – takes place within a partisan-based legislative body. Therefore, each member has a stake in the strength of the party brand – an often-used heuristic for voters – and the general political landscape. However, working alone, a member will have great difficulty in shaping these key factors. As agents of the party's congressional caucus, House leaders are better positioned to speak on their behalf and otherwise act so that the party brand is strengthened and that the terrain upon which their candidates, both incumbents and challengers, will run is favorable. To address both of these collective action problems, House caucus leaders will use every tool available to them, including media outreach.

My interviews with 19 former communications staffers for House caucus leaders confirmed that leaders of the two parties' caucuses dramatically increased their investment of time, resources, and personnel during the 1981 – 2010 period. Prior to 1981, Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill had already begun to significantly increase his television appearances, as compared to the two previous speakers, Rep. Carl Albert (OK) and Rep. John McCormack (MA). A major shift occurred when O'Neill brought on Chris Matthews as his spokesman, and eventually, top aide. Matthews was mentioned by several leadership communicators as redefining the communications staff position into one involving much more advocacy and active engagement with the media on behalf of his boss. The hiring of Matthews was also significant because it reflected leadership acceptance of the importance of media outreach at a time when so few members of the House had full-time press secretaries. Thirty years later, the staff position was ubiquitous

throughout Capitol Hill and top leaders had teams of several staffers focused exclusively on communications.

The process by which House caucus leaders develop messages to promote their party's positions largely evolved in the same ways for Republicans and Democrats. It would be a collaborative effort that frequently involved multiple meetings with a combination of leadership, members, staff, and consultants, such as pollsters and campaign strategists, participating. The legislative agenda often set the stage for the messages that were being developed; it was what everyone could talk about. As the House majority was in charge of setting the agenda, it had a strong advantage over the minority in terms of generating coverage. They knew what was happening before anyone else and they had the power to shape the outcome more than anyone else. At the same time, minority leaders did not shy away from actively promoting their own messages, and in many cases, pursued it happily because they could do so while free of the obligations of governing. Given the ability to add whatever rhetorical flourish they wanted, minority leaders in the House freely and creatively engaged the media on behalf of their membership.

My research suggests that disseminating the messages that were developed by majority and minority leadership begins with many of the traditional tools, such as pen-and-pads, floor remarks, press conferences, press releases, Sunday talk shows on the three major networks, and one-on-one conversations with reporters. Throughout the three decade period covered by this dissertation, all of these were used by caucus leaders in the House. In addition, over time, top-level communicators on both sides of the aisle

found new options for spreading their messages. Anything utilized by one party was quickly recognized and adopted, with varying degrees of success, by the other side.

These additional options for disseminating leadership messages include special orders speeches and one-minutes (collectively referred to as non-legislative debate), talk radio, cable news networks and, eventually, social media through the Internet. The growth of an online electorate incentivized House caucus leaders to target their messages to specific audiences, something that could now be done more effectively than ever. This often allowed messages to be delivered unfiltered by traditional media.

Thus, the period 1981 to 2010 shows strong support for the prediction that House caucus leaders will actively promote their party's position in the media.

My qualitative data also suggests that House caucus leaders believe that national communications is part of their job responsibility and that caucus members expect them to do it well. Those interviewed routinely agreed that such efforts were one element of what they had to do by virtue of serving in a core leadership position. When national messaging driven by leadership was not done well, complaints from members most often went to the top leaders, despite the collaborative process used to create and disseminate the messages. This only served to reinforce the notion among leadership staff that their offices were responsible, regardless of how many members were involved in national communications.

Additional hurdles to effective communications arose as House caucus leaders faced competition to be covered by the media, and this led to occasional frustration among their staffs. Sometimes caucus leaders were political rivals and/or uneasy partners resulting in varying degrees of success when it came to promoting a unified message.

Other times, leaders would have to compete with the voices of fellow partisans who were outside the official caucus leadership circle. Each party's leaders would also strive to communicate more effectively than their counterparts across the aisle, since they were also seeking to win space within limited political coverage. Finally, House caucus leaders believed they were responsible for communicating on behalf of their members even when they had to compete with the White House for precious media coverage. (Competition from the Senate for media coverage was rarely mentioned, and even when it was, was dismissed as not being a real threat to coverage of House leadership messaging.) The president, a solitary voice speaking from a position of tremendous authority, almost always won these battles with the House for press attention. Even though they understood that they were in a weakened position because of the internal and external competition, House caucus leaders nonetheless pursued and expanded their media outreach operations because they believed retreating from such an effort would be seen as an abdication of one of their central duties as leaders.

Communications staff who worked for caucus leaders over the course of three decades studied here provided nuanced support for the idea that House leadership would engage in national messaging so as to shape the party brand and provide for a more hospitable electoral landscape. Leaders did, indeed, consider communications an important ingredient to a successful election year. This assumption became even more important following the 1994 election and the unexpected GOP takeover of the House. The Contract with America, a 10-point agenda offered by House Republican incumbents and challengers in September 1994, was widely perceived as having been a very effective national messaging tool. The Contract was understood to be pivotal to the GOP winning

the majority and therefore it was assumed by Republican leadership staff that collective communications from leadership was going to continue if they wanted to maintain their newfound status. For their part, Democrats at the time – now led by Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (MO) – focused intensely on winning the House majority back through what they believed to have been the Republicans most effective tool: national communications. Winning the next election was clearly a motivating factor for the increase in media outreach efforts by House caucus leaders.

The broader story, however, indicates that, in the daily whirlwind of congressional action, the drive for electoral victories, while always present, was not front-and-center at each moment. Rather, it was, as described in this dissertation, a primary Stage 2 goal of leadership communications.

Four other, more immediate – Stage 1 – objectives were identified. First, communicators were simply trying to generate coverage of their leaders. These top members wanted to see themselves quoted in the press. A second immediate goal was to put one's political adversaries across the aisle on the defensive by having them forced to respond to different attacks. Despite the growing partisanship within the House, party unity was another communications objective for leadership. Messages from caucus leaders offered an opportunity for members to feel like they were part of a team. The subsequent good will and camaraderie would strengthen the position of party leaders and allow them to be more effective. A final short-term goal was to encourage member participation, as well as the participation of key electoral allies, in disseminating the messages.

These Stage 1 goals were the means to a combination of Stage 2 objectives. While winning or maintaining the majority was the top goal for each party's leadership, some other long-term objectives were mentioned: influencing policy and legislation, and strengthening a leader's political standing. Despite the varied goals at each stage, those interviewed in this dissertation still recognized that the ultimate purpose of media coverage was to help push one's candidates toward electoral victories on election day.

Finally, I found that, over time, House caucus leaders would act to make their promotion efforts more effective. Often, one party would respond to what it perceived as a new and effective tactic or outlet being employed by the other. And so, the rise of someone like Chris Matthews as a forceful advocate for O'Neill helped encourage Gingrich to bring Tony Blankley, a similarly talented communications professional, on board. The perceived effectiveness of Republicans using non-legislative debate encouraged Democrats to do the same thing. The Contract with America encouraged Democrats to create their own "New Direction for America" theme. The Democrats' Message Group was matched by the Republicans' Theme Team. Democratic use of liberal blogs and other social media spurred Republicans to ally with like-minded organizations to reinforce their own messaging.

The measuring of messaging effectiveness often was haphazard, and this is curious given the amount of time, resources, and personnel devoted to its development and dissemination. While leaders on both sides of the aisle worked to stay even or pull ahead in the "communications arms race," their own assessment as to whether it was making any difference was rarely quantitative or sustained. In sum, leadership communicators took deliberate steps over the years to make their efforts more effective,

and they believed they were being more effective, as I predicted. But they seldom sought to actually prove it.

