

## Framing and party competition: How Democrats enabled the GOP's move to the uncompromising right

By Robert M. Entman

### INTRODUCTION



**Robert M. Entman** is the J.B. and Maurice C. Shapiro professor of media and public affairs as well as a professor of international affairs at George Washington University.

Everyone is familiar with incessant complaints about partisan bickering and gridlock, about how Washington doesn't work and government is dysfunctional.

This may constitute one of the very few facts on which right and left can agree. Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein's "It's Even Worse than It Looks"<sup>1</sup> says the problem is rooted in the Republicans having abandoned traditional rules of the game in American politics and moving far from the ideological center where political scientists expected both parties to remain. But what *enabled* the GOP to undertake their migration to the uncompromising right?

I suggest it's the absence of genuine party competition. In fact, party competition ultimately means *frame competition*. It's a matter of political communication. If a party can't brand itself and construct a consistent, coherent story, it can't compete effectively. As Dennis Chong and James Druckman's research<sup>2</sup> shows, frame competition is necessary if not sufficient for a minimally informed citizenry. In these terms, the U.S. doesn't have two full-fledged parties. We have one-and-a-half.

Republicans enjoy generous funding to maintain a sophisticated infrastructure of partisan think tanks, legal groups, and associated organizations that groom people from their youth to take leadership roles. They deploy a comprehensive national strategy to win and hold political power at the state, local and congressional levels—as shown by the GOP's hold right now on more U.S. House seats and state governments than since the 1920s, despite recently presiding over the most devastating economic downturn and national security blunders in generations. Aided by ideological soul mates at Fox News, talk radio, and many local newspapers, the Republicans have the capacity to enforce message discipline across the entire party, and therefore offer a consistently clear, culturally resonant message. Republicans have a simple story used by all its leaders to explain policy

problems, mobilize public outrage, and legitimize policy solutions: “Big government is the problem, cutting taxes and regulation the solution; a rising tide will then lift all boats and those who work hard will live the American Dream.”

Republicans have a simple story used by all its leaders to explain policy problems, mobilize public outrage, and legitimize policy solutions: “Big government is the problem, cutting taxes and regulation the solution; a rising tide will then lift all boats and those who work hard will live the American Dream.”

The communicative success of the Republicans, the only real party we have, can be measured in many ways, but one is the existence of memes that trigger a series of instant, clear mental associations: “Big government.” “Tax and spend liberal.” “Obamacare.” “Repeal and replace.” “Government is the problem, not the solution.” “Tax relief.” “Cut and run.” “Strong defense.” “He kept us safe.” And many others. One finding of my current research is that Democrats don’t have any familiar slogans like this at all.

In fact, the Democrats don’t have a story identifying the general causes of America’s problems and offering a frequently repeated series of mobilizing moral judgments and solutions. They engage in what I call *nonframing rhetoric*. When they do try persuasive communication, it

doesn’t hang together as a coherent frame that explains the nature, cause, and remedy to problems in an emotionally compelling way. Nor do they have anything remotely comparable to the infrastructure of funding, partisan recruitment, think tanks and media, or the national strategy to maximize power, enjoyed by the GOP. Hence: a half-party.

With one party, the only effective one, having moved decisively toward the right, the negotiation, compromise and “everyone gets some of what they want, nobody gets all of what they want” approach that was the hallmark of America’s pluralistic democracy for most of the 20th century—what democratic theorists Robert Dahl and Charles Lindblom called “partisan mutual adjustment”—vanished. The lack of effective competition from another full-fledged, competently communicating party diminished Republicans’ incentives to compromise. The vacuum empowered and emboldened Republicans to exercise extraordinary power over the vocabulary and agenda of politics, and to fully exploit the many veto points provided by our constitution and tradition. Then they say “We told you government is the problem.” Lacking effective narrative opposition frees or perhaps necessitates that even the GOP’s once-moderate leaders—people like Mitch McConnell, Mitt Romney, and John McCain—be pushed to uncompromising extremes by the most intense or wealthiest interests.

