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POL SCI 492 *Senior Capstone with Dr. Elizabeth Vonnahme*

## **Media Framing of Congressional Republicans during the 2013 Government Shutdown**

In recent years, the political climate in the United States has become increasingly polarized between the Democratic and Republican parties. This is seen most recently with the shutdown of the United States government, October 10 through October 16, 2013, which was the result of a disagreement between the two parties over the United States budget and the Affordable Care Act. The recent increase in the polarization between the two parties has even caused a divide within media outlets, more specifically cable news outlets such as Fox News and MSNBC. These news programs frame different stories and events in a biased fashion towards one party or another. However, the network channels may or may not be affected by this recent increase in polarization. This raises the question, do mainstream news channels report the news in an unbiased manner? To be exact, is there a partisan bias within the mainstream media's evening news programs?

Media coverage of political events is important to the political process because it is how a large number of individuals get their information about policies and policy makers. Voters' information, and by association, their beliefs, could be led astray if a bias exists within mainstream media. If a bias is identified, future political science research could examine why this bias exists and what might be a driving force behind the bias. People should be able to feel confident that the information provided by mainstream news outlets is not framed or biased in a certain way as to lead them or their beliefs astray. Hopefully this paper, in answering this question, will help to either bring awareness of a possible bias or bring confidence

in the lack of a biased media coverage of American politics. I will examine prior research on framing and media reporting of politics. I will then examine a three-week window from October 7 through October 25, 2013, of the nightly news coverage on three mainstream media channels: ABC, CBS, and NBC. This will cover the end of the shutdown of the United States government and the beginning of the issues with the Affordable Care Act website. I will look at the number of times both parties are mentioned and the tone used when mentioning the parties. From this information, I will then assess if a partisan bias is present.

### *What is Framing?*

Framing has been studied by a number of political scientists in a number of aspects. Chong and Druckman (2007) argue that framing occurs when someone takes a different opinion on an issue due to the issue's presentation. Kinder and Nelson (1990) further define framing as linguistic structures used to provide meaning to certain events or issues. This definition of framing assumes that issues or objects can be viewed from different angles and have different emphases put on them that can have a psychological effect on the individuals exposed to the framing. A single frame can influence an individual's overall opinion on an issue (Chong and Druckman, 2007).

Framing affects people's choices and beliefs in a variety of areas. Kinder and Nelson (1990) conducted an experiment in which they asked two groups two different questions about poverty programs. One question asked whether the government should give money to the poor or not because it tends to give to those who do not need it. The other question asked if the government's deficit was too large and therefore could not afford to give to the poor. Through this experiment, Kinder and Nelson found that the different framing of the questions caused varying responses from individuals filling out the questionnaire. They believed that the framing reminded these individuals of a certain way that the topic is sometimes viewed.

Research, like the aforementioned and other research done by Nelson and his colleagues, shows that framing is more

than just belief change or traditional persuasion; framing is more subtle (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997). The researchers described traditional persuasion as the ability to change an individual's beliefs through the presentation of new information. They argued that this is distinct from framing as framing gives greater weight to certain concepts. They tested this distinction with an experiment by first assessing individuals' knowledge of a topic and their opinions on the topic. They then gave the subjects articles in which welfare, for example, was framed in a certain manner. The researchers hypothesized that if they showed that individuals who possessed knowledge of welfare prior to the articles were affected by framing, this would then show that framing effects were different than the traditional persuasion. This is exactly what they found. They found that framing effects were actually stronger among respondents already familiar with welfare. They believed this was because frames trigger one to remember already existing beliefs instead of adding new items or information to individuals' beliefs (Nelson et al., 1997).

There are limitations to the success of framing. When individuals are aware of the presence of framing, especially by political candidates, this can have an effect on people's opinions of the candidates. Valentino, Buhr, and Beckmann (2001) examined the effect of candidates' strategic use of framing on individuals' opinions. In this experiment, they presented two groups with different articles: one article in which the candidates appear to be sincerely concerned about an issue and another article in which the candidates appear to be framing the issue in a way to benefit themselves. The individuals shown the article in which the candidates seemed to be using their framing strategically had a far more negative view of the candidates and moved the conversation away from the issue. Therefore, framing can have a negative effect on candidates in these circumstances.