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

In an attempt to understand what circumstances would affect media coverage of House caucus leaders, I developed 11 separate conditions and then employed them as independent variables while looking at the impact on my five different measurements of coverage. Overall, the results were mixed. Strong support that might be found with one measure of media coverage under a certain condition would be offset by limited or little support for my hypotheses using a different measure of coverage under the same condition. Nonetheless, this initial foray provides scholars with some insights into how one might continue to assess the messaging efforts of House caucus leaders in the future.

Most significantly, as predicted, overall media coverage was better for majority leadership in the House than minority leadership. Even in years when the minority party was about to achieve majority status (1994, 2006, 2010), the coverage still reflected the effects of the power bias. A strong economy, as measured by the change in **Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth**, will reinforce the majority's advantage and produce even more coverage. Interestingly, my multivariate analysis indicated that, as economic growth expands, the tone of coverage towards the Republican Party will improve, even when the GOP is in the House minority. With one exception, the **party label** does not appear to have as strong an effect as those who perceive a Democratic bias in the press would suggest. My data seems to indicate that majority leadership, regardless of party, continues to dominate the coverage. Indeed, despite those who argue there is a Democratic bias, House Republican caucus leaders in the majority received slightly more

coverage (as measured by mentions or the inclusion of a message in the article) than Democrat majority leaders. The one exception in my findings is that the tone of articles mentioning House caucus leaders tends to favor the Democrats over Republicans, both in the majority and the minority.

My analysis also suggests that under some specific conditions, the dominance of the majority party in garnering media coverage can be reduced. In an **election year**, majority leaders receive less coverage while minority leaders in the House increase their numbers. This was predicted because efforts by the media to remain objective are likely to lead to coverage that presents both sides more equally when there is an electoral battle for the majority. The mere presence of a November election can be expected to generate more attention for the minority leadership as they make their pitch to the voters and seek to out-maneuver majority leadership, who are clearly hoping to retain their powerful status. Those leaders in the House minority who complain about never being covered might find a sliver of hope given that their position seems to improve somewhat in an election year. **Presidential popularity** can also have an impact on reducing the majority leadership's dominance in winning media coverage.. When the White House and the House of Representatives are controlled by opposite parties, the president's popularity appears to help his fellow partisans in the House win additional coverage. A weak economy, operationalized by a growing **unemployment rate**, will also produce a significant increase in coverage for House minority leaders. This is likely because the majority party in the House will be perceived as responsible for the economic conditions, as they are often viewed as being partially responsible for running the country. As the

unemployment rate increases, therefore, the House minority have an opportunity to claim

that their economic plan offers a better option, and therefore receive additional coverage.

The findings in this dissertation provided some unexpected results as well. Over

time, as Congress became more polarized and there were steady increases in the time,

resources, and personnel devoted to national messaging by House leaders, I expected to

see the Majority's media coverage advantage over the Minority expand. The bivariate

data that was generated however showed the coverage fluctuated over the years for

leaders on both sides of the aisle. Interestingly, increases in one side's coverage were

met by decreases in coverage of the other. However, when I isolated the "time" variable

in my multivariate analysis, when controlling for things like political isolation, various

topics of the coverage, and national conditions like presidential approval and the state of

the economy, I found that mentions of House majority caucus leaders increased while

similar coverage of minority leaders decreased, in line with my original hypothesis. My

analysis also suggested that the tone towards the Republican party as a whole, when they

held the House majority, was 25% more likely to be somewhat or mostly negative over

time, while the tone towards the Democratic party when its House leaders were in the

majority was only 13% more likely to be negative, which could lend support to those who

argues there is partisan bias in the press.

Rather than seeing expanding majority coverage and decreasing minority

coverage, a fluctuating result was found when the **margin of seats** between the majority

and the minority moved from as small as 7 to as large as 105. However, I also found that

the tone towards the majority party would improve as its margin increased, while the tone

towards the party of the House minority would become more negative, which was more

in line with my original hypotheses. In my multivariate analysis, it appears that articles that include mentions of or messages from the majority leadership will decrease as the margin between the two parties get bigger, contrary to my prediction.

Building on Groeling's work,[917] I predicted that the more **isolated** one party's leadership is in the House, vis-à-vis partisan control of the Senate and the White House, the better its coverage. Contrary to my hypothesis, what I found in my bivariate work was that coverage of majority House leadership increases to its highest levels when it is somewhat – not most – isolated (e.g., when the House majority party controls the House and the Senate, but not the White House). Coverage of minority leaders in the House also moved in ways contrary to my expectations. Rather than finding the most coverage when it was most isolated, minority leadership garnered the greatest attention from the media when it was least isolated, such as when Rep. Bob Michel served as minority leader while his fellow Republicans were in control of both the Senate and the White House. Using multivariate regression, however, I found stronger support for improved coverage of the Majority as it became more isolated, in accordance with my expectation.

There was limited coverage of House **scandals** contained in the dataset, and my results showed little evidence to support my prediction that media coverage would be greater for the non-scandal party. Rather, the coverage follows the scandal party.

Finally, I found that issue ownership does not appear to have a significant impact on the coverage of House caucus leaders. Thus, an analysis of articles about the **economy** did not show strong support for my expectation that coverage would favor the Republicans. Similarly, GOP ownership of the **foreign affairs** issue arena did not provide significant results when measured against House leadership coverage. In fact,

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[917] Groeling, 2010.

according to my multivariate analysis, when Democrats control the House and the article involves foreign affairs, they see an increase in mentions. The same pattern did not hold for Republicans when they were in the majority.

In my bivariate assessment, when looking at the tone of the articles towards the Republicans or Democrats, it is much more likely that the GOP will receive see a negative tone when it is in the majority and the article concerned foreign affairs. Curiously, my multivariate data generated the opposite conclusion. Further research is clearly needed to reconcile these two findings.

The reason I chose to use five different types of coverage measurement was to build a more robust understanding of what "media coverage" implies. Counting mentions of House caucus leaders, as often done by scholars, seems too limited, albeit efficient, to have broad explanatory power. The fact that the results were so mixed indicates that our appreciation of what exactly constitutes media coverage of Congress should be reexamined in the future. Given the evidence presented here, relying on only one of these measures does not fully capture the true scope of media attention.

Since House caucus leaders invested more time, resources, and personnel into their national messaging efforts between 1981 and 2010, we would expect to see significant change in the output. But the analysis of this dissertation suggests that the return on investment was not always present. Perhaps because leaders on both sides of the aisle, in relatively short order, would seek to match the messaging efforts of their opposition, the result was a "communications arms race" that led to more of a stalemate than growing effectiveness. As neither side dominated the other with their media

outreach investments, more traditional coverage-influencing factors came into play, including the adherence to media norms and especially the tendency for coverage to focus on those who have the most power to affect the final outcome. Everyone was communicating better. Everyone was communicating more. But the net results still reflected underlying dynamics because neither side was that much better than the other. For House leaders in the future, it will be important to never surrender a qualitative edge in communications to those across the aisle. Doing so may lead to significant change in the status quo.

IRONIES OF HOUSE LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATIONS

Stemming from my research, there appear to be four significant ironies of House leadership behavior when it came to communications. First and foremost, despite all the investment in time, resources, and personnel – as previously mentioned – it appears that no one from caucus leadership communications staff systematically sought to assess if this effort was working. House leaders and their communications staff certainly tried to use every tool available to disseminate their key messages, but when it came to determining whether or not the coverage was there, it was largely intuitive and cursory.