The effects can be seen in Republican leaders’ unanimous denial of urgent, human-caused climate change, a stance unmatched by any conservative party in the Western world. Denial is rooted in the power and funding of fossil fuel, chemical, and agribusiness interests. Ditto on gun control: America’s extreme stand is unique in the world and is rooted in the weakness of political opposition that could compel moderation and compromise.

Yes, Democrats can still win presidential elections, but Clinton and Obama were prevented by implacable ideological opposition from enacting more than a few major policies, and their victories generated no memorable slogans à la the *New Deal*, no clear brand identity other than perhaps the one bestowed on them by the Republicans (*tax and spend liberals*), no loyalty-generating story. How else to explain Al Gore’s inability to retain the presidency for the Democrats after the relatively prosperous, peaceful Clinton years (a point supported by Lynn Vavreck’s “The Message Matters”)?<sup>3</sup> When Bush 43 took office, he could follow through on his major promises, in part because Democrats

had no narrative to delegitimize his two deficit-ballooning tax cuts and other major initiatives, many of which involved policy *inaction* (as explained in Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson’s “Winner Take All Politics”)<sup>4</sup>—always easier to pull off in the U.S. system.

Now for some data on the Democrats’ communication problems. In a recent study, Julie Wronski and I analyzed a total of 38,812 Republican elite, 29,843 Democratic elite, and 13,561 partisan-leaning journalist passages from transcripts of ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and Fox Sunday morning news talk shows like “Meet the Press” and “Face the Nation,” spanning every program for 6 years (2009-15).<sup>5</sup> These shows are the venues where leaders of both parties voice their party’s talking points and attack their opponents’, or, in other words, engage in frame competition. The data reveal several trends.

The GOP actually used liberal nearly four times more often than Democrats, applying it as a pejorative against the half-party.

## #1: REPUBLICANS DOMINATE THE POLICY AGENDA

We found that Democrats talked about the same top two issues the Republicans stressed: cutting the federal budget deficit and creating jobs and growing the economy. By emphasizing the deficit, Democrats promoted the *Republican* agenda! In fact we found that Democrats’ single most-frequently-mentioned policy proposal was the Simpson-Bowles Commission’s recommendations, which included cutting Social Security, a stand that obscures and confuses in the public mind what has generally been Democrats’ ownership of the Social Security issue and other safety net spending. This Democratic concern with the deficit at a time when Keynesian deficit spending should have been the priority illustrates how the party’s maladroit communication strategy reinforces decisions that are likely bad policy and certainly bad politics, in this case giving Republicans a weapon (scary-big deficits) used with relish against Democrats ever after.

## #2 DEMOCRATS UNDERMINE THEIR BRAND WHILE REPUBLICANS PROMOTE THEIRS

Democrats frequently endorsed their own negative stereotype without promoting a clear and positive image or brand identification. Our computer analyses of their language (using the LIWC and Diction programs) show Republicans, on the other hand, display more tenacity and less passivity, more concern with ordinary people and human interest, use more concrete rather than abstract vocabulary, and utter praising judgments more often. In other words, they present a more disciplined, active, and attractive brand appeal than the Democrats.

Furthermore, the Republicans use a more emotional vocabulary and in particular, employ *negative* emotional appeals and attacks significantly more than Democrats—the sorts of attacks that alert the listener that they need to pay attention and monitor the environment for solutions to heightened threat, according to Ted Brader’s research.<sup>6</sup> GOP leaders consistently highlighted and attacked the threats embodied in Democrats’ allegedly failed economic policies and Obamacare.

Meanwhile, the Democrats rarely even gave themselves an ideological label. The Republicans proudly brandished their ideological label *conservative*, using it 11 times more often than Democrats used *liberal* or *progressive*. The GOP actually used *liberal* nearly four times more often than Democrats, applying it as a pejorative against the half-party. This finding reveals Republican success at delegitimizing the Democrats’ natural ideological label. Lacking

an ideological brand, Democrats gave citizens little in the way of a cognitive or emotional hook on which to maintain a mobilizing loyalty.