Second, caucus leaders assume that they are expected to handle national communications on behalf of their members, and that they will be chastised by those members if the party's messaging is not effective. At the same time, caucus members didn't usually prioritize national messaging when voting for leaders. Perhaps the clearest historical example was Rep. Dennis Hastert's ascension to the speakership, even though his skills as a communicator were widely considered sub-par. On the Democratic side, regional loyalty, according to staffers, plays a greater role in who becomes a caucus

leader than communications skills. Serving as the "face of the party" might be a preferred prerequisite for a top leadership position, an obligation to be fulfilled if elected, but it hardly determines who wins the race.

A third irony of House leadership communications was that despite it being much easier for the Majority to garner coverage, the focus of their messaging – governing – is generally less exciting and less engaging for the public. Therefore, even as House majority leaders are covered more, their ability to achieve a Stage 2 goal of producing electoral victories is made that much tougher because of the substance of their messaging. For minority House leaders, the freedom from governing means that while they will be covered less, they can also be far more entertaining, provocative, and ultimately appealing to the electorate, which is, after all, the ultimate objective.

A final irony that emerged from the research is that despite the edge that majority leaders have over House minority leaders in terms of coverage, majority leaders nonetheless find it hard to ignore the critiques of the Minority. Indeed, they increasingly responded to comments from minority leaders as if there was a true competitive environment, when quantitative research demonstrates that it is usually the opposite. Rather than ignoring the messaging from the minority, based on the assumption that it is not likely to receive much play in the press, they often chose to engage on that field of battle. This practice only strengthened the resolve of the Minority to do more of it. From the minority leadership perspective, one way effective communications could be ascertained if they forced a response from the Majority. Clearly, without a proper assessment of the relative coverage for each party, majority communicators may not have realized their own advantageous position.

The scholarship on congressional leadership and their outreach efforts to the media typically focuses the role that those actions play in passing legislation and often neglects other purposes. While writing laws is what leaders are supposed to do as the drivers of an institution, it is far from their only responsibility. This dissertation contributes to the field because it expands a theoretical basis for understanding the motivations of House leadership to engage in messaging efforts that go beyond a legislative agenda. Future research in congressional communications will hopefully use this to design more appropriate hypotheses and build more robust theories of leadership behavior.

In addition, the qualitative data provided in this dissertation offers new insights into what actually happened as a result of the dramatic expansion in time, resources, and personnel devoted to communications of caucus leaders. The messaging responsibilities of these core members of the House can be, in part, dictated by the personalities and political needs of the individuals. But institutionally, precisely because they were agents of the entire caucus, they and their staffs accepted that collective communications needed to be done to best serve their collective electoral goals as well. Thus, this dissertation allows future congressional media scholars to appreciate the distinction between caucus leaders and other members. Furthermore, the field now has additional insight into the details of how leaders acted on their communications obligations and the power dynamics that affected their work, including internal, partisan, and institutional competition for coverage.

One of the findings presented in this dissertation is that the minority leadership in the House lags significantly behind coverage of majority caucus leaders. In and of itself, this is not a new discovery. However, the research presented here digs deeper and more comprehensively to see the pervasiveness of the power bias. Despite using five different types of measures of coverage, over an extended period of time, the systemic advantage of the Majority remains. This has implications for our understanding of the role that the press in a representative democracy. An informed electorate needs access to full information. However, a pervasive power bias denies the electorate that opportunity because they so rarely hear about what the minority in the House is doing. Building on the quantitative data provided in this dissertation, future researchers will be able to follow Arnold's suggestion and "interview editors and reporters to learn why they make the choices they do" now that we have some sense of the "patterns of coverage."[918]

At the same time, the electoral effect of media coverage should be examined with a higher degree of skepticism. The fact that the elections of 1994, 2006 and 2010 have switched control in the House, despite the existence of the power bias, indicates that the press has a much more limited impact on voter decisions than otherwise might be assumed. This is not to say that the media has no impact, but that the effects of media-generated constructs such as framing, agenda setting, and issue ownership might not be as strong when it comes to members of Congress achieving their primary objectives: winning re-election and maintaining/achieving majority status. Given the potential for the limited impact of press coverage on electoral outcomes, future scholars may wish to consider, for example, whether even a biased press needs to be of any concern in a democracy.

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[918] Arnold, 2004, 261.

As mentioned above, this dissertation suggests four significant ironies involving this study of House leadership and communications. Perhaps most striking and significant to the field is that despite all of the time, resources, and personnel devoted to national messaging, the leaders and their staffs never seemed to take a sustained, quantitative look at whether they were being effective of not. This dissertation begins to address that lack of information. The results may have implications for future House caucus leader behavior. For the Majority, by way of example, knowing when you can press your advantage, in terms of media coverage, may dictate how and when you respond to critiques from the Minority. House leaders in the minority can now see when they have the best chance to be covered and may seek to expand their efforts during those times. For instance, knowing that the Majority is likely to respond to the threat of any increase in coverage of the Minority allows strategic minority leaders to achieve a Stage 1 objective by getting the Majority to respond to its agenda.

This dissertation also begins to fill in the gaps that currently exist in the literature. Frequently, scholarship examining the relationship between Congress and the media focuses on short periods of time. By encompassing a three-decade era, scholars can now look for long-range trends in leadership and media behavior. In past studies, the differences between majority and minority House leaders are often overlooked. This dissertation prioritizes those distinctions in both the theory and data analysis sections, thereby offering a more complete understanding of who does what and why. Partisan differences matter because of the personalities and internal dynamics of each caucus, and because of each party's relative isolation in the House vis-à-vis which party controls the White House and the Senate. Historically, scholars rarely consider partisan differences

when looking at Congress and the media.[919] Thus, implications of the findings in this dissertation are that ignoring partisan and majority/minority distinctions should not be as readily acceptable to future scholarship. Finally, this dissertation makes the case that not all leaders are the same. Caucus leaders have different agenda, responsibilities, and constituencies than committee leaders and others. Therefore, a final implication of this dissertation is that scholars can begin to appreciate those differences and isolate these leaders when studying Congress in the future.

AREAS FOR EXPANDED RESEARCH IN THE FUTURE

This dissertation expands and deepens the study of congressional leadership in the House of Representatives and their national communications efforts. There are, however, certain weaknesses that can be addressed with future research. I chose to consider only the print media and, more specifically, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. While I have addressed concerns about these choices previously, subsequent research can, and should, expand the dataset to include other large national papers such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*, as well as large, influential regional papers such as the *Miami Herald*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Los Angeles Times*.

In addition, similar hypotheses and analysis can include wire service stories from the Associated Press, which is increasingly used by smaller papers who no longer can, or never could, afford a Washington correspondent. Further, future research would want to integrate a more diverse range of media in the analysis by including the weeknight network news broadcasts on ABC, CBS, and NBC, and the primary news broadcasts for cable networks, including CNN, Fox, and MSNBC.

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[919] Groeling, 2010, is the notable exception that proves the rule.

I chose to exclude editorials and opinions pieces from consideration in this dissertation because they do not, I believe, reflect traditional news coverage, which was my intended focus. However, as the power of "opinion programming" develops, researchers will need to consider how best to measure coverage of Congress on cable television shows such as "The Rachel Maddow Show" (MSNBC) and "Hannity" (Fox), as well as similar partisan-oriented blogs and online news sites. Clearly, leadership communicators rely on these types of shows to serve as unchallenged conduits for their messaging to hard-core partisans. As part of such data collection, scholars may choose to reconsider whether or not to include editorials and opinion pieces from print media as well.

One can extend this dissertation's work after 2010, examining if the GOP majority, operating in the most highly partisan House in modern times and yet beset by a variety of internal divisions, finds similar dynamics affecting its coverage as in prior years. It would also not be difficult to look at the 1960s and 1970s, when we would expect to see the dynamics of leadership communications reflect the era just before everything seemed to change.

Qualitatively, extending the time would open up the potential for new interviewees. In addition, the field would be helped by speaking to reporters and editors about their decisions on who, what, and when to cover when reporting on Congress with the dataset in hand that shows the actual numbers relating to that coverage.

Finally, the Senate offers an entirely different realm to explore in terms of leadership and the media. The institution itself has a large number of pivotal distinctions

from the House, requiring some very different hypotheses. However, the reasons for studying this subject would remain the same for either side of the Capitol.

In sum, there remains a rich and fertile ground for additional scholarship that builds on that which was found in this dissertation.

*   *   *   *   *

The conclusions presented here will further scholars' understanding of how congressional leaders in the House of Representatives interact with the media in an effort to generate collective communications and under what conditions they are most effective in getting covered. These conclusions illuminate our understanding of congressional leadership behavior and provide additional insights into the dynamics of media coverage of Congress. With this material in hand, the strategies and tactics of future leaders in the House, as well as media behavior, may be shaped in years to come.

Appendix A

House Caucus Leaders (Majority)

Term	Dates (Start of session to election day)	Speaker	Majority Leader	Majority Whip	Campaign Committee chair
97	01/05/81 – 11/02/82	Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill	Jim Wright	Tom Foley	Tony Coelho
98	01/03/83 – 11/06/84	Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill	Jim Wright	Tom Foley	Tony Coelho
99	01/03/85 – 11/04/86	Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill	Jim Wright	Tom Foley	Tony Coelho
100	01/06/87 – 11/08/88	Jim Wright	Tom Foley	Tony Coelho	Beryl Anthony, Jr.
101	01/03/89 – 11/06/90	Jim Wright / Tom Foley[920]	Tom Foley / Richard Gephardt[921]	Tony Coelho / William Gray III[922]	Beryl Anthony, Jr.
102	01/03/91 – 11/03/92	Tom Foley	Richard Gephardt	William Gray III / David Bonior[923]	Vic Fazio
103	01/05/93 – 11/08/94	Tom Foley	Richard Gephardt	David Bonior	Vic Fazio
104	01/04/95 – 11/05/96	Newt Gingrich	Richard K. Armey	Tom DeLay	Bill Paxon
105	01/07/97 – 11/03/98	Newt Gingrich	Richard K. Armey	Tom DeLay	John Linder
106	01/06/99 – 11/07/00	J. Dennis Hastert	Richard K. Armey	Tom DeLay	Tom Davis
107	01/03/01 – 11/05/02	J. Dennis Hastert	Richard K. Armey	Tom DeLay	Tom Davis
108	01/07/03 – 11/02/04	J. Dennis Hastert	Tom DeLay	Roy Blunt	Tom Reynolds
109	01/04/05 – 11/07/06	J. Dennis Hastert	Tom DeLay / Roy Blunt / John Boehner[924]	Roy Blunt	Tom Reynolds
110	01/04/07 – 11.04/08	Nancy Pelosi	Steny Hoyer	James Clyburn	Chris Van Hollen
111	01/06/09 – 11/02/10	Nancy Pelosi	Steny Hoyer	James Clyburn	Chris Van Hollen

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[920] Wright resigned from the House on June 6, 1989. He was replaced by Foley the same day.

[921] When Foley replaced Wright, his position was filled by Gephardt.

[922] Coelho resident from the House on June 15, 1989. He was replaced by Gray the same day.

[923] Gray resigned from the House on September 11, 1991. Bonior had been elected to fill the post on July 11, 1991, but did not assume the office until September 11th of that year.

[924] DeLay temporarily stepped down on September 28, 20015. Blunt was elected as interim majority leader on the same day. Boehner was elected to fill the post on February 2, 2006.

House Caucus Leaders (Minority)

Term	Dates (Start of session to election day)	Minority Leader	Minority Whip	Minority Caucus Chair	Campaign Committee chair
97	01/05/81 – 11/02/82	Robert Michel	Trent Lott	Jack Kemp	Guy Vander Jagt
98	01/03/83 – 11/06/84	Robert Michel	Trent Lott	Jack Kemp	Guy Vander Jagt
99	01/03/85 – 11/04/86	Robert Michel	Trent Lott	Jack Kemp	Guy Vander Jagt
100	01/06/87 – 11/08/88	Robert Michel	Trent Lott	Jack Kemp / Dick Cheney	Guy Vander Jagt
101	01/03/89 – 11/06/90	Robert Michel	Dick Cheney / Newt Gingrich[925]	Jerry Lewis	Guy Vander Jagt
102	01/03/91 – 11/03/92	Robert Michel	Newt Gingrich	Jerry Lewis	Guy Vander Jagt
103	01/05/93 – 11/08/94	Robert Michel	Newt Gingrich	Richard K. Armey	Bill Paxon
104	01/04/95 – 11/05/96	Richard Gephardt	David Bonior	Vic Fazio	Martin Frost
105	01/07/97 – 11/03/98	Richard Gephardt	David Bonior	Vic Fazio	Martin Frost
106	01/06/99 – 11/07/00	Richard Gephardt	David Bonior	Martin Frost	Patrick Kennedy
107	01/03/01 – 11/05/02	Richard Gephardt	David Bonior / Nancy Pelosi[926]	Martin Frost	Nita Lowey
108	01/07/03 – 11/02/04	Nancy Pelosi	Steny Hoyer	Bob Menendez	Robert Matsui
109	01/04/05 – 11/07/06	Nancy Pelosi	Steny Hoyer	Bob Menendez	Rahm Emanuel
110	01/04/07 – 11.04/08	John Boehner	Roy Blunt	Adam Putnam	Tom Cole
111	01/06/09 – 11/02/10	John Boehner	Eric Cantor	Mike Pence	Pete Sessions

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[925] Cheney resigned from the House on March 17, 1989. Gingrich was elected to the post on March 22, 1989.

[926] Bonior resigned from the House on January 15, 2002. Pelosi was elected to replace him on October 10, 2001 but didn't assume the post until Bonior resigned.

Appendix B
<u>Script for Informed Consent Interviews</u>

Introduction:

Thank you for meeting with me.

As I have explained, I am pursuing a PhD in political science at Rutgers University. My dissertation covers a 30 year period – from 1981 to 2011 – and looks at how the top leadership in the House, both majority and minority, tried to shape national media coverage.

As with all social science research that involves an interview, my university requires me to ask you to sign this consent form. Actually, you initial the first page and initial <u>and</u> sign on the second page.

Basically, it says that I am about to ask you a handful of questions about what you saw when you were working as a communications staffer for _____. The whole interview should not take longer than 30 minutes.

You can refuse to answer any question with which you are not comfortable.

If you agree to have the interview, your participation will be kept confidential. That means your responses will be used in scholarly publications stemming from this project, but your responses will never be attributed to you by name OR in any way that allows you to be identified personally.

You will also have the choice, on page 2 of the attached form, of whether or not to be thanked in the acknowledgments that may accompany any final product resulting from this project.

I keep all of the interviews confidential by limiting access to the data in a locked file cabinet or in a password protected computer file. The research team, of which I am the head, and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University, which has sanctioned my project are the only parties allowed to see the data, except as required by law.