### #3 GOP USE “THE AMERICAN PEOPLE” TO LEGITIMIZE AND ATTACK

The second most common phrase in the rhetoric of both party’s elites was “the American people.” In the full corpus of Sunday news morning shows from January 2009 through January 2015, those words appeared 1,417 times, in approximately 39 percent of all show segments. But the party elites invoked “the American people” in significantly different ways. Republicans frequently attributed their own policy views and frame to the “American people,” casting themselves as the public’s faithful representatives while legitimizing their preferences matching public opinion. Actually, polls show this is often inaccurate; in general, surveys show more public support for Democratic policies, as demonstrated in studies of Americans’ *operational liberalism* in contrast with their ideological conservatism (shown in Grossmann and Hopkins’ recent study).<sup>7</sup>

Rather than building on and emphasizing their party’s greater support for the will of the American people, Democrats tended to pronounce that they are doing good things *for* the public, treating citizens as *objects* of well-intentioned policymaking. They more rarely claim Democratic policies are those that majorities support—even though this is generally truer than for GOP policies.

### EXPLANATIONS

So why are Democrats so poor at communicating? The explanation is multifaceted but here are a couple important factors:

1) While raising money from wealthy interests and individuals, Democrats must also arouse enthusiasm of their mass base combining the two largest ethnic minorities, blacks and Latinos, with working or middle class, mostly urban or suburban whites. The latter citizens’ loyalty to Democrats has been weakening since President Nixon’s Southern Strategy and the rise of the “Reagan Democrats.” Democrats face a more difficult balancing act than Republicans. If they consistently denounce economic inequality, for instance, they can’t recommend soak-the-rich taxes without alienating important contributors.

2) The other factor involves the ideological asymmetries between the two parties. As Grossmann and Hopkins show, the base of the Democratic Party possesses belief systems that are less ideologically coherent; they see the appeal of their party in far less ideological terms than Republicans. The latter have been educated via conservative media and the ideological coherence of the GOP communication strategy itself into loyalty to a brand closely identified with conservatism. In the absence of a strong competitive frame from the other party, Republicans have been able to take their ideological brand identification and move it farther and farther away from the center to please their contributors and most extreme and intense voters.

To the extent Democrats’ poor communication style and weak branding arise structurally from the necessity to raise the bulk of party funds from wealthy groups and individuals, prospects for more symmetrical partisan frame

competition—the sort that would give Republicans stronger incentives to pull back from the extreme toward the middle—seem remote. As Mann and Ornstein demonstrate, such a location of healthy party competition around the center of the spectrum is precisely what the founders and major theorists of democracy presumed necessary for the U.S. to be a functional rather than dysfunctional democracy.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Mann, Thomas and Norman Ornstein. 2013. *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism*. (New York, NY: Basic Books).
- 2 Chong, Dennis and James N. Druckman. 2007. *Framing Public Opinion in Competitive Democracies*. *American Political Science Review* 101 (4): 637-55.
- 3 Vavreck, Lynn. 2009. *The Message Matters: The Economy and Presidential Campaigns*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- 4 Hacker, Jacob and Paul Pierson. 2011. *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer--and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class*. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster).
- 5 Data analyzed in Entman, Robert and Wronski, Julie. 2015. "The Politics of Self-Inflicted Pain: Inequality and Asymmetric Partisan Communication Competence." Paper submitted for presentation to the 2016 Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Fukuoka, Japan.
- 6 Brader, Ted. 2006. *Campaigning for Hearts and Minds: How Emotional Appeals in Political Ads Work*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- 7 Grossman, Matt and David Hopkins. 2015. "Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats: The Asymmetry of American Party Politics." *Perspectives on Politics*. 13(1): 119-139.

### GOVERNANCE STUDIES

The Brookings Institution  
1775 Massachusetts Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
Tel: 202.797.6090  
Fax: 202.797.6144  
[brookings.edu/governance](http://brookings.edu/governance)

### EDITING

Elizabeth Sablich  
Nick McClellan

### PRODUCTION & LAYOUT

Nick McClellan

### EMAIL YOUR COMMENTS TO [GSCOMMENTS@BROOKINGS.EDU](mailto:GSCOMMENTS@BROOKINGS.EDU)

This paper is distributed in the expectation that it may elicit useful comments and is subject to subsequent revision. The views expressed in this piece are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the staff, officers or trustees of the Brookings Institution.

The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and, based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.