If you don't have any questions, please initial and sign and we can begin.

The date is _____. We are in Washington, DC and I am speaking with _____.

I'd like to begin with the PROCESS.

Development:

(1) Thinking back to when you were working for leadership on the Hill, as purely as you can recollect, can you walk me through the steps you took to develop a national message for your caucus?

(2) How frequently were you working on new messages? Was this a daily exercise? Or something you did every week? Or less often?

Dissemination:

(3) Reflecting now on that time and place when you worked for Hill leadership, how did you got about disseminating this national message?

(4) What tactic(s) usually worked best? Why?

(5) How many people were involved with disseminating the message? Was it centralized among leadership and staff? Was it broader than that?

Evaluation:

(6) **WHY** did you put in so much effort into developing and disseminating these messages to the press?

[**If not mentioned, ask about these:** An upcoming fight over legislation? Polling? Initiative by a leader(s)? Response to outside events?]

    (a) What about the <u>electoral climate</u>? Was shaping the electoral climate something you thought came from your national press outreach?

    (b) IF YES: Can you recall a specific example when positive media coverage driven by leadership made a difference in candidate recruitment or an election?

House Caucus Leaders:

My focus is on the top House caucus leaders; the speaker, majority leader, whip and campaign committee chair for the majority, and the minority leader, the whip, the caucus chair and the campaign committee chair for the minority.

(7) Based on your experience, how involved were these top caucus leaders in national message development? Let me give you four choices:

(a) Was the leader you worked for…

- Very involved?

- Moderately involved?
- Moderately uninvolved?
- Very uninvolved?

(b) Can you explain why you chose what you did?

(8) In terms of developing and disseminating a national message for the caucus, are these top House leaders different from other leaders in the caucus?

[**If "no"**] → Really?   [If "yes"] → How?

(a) Some would argue that caucus leaders, because they are elected by the caucus, have special obligations, beyond those of other members, to promote the party's messages in the press.

Did you find this to be the case when you were working for _____?

Minority/ Majority Status:

[IF **NOT** MENTIONED BEFORE….] You served as a senior communications staffer to House leadership in the [majority / minority].

(9a)   Can you explain, based on your experience, and again, as purely as you can recollect, what unique challenges you might have faced because of that designation?

** How did you overcome them?

[IF PREVIOUSLY MENTIONED….] You mentioned earlier that being in the minority was hard (being in majority was great).

(9b)   Were there any other unique challenges you faced because of that?

** How did you overcome them?

If running out of time:

I see we are at 30 minutes. I have a few more questions though. Can you take a little more time to talk a bit?

Conclusion:

Thank you so much for help. I greatly appreciate your time and the insights you have shared. If I have a follow-up question, would you mind if I email or call you?

Appendix B1

Dates of Interviews

Republican staffer, July 23, 2012
Democratic staffer, July 23, 2012

Democratic staffer, July 24, 2012
Republican staffer, July 24, 2012

Republican staffer A, July 25, 2012
Democratic staffer, July 25, 2012
Republican staffer B, July 25, 2012

Democratic staffer, July 26, 2012
Republican staffer, July 26, 2012

Republican staffer, July 27, 2012

Republican staffer A, July 30, 2012
Republican staffer B, July 30, 2012

Democratic staffer, July 31, 2012
Republican staffer A, July 31, 2012
Republican staffer B, July 31, 2012

Republican staffer, August 2, 2012

Democratic staffer, August 3, 2012

Democratic staffer, August 8, 2012

Republican staffer, August 16, 2012

Codebook for
Collective Communication in Congress:
Understanding and Assessing House Caucus Leadership Efforts
to Win Press Coverage, 1981 - 2010

Last updated: April 19, 2014.
Minor changes: February 21, 2015.

<u>IDENTIFYING INFORMATION</u>

V1
Question   Database identification per story
Var Name   ID
Coding   [Unique ID of story coded]
              1001 – 2681   *The New York Times*
              3001 – 4420   *Washington Post*
              Automatically assigned
Note(s)

V2
Question   From what publication of broadcast is this story taken?
Var Name   Paper
Coding   1   *The New York Times*
              2   *The Washington Post*

V3
Question   What is the year of the story?
VarName   Year
Coding   [YYYY]

V3a
Question   In what decade did the story appear?
VarName   Decades
Coding   1   1980 – 1989
              2   1990 – 1999
              3   2000 – 2010

V4
Question   What is the congressional term of the story
VarName   CongTerm
Coding   97 (Jan 81 to Nov 82) all the way to 111 (Jan 09 to Nov 10)

V5
Question   Unique identification per story on each printed article
Var Name   StoryID
Coding   [Unique ID of story coded]
Note(s)   Code indicated year, newspaper and chronological rank of the story

V6
Question   What is the date of publication of the story?
Var Name   Date
Coding   [date MM/DD/YY]
Note   Use input mask or type your own date

V7
Question   On what page is the story published?
Var Name   Page
Coding   [Page Number]
        -88   Not mentioned
        -99   Missing
Note(s)   Coded for newspapers only
        Type Section letter before page number for stories not in front section.
        Missing should apply to all non-newspaper stories, such as television stories.
        Not mentioned refers to articles that do not have a page number, such as wire services.

V8
Question   What is the story's headline?
Var Name   Headline
Coding   [Text of headline]

V9
Question   Number of words in the print story.
Var Name   WordCount
Coding   [Number of words]
        -88   Not mentioned
        -99   Missing
Note(s)

STORY TYPES

V10
Question   What kind of story is it?
Var Name   StoryType
Coding   1   Event-based article
                 2   News analysis
                 3   Profile
                 4   Other
Notes(s)   "Other" refers to stories that include multiple categories as well as those that cannot be appropriately labeled.

V11
Question   Does the story involve relations between the House and another part of federal government?
Var Name   InterBranch
Coding   0   Not about relations with another part of federal government
                 1   About relations with another part of federal government
                 -88   Not mentioned
                 -99   Missing
Note(s)

V12
Question   What other part of the federal government is mentioned?
Var Name   InterBranchName
Coding   0   Not mentioned
                 1   Relations with White House
                 2   Relations with Senate
                 3   Relations with Supreme Court
                 4   Relations with One Federal Agency or Department
                 5   Relations with Multiple Parts of Federal Government
Note(s)   Focus is on relations. The House and the other branch have to be working on something at the same time, either separately or together.

V13
Question   Is the story about the economy?
Var Name   Economy
Coding
0	Not about the economy
1	About the economy
-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Note(s)   "Economy" refers to issues involving national economic conditions and policy, including the budget, jobs, minimum wage, taxes, and overall spending

Includes <u>general</u> defense spending.

It does <u>not</u> include foreign aid.

It does <u>not</u> include stories about federal salaries and benefits,

It does <u>not</u> include stories on international trade, which are labeled "foreign affairs" for this coding.

It does <u>not</u> include individual spending items, such as articles about health care spending.

V14
Question   Is the story about foreign affairs?
Var Name   ForeignAffairs
Coding
0	No, not about foreign affairs
1	Yes, about foreign affairs
-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Note(s)   Includes international trade, including free trade agreements (but not economy).

Includes arms talks.

Includes foreign military operations.

Includes foreign aid (Contras, etc.)

Includes Iran-Contra.

Does <u>not</u> include domestic base closings.

Does not include funding for individual programs unless article relates to international response / politics. Ex. MX missile funding debate is <u>not</u> included unless article covers USSR, etc. response.

No real need for -88 or -99 here. It's a yes or no question.

V15
Question   Is the story about a congressional scandal?
Var Name   Scandal
Coding   0   No, not about a congressional scandal
                 1   Yes, about a congressional scandal
                 -88   Not mentioned
                 -99   Missing

Note(s)   "Congressional scandal" refers to specific allegations, trials, and
                 investigations of members of the House of Representatives relating to
                 ethical issues.

                 It does not refer to stories about ethics reform. In other words, these are
                 stories about the alleged infraction, not the proposals to fix the overall
                 problem.

                 It does not include stories about mistakes that aren't ethical, i.e., anti-
                 Semitic comments.

                 Does not include Iran-Contra or ClintonGate, including Whitewater. This
                 category is for scandals involving members of Congress, not the White
                 House.

V16
Question   If story is about congressional scandal, which party is involved?
Var Name   ScandalParty
Coding   0   Scandal involve majority party
                 1   Scandal(s) involve both majority and minority party
                 2   Scandal involve minority party
                 -88   Not mentioned
                 -99   Missing
Note(s)

V16a
Question   Does the scandal coverage involve the **majority** party?
Var Name   MajScandal
Coding   0   Involves minority only OR is missing.
                 1   Scandal(s) involve both majority and minority party
                 2   Scandal involves majority party only
Note(s)   Variable created on 4/19/14.

V16b
Question   Does the scandal coverage involve the **minority** party?
Var Name   MinScandal
Coding   0   Involves majority only OR is missing.
                 1   Scandal(s) involve both minority and the majority party
                 2   Scandal involves minority party only
Note(s)   Variable created on 4/19/14.

V17
Question   Is the story about American elections / campaign strategy?
Var Name   Elections
Coding   0   No, not about elections / campaign strategy
           1   Yes, about elections / campaign strategy
           -88   Not mentioned
           -99   Missing
Note(s)   Does <u>not</u> include House caucus leader elections for speaker, whip, etc.
           Does not include articles on campaign finance reform.

V18
Question   Is the story about some other <u>important</u> topic besides the economy, foreign affairs, scandal or elections?
Var Name   OtherImptTopic
Coding   0   No, not about another <u>important</u> topic
           1   Yes, about another important topic
           -88   Not mentioned
           -99   Missing
Note(s)   "Important" is if you think we should be coding this topic throughout the study. Also include any topic over which you have a question.

V19
Question   Describe the "other important topic."
Var Name   OtherImptText
Coding   [Type a description of the other important topic you have identified.]
           -88   Not mentioned
Note(s)

STORY CONTENT

V20

Question   Which party's House leader or leadership, or official spokesperson, is mentioned in the story?

Var Name   PartyMention

Coding
0		Majority leader or leadership
1		Both minority and majority leader or leadership
	2	Minority leader or leadership
-88		Not mentioned
-99		Missing

Notes(s)   To qualify, mentions have to connect the leader(s) with official or political action as **House** leaders. Coverage of leader(s) participation in a constituent matter or social gathering (such as inaugural balls, cocktail parties, etc.) would not count.

Includes official spokespersons, such as press secretaries, of the leaders.

Includes top staff for congressional campaign committees and other campaign consultants clearly described as working for house caucus leader(s).

Does not include non-caucus leaders in the House who are described as "an ally of the leader" or "close to the leader", etc.

** We only want to include those who are speaking at the direction of the caucus leadership.

Includes a leader's name as the sponsor of a bill (e.g., Kemp/Roth tax cut). Includes passive mentions of the leader(s), such as comments from a lobbyist, department secretary, White House, etc.

V21

Question   Which party's House leader's, leadership's or official spokesperson's message is in the story?

Var Name   PartyMsgMention

Coding
0	Majority leader or leadership
1	Both minority and majority leader or leadership
2	Minority leader or leadership
-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Notes(s)   To qualify as a message, the leader(s) cannot be passive (i.e., a comment from the White House about Congressional Democratic leaders), but must be portrayed as actively pushing a message through a comment or legislative / political action.

Portrayed means a message is from a reporter explaining HCL or his/her spokesperson, or from the HCL (or HCL spokesperson) himself/herself.

Since we are looking at what is portrayed in the article the message can be the reporting of leadership's actions. We want to see if it was reported.

A non-quote is acceptable if the effect of it is to deliver a message, as if it were pushed by a leader or staff.

V22a

Question   Is the message delivered by the majority leader(s) a <u>proposal</u> of an initiative, policy, effort, etc.?

Var Name   MajMsgProp

Coding
0	No
1	Yes
-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Notes(s)   For "proposal," the message must convey something being launched or an action advocated (i.e., a message favoring doing something specific), even if it is something that was tried before. In other words, the subject matter doesn't have to be new.
Includes "called for…" and "suggested…." and "indicated he would…."
To qualify for this category, the message must show some specificity. For "expectation / explaining" it can be more general.
Individual actions by HCLs (House caucus leaders) are considered, by their nature, a call for others to join him/her. ("Foley said he would support the amendment…")
Also includes opposition to a bill, or a negative action being advocated, such as voting "no" on a bill.
Includes political endorsements.

Explaining why one should support a bill or why one should oppose a bill can be both Proposal and Explanation, IF it explains what the bill does ex. putting forth an idea

V22b

Question   Is the message delivered by the majority leader(s) a citation of <u>accomplishments</u>?

Var Name   MajMsgAcc

Coding

0	No
1	Yes
-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Notes(s)   For "citation," we are looking for actions, not words. The fundamental question that this variable addresses is "what have they been doing?" Usually, this will fall into giving support, meetings, and tactics.

The message needs to be things in the past – no matter how far back – not items anticipated for the future. The accomplishments can include losing efforts

Includes only official duties. Therefore, it does not include items like graduating school or other pre-congressional work.

Does not include listing of past electoral victories.

Does not include campaign money raised, unless money raised was for others, not the HCL's own campaign.

Does <u>not</u> include a proposal or push, unless it came to fruition.

Includes details of a bill passed by leaders where they are taking credit.

It needs to be a message of substance that is delivered. It can only be reported by the reporter's voice, or by the HCL/HCL spokesperson, not others.

Includes reporting on what they did (GOP leaders moved to do xxx last week…." "Democrats met at the White House to negotiate…."

A list of accusations (what a House leader might have done, for example Jim Wright scandal) should not be included.

V22c

Question   Is the message delivered by the majority leader(s) suggesting <u>explanations</u> or <u>expectations</u>?

Var Name   MajMsgExp

Coding
0	No
1	Yes
-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Notes(s)   For "explanations," the message must explain what's going on and articulate what the public can expect in the future. It is more <u>general analysis</u> than "defensive," which is its own category.

Includes general opinions that are <u>neutral</u> or <u>positive</u>, **including "offered no comment."** (However, <u>negative</u> opinion on a person offered by an HCL is considered an "attack." Ex. He should have voted "no" on that bill)

Simple assessments are included i.e., "that was a good speech"

Includes explaining the reasoning behind something. Thus, a messages that is a Proposal might also be an Explanation.

V22d

Question   Is the message delivered by the majority leader(s) hurling <u>attacks</u>?

Var Name   MajMsgAtt

Coding
0	No
1	Yes
-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Notes(s)   For "attacks," the message can be aimed at <u>anyone</u>. They are not just limited to House members from the opposite party. It does not matter if they are in response to a previous event, speech, comment, etc.

Includes any criticism, even if in the form of a rhetorical question. ("Should we go back? Remember how it used to be?")

V22e
Question   Is the message delivered by the majority leader(s) offering defenses?
Var Name   MajMsgDef
Coding   0   No
                1   Yes
                -88   Not mentioned
                -99   Missing

Notes(s)   For "defenses," the leader(s) delivering the message are talking about
                themselves and are limited to justifying, explaining, and otherwise
                defending their policies, actions or the results of their actions. In many
                cases, a clue will be the use of negative words, such as not, won't, doesn't,
                etc.

                "Best we could do…."

                Includes a proposal issues in response to a scandal in which the HCL
                proposing it is acting defensively.

V23a
Question   Is the message delivered by the minority leader(s) a <u>proposal</u> of an
                initiative, policy, effort, etc?
Var Name   MinMsgProp
Coding   0   No
                1   Yes
                -88   Not mentioned
                -99   Missing

Notes(s)   For "proposal," the message must convey something being launched or an
                action advocated (i.e., a message favoring doing something specific), even
                if it is something that was tried before. In other words, the subject matter
                doesn't have to be new.
                Includes "called for…" and "suggested…." and "indicated he would…."
                To qualify for this category, the message must show some specificity.
                For "expectation / explaining" it can be more general.
                Individual actions by HCLs (House caucus leaders) are considered, by
                their nature, a call for others to join him/her. (**"Foley said he would**
                support the amendment…")
                Also includes opposition to a bill, or a negative action being advocated,
                such as voting "no" on a bill.
                Includes political endorsements.

                Explaining why one should support a bill or why one should oppose a bill
                can be both Proposal and Explanation, IF it explains what the bill does ex.
                putting forth an idea

V23b

Question	Is the message delivered by the minority leader(s) a citation of <u>accomplishments</u>?
Var Name	MinMsgAcc
Coding	0 No
	1 Yes
	-88 Not mentioned
	-99 Missing

Notes(s)   For "citation," we are looking for actions, not words. The fundamental question that this variable addresses is "what have they been doing?" Usually, this will fall into giving support, meetings, and tactics.

The message needs to be things in the past – no matter how far back – not items anticipated for the future. The accomplishments can include losing efforts

Includes only official duties. Therefore, it does not include items like graduating school or other pre-congressional work.

Does not include listing of past electoral victories.

Does not include campaign money raised, unless money raised was for others, not the HCL's own campaign.

Does <u>not</u> include a proposal or push, unless it came to fruition.

Includes details of a bill passed by leaders where they are taking credit.

It needs to be a message of substance that is delivered. It can only be reported by the reporter's voice, or by the HCL/HCL spokesperson, not others.

Includes reporting on what they did (GOP leaders moved to do xxx last week…." "Democrats met at the White House to negotiate…."

A list of accusations (what a House leader might have done, for example Jim Wright scandal) should not be included.

V23c

Question	Is the message delivered by the minority leader(s) suggesting <u>explanations</u> or <u>expectations</u>?
Var Name	MinMsgExp

Coding

0	No
1	Yes
-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Notes(s)   For "explanations," the message must explain what's going on and articulate what the public can expect in the future. It is more <u>general analysis</u> than "defensive," which is its own category.

Includes general opinions that are <u>neutral</u> or <u>positive</u>, **including "offered no comment."** (However, <u>negative</u> opinion on a person offered by an HCL is considered an "attack." Ex. He should have voted "no" on that bill)

Simple assessments are included i.e., "that was a good speech"

Includes explaining the reasoning behind something. Thus, a messages that is a Proposal might also be an Explanation.

V23d

Question	Is the message delivered by the minority leader(s) hurling <u>attacks</u>?
Var Name	MinMsgAtt

Coding

0	No
1	Yes
-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Notes(s)   For "attacks," the message can be aimed at <u>anyone</u>. They are not just limited to House members from the opposite party. It does not matter if they are in response to a previous event, speech, comment, etc.

Includes any criticism, even if in the form of a rhetorical question. ("Should we go back? Remember how it used to be?")

V23e
Question   Is the message delivered by the minority leader(s) offering defenses?
Var Name   MinMsgDef
Coding   0   No
              1   Yes
              -88   Not mentioned
              -99   Missing

Notes(s)   For "defenses," the leader(s) delivering the message are talking about themselves and are limited to justifying, explaining, and otherwise defending their policies, actions or the results of their actions. In many cases, a clue will be the use of negative words, such as not, won't, doesn't, etc.

              "Best we could do…."

              Includes a proposal issues in response to a scandal in which the HCL proposing it is acting defensively.

V24
Question   Where in the story is a **majority** party's message first mentioned?
Var Name   WhereMajMsg
Coding   [Paragraph number of first mention]
              -88   Not mentioned
              -99   Missing
Note(s)

V24a
Question   In what section of the story is a **majority** party's message first mentioned?
Var Name   WhereMajMsgCondense
Coding   1   Paragraphs 1 through 5
              2   Paragraphs 6 through 10
              3   Paragraphs 11 and higher
              -88   Not mentioned
              -99   Missing
Note(s)

V25
Question   Where in the story is a **minority** party's message first mentioned?
Var Name   WhereMinMsg
Coding   [Paragraph number of first mention]
              -88   Not mentioned
                -99   Missing
Note(s)

V25a
Question   In what section of the story is a **<u>minority</u>** party's message first mentioned?
Var Name   WhereMinMsgCondense
Coding

1	Paragraphs 1 through 5
2	Paragraphs 6 through 10
3	Paragraphs 11 and higher
-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Note(s)

V26
Question   How many paragraphs contain a message from **<u>majority</u>** leader or leadership?
Var Name   MajMsgGraphs
Coding   [Total number of paragraphs where the majority's message is found]

-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Note(s)   Even if a single paragraph mentions both parties' messages, count it as one paragraph for each.

V27
Question   For the majority party, what is the tone of the coverage multiplied by the length of the coverage?
VarName   MajToneMsg
Coding   [Tone1 * MajMsgGraphs]

-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

V28
Question   How many paragraphs contain a message from **<u>minority</u>** leader or leadership?
Var Name   MinMsgGraphs
Coding   [Total number of paragraphs where the minority's message is found]

-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Note(s)   Even if a single paragraph mentions both parties' messages, count it as one paragraph for each.

V29
Question For the minority party, what is the tone of the coverage multiplied by the length of the coverage?
Var Name MinToneMsg
Coding [Tone1 * MinMsgGraphs]
    -88   Not mentioned
    -99   Missing

TONE

V30
Question   Overall, what is the article's tone towards the **majority** party? (0 to 4 scale)

VarName   MajTone

Coding

0	Mostly negative
1	Somewhat negative
2	Neutral/Mixed
3	Somewhat positive
4	Mostly positive
-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Note(s)   This is tone towards the party, not just towards the HCLs. Therefore, an article that doesn't mention an HCL can still have a tone towards the party. Ex. the tone can be supportive of the party in the White House.

V30a   Overall, what is the article's tone towards the **majority** party? (1 to 5 scale)

VarName   MajTone1

Coding

1	Mostly negative
2	Somewhat negative
3	Neutral Mixed
4	Somewhat positive
5	Mostly positive
-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Note(s)   This is tone towards the party, not just towards the HCLs. Therefore, an article that doesn't mention an HCL can still have a tone towards the party. Ex. the tone can be supportive of the party in the White House.

V30b	Overall, what is the article's tone towards the **majority** party? (0 to 5
scale)	
VarName	MajTone2
Coding	0 Not mentioned
	1 Mostly negative
	2 Somewhat negative
	3 Neutral / Mixed
	4 Somewhat positive
	5 Mostly positive
	-99 Missing
Note(s)	This is tone towards the party, not just towards the HCLs. Therefore, an article that doesn't mention an HCL can still have a tone towards the party. Ex. the tone can be supportive of the party in the White House.

V30c	Overall, what is the article's tone towards the **majority** party? (-2 to +2
scale)	
VarName	MajTone3
Coding	-2 Mostly negative
	-1 Somewhat negative
	0 Neutral Mixed
	1 Somewhat positive
	2 Mostly positive
	-88 Not mentioned
	-99 Missing
Note(s)	This is tone towards the party, not just towards the HCLs. Therefore, an article that doesn't mention an HCL can still have a tone towards the party. Ex. the tone can be supportive of the party in the White House.

V31	
Question	Overall, what is the article's tone towards the **minority** party?
VarName	MinTone
Coding	0 Mostly negative
	1 Somewhat negative
	2 Neutral Mixed
	3 Somewhat positive
	4 Mostly positive
	-88 Not mentioned
	-99 Missing
Note(s)	This is tone towards the party, not just towards the HCLs. Therefore, an article that doesn't mention an HCL can still have a tone towards the party. Ex. the tone can be supportive of the party in the White House.

V31a   Overall, what is the article's tone towards the **<u>minority</u>** party?
VarName   MinTone1
Coding
1	Mostly negative
2	Somewhat negative
3	Neutral Mixed
4	Somewhat positive
5	Mostly positive
-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Note(s)   This is tone towards the party, not just towards the HCLs. Therefore, an article that doesn't mention an HCL can still have a tone towards the party. Ex. the tone can be supportive of the party in the White House.

V31b   Overall, what is the article's tone towards the **<u>minority</u>** party?
VarName   MinTone2
Coding
0	Not mentioned
1	Mostly negative
2	Somewhat negative
3	Neutral Mixed
4	Somewhat positive
5	Mostly positive
-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Note(s)   This is tone towards the party, not just towards the HCLs. Therefore, an article that doesn't mention an HCL can still have a tone towards the party. Ex. the tone can be supportive of the party in the White House.

V31c   Overall, what is the article's tone towards the **<u>minority</u>** party?
Var Name   MinTone3
Coding
-2	Mostly negative
-1	Somewhat negative
0	Neutral Mixed
1	Somewhat positive
2	Mostly positive
-88	Not mentioned
-99	Missing

Note(s)   This is tone towards the party, not just towards the HCLs. Therefore, an article that doesn't mention an HCL can still have a tone towards the party. Ex. the tone can be supportive of the party in the White House.

ADDITIONAL & EXTERNAL VARIABLES

V32
Question   Quickly, what topic(s) were covered by **majority** leadership's messages?
Var Name   MajMsgTopic
Coding   [List topics of majority leadership's messaging.]
               -88   Not mentioned
Note(s)   This is being collected so that topics can be coded later, possibly using the Baumgartner and Jones policy agendas categories (www.policyagendas.org)

V33
Question   Quickly, what topic(s) were covered by **minority** leadership's messages?
Var Name   MinMsgTopic
Coding   [List topics of minority leadership's messaging.]
               -88   Not mentioned
Note(s)   This is being collected so that topics can be coded later, possibly using the Baumgartner and Jones policy agendas categories (www.policyagendas.org)

V34
Question   What is the most recent Gallup job approval rating for the President?
Var Name   PrezApproval
Coding   [Job approval rating]
               -88   Not mentioned
               -99   Missing
Note(s)

V34a
Question   What is the year's average Gallup job approval rating for the President?
Var Name   PrezAppYrAvg
Coding   [Average of V34 for calendar year]
               -88   Not mentioned
               -99   Missing
Note(s)

V35
Question   What is the fiscal quarter's rate of GDP growth?
Var Name   GDP
Coding   [GDP growth rate]
        -88   Not mentioned
        -99   Missing
Note(s)

V35a
Question   What is the yearly average rate of GDP growth?
Var Name   GDPYrAvg
Coding   [Average of V35 for calendar year]
        -88   Not mentioned
        -99   Missing
Note(s)

V36
Question   What is the fiscal quarter's national unemployment rate?
Var Name   Unemployment
Coding   [National unemployment rate]
        -88   Not mentioned
        -99   Missing
Note(s)

V36a
Question   What is the yearly average of the national unemployment rate?
Var Name   UnemployYrAvg
Coding   [Average of V36 for calendar year]
        -88   Not mentioned
        -99   Missing
Note(s)

V37
Question   Is there an election during the year of publication?
Var Name   ElectionYr
Coding   0   Non-election year for Congress
        1   Election year for Congress
Note   Even years are election years. Odd years are non-election years.

V38
Question   Which party controls the House of Representatives?
Var Name   HouseMaj
Coding   0   Democratic Party
                  1   Republican Party
Note(s)

V39
Question   How big is the margin between the House majority and the House
minority?
Var Name   HouseMargin
Coding   [Margin of advantage for majority]
                  -88   Not mentioned
                  -99   Missing
Note(s)

V40
Question   Among **all** voters, what is the most recent Democratic Party performance
                  on the Gallup generic ballot question?
Var Name   AvgDemBallotAV
Coding   [Democratic Party support on generic ballot question]
                  -88   Not mentioned
                  -99   Missing
Note(s)

V41
Question   Among **all** voters, what is the most recent Republican Party performance
                  on the Gallup generic ballot question?
VarName   AvgGOPBallotAV
Coding   [Democratic Party support on generic ballot question]
                  -88   Not mentioned
                  -99   Missing
Note(s)

V42
Question   Among **all** voters, what is the average difference between the Democrats
                  generic ballot and the Republican generic ballot?
VarName   AVGenBallotAvgDiff
Coding   [V40 minus V41]
                  -88   Not mentioned
                  -99   Missing
Note(s)

V43
Question   Among **<u>registered</u>** voters, what is the most recent Democratic Party performance on the Gallup generic ballot question?
Var Name   AvgDemBallotRV
Coding   [Democratic Party support on generic ballot question]
        -88   Not mentioned
        -99   Missing
Note(s)

V44
Question   Among **<u>registered</u>** voters, what is the most recent Republican Party performance on the Gallup generic ballot question?
VarName   AvgGOPBallotRV
Coding   [Democratic Party support on generic ballot question]
        -88   Not mentioned
        -99   Missing
Note(s)

V45
Question   Among **<u>registered</u>** voters, what is the average difference between the Democrats generic ballot and the Republican generic ballot?
VarName   RVGenBallotAvgDiff
Coding   [V43 minus V44]
        -88   Not mentioned
        -99   Missing
Note(s)

V46
Question   Which party controls the U.S. Senate?
Var Name   SenateMaj
Coding   0   Democratic Party
        1   Tie
        2   Republican Party
Note(s)

V46a
Question   Are Senate and the House controlled by the same party?
Var Name   SenHouseSame
Coding   0   No
        1   Yes
Note(s)

V47
Question   Which party controls the Presidency?
Var Name   PrezControl
Coding   0   Democratic Party
                1   Republican Party
Note(s)

V47a
Question   Are the White House and the House controlled by the same party?
Var Name   PrezHouseSame
Coding   0   No
                1   Yes
Note(s)

V48
Question   How isolated is the House majority party?
Var Name   HouseIsolation
Coding   1   Least isolated
                2   Isolated with Senate
                3   Most isolated
Note(s)   There are no cases, during this period, in which the House was isolated with the White House.

V48a
Question   How isolated is the House majority party? (Combines coding of 2 and 3)
Var Name   HouseIsolation2
Coding   1   Least isolated
                2   More isolated (either isolated with Sen, or with Sen and WH)

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