Similarly, there are times when media framing can backfire. During the Clinton administration, and more specifically the Monica Lewinsky scandal (the affair between President Clinton and his intern), the public had a considerably high opinion of President Clinton given the circumstances (Shah, Watts, Domke, & Fan, 2002). Research examined why this would be. Researchers observed the

predicted public opinion, then accounted for the state of the economy, and then finally they took into account the scandal. The researchers concluded that the economy did not affect the public's opinion; rather, the media's framing of the scandal influenced opinion. The researchers were able to show that the media framed the scandal in terms of conservatives attacking the President through the process of impeachment and liberals questioning the motives of the conservative members of Congress. This framing is what the researchers believed to be the cause of the positive public opinion ratings for Clinton (Shah et al., 2002).

The effects of framing documented above may be moderated in the real world as discussed by Druckman (2001). The effects of framing can be counterbalanced in the real world because most people have access to outside information from reputable sources. Druckman examined this belief by administering a survey in the traditional format without outside information, while another group was given a survey with the addition of credible outside information, namely articles from reputable sources. The second type of research design is much more natural to how one receives information. Druckman was able to conclude that the findings in framing research done in the traditional research design overemphasized the effects of framing. When factoring in credible information, framing effects dramatically decreased and, in some instances, even were eliminated.

Credibility, however, can also have a positive effect on framing when the credibility is in reference to the articles in which the framing occurs. Druckman (2008) did an experiment with students in which he gave them articles in reference to America's poor, framed in terms of either economic or humanitarian frames. Druckman then explained to different groups the credibility of the sources. Druckman made one group believe the source was credible while making another source appear to be less credible. Druckman found that only a credible source could affect the ability of the frame to have an effect on people's opinion. He believes this shows that credibility is a prerequisite for framing to have an effect.

## *Framing and the Republican Party*

Framing research in the context of politics has also more narrowly focused on the framing of the Republican Party. Many different research experiments have been done to see what the relationship between the media and the Republican Party has been and if there is a bias towards the GOP within the media. These experiments have covered presidencies, elections, and even basic labeling of the parties. Eisinger, Veenstra, and Koehn (2007) did research into the possibility that there was bias within the media in terms of conservative labeling. They examined the print media to see if conservatives were being labeled at higher numbers. They examined this over a fourteen-year time span and found that conservatives were actually being labeled at a higher rate. However, this was due to an increase of conservatives within Congress at the time and proved that no true bias existed.

A possible conservative bias has also been researched when it comes to the portrayal of President George W. Bush. Peake (2007) examined newspapers to see if the tone and amount of coverage was different among different newspapers. The research looked at three factors to determine if any of them had an impact on how the newspaper portrayed President Bush: if the newspaper had endorsed the President during the campaign, was published in a market that was favorable to the President, or if a corporation owned the newspaper. Peake found that newspapers that did endorse President Bush during his campaign continued to frame him in a positive light. Peake also found that in states with a higher number of congressional Democrats, newspapers gave the President more coverage, but in doing so they covered him in a more negative light. Lastly, Peake found that corporate-owned newspapers covered the President far less than independently-owned newspapers.

The possible bias against the GOP and conservatives when it comes to presidential and congressional campaigns has been discussed by Entman (2010). Entman examined the 2008 campaign and broke it down into three sections of time to examine instances of framing more closely. Entman was examining the validity of the claim that the

mainstream media had a left-leaning bias. The research found that the media did not have a bias, but rather the media reflected the skills of the party and the events occurring at the time.

### *Framing During the Government Shutdown*

Research done in the past has shown that no bias exists in the mainstream media, media put out through the largest distribution channels. Research has looked at basic labeling, framing of the economy during different presidential terms, and framing of candidates during campaigns. My research will look to expand this prior research by examining the framing of congressional Republicans during an active congressional session. This research will focus on a different area of Republican politics that has yet to be examined. As the climate of American politics is in constant motion, my research will also supply the most current research in this area of study. It also will examine bias in a wider scope by examining both labeling and tone.

I believe that the results will match and strengthen the results found by prior research. I hypothesize that while the Republican Party will be mentioned at a higher rate than the Democratic Party, no true partisan bias will exist. I believe this will be the case due to the time frame being examined. With the shutdown of the government and the Republicans' active role in that event, I posit there will be a slight increase in the number of times the Republican Party is mentioned, but not enough to warrant a partisan bias. The shutdown occurred when congressional Republicans refused to pass the budget and raise the debt ceiling because of their desire to defund the Affordable Care Act. I also believe the tone used by the media to portray the Republican Party will be no more negative than that used to portray the Democratic Party. I believe this will be the case because prior research has shown it to be true. Therefore, I believe that the media framing of the Republican Party will be similar to that of the media framing of the Democratic Party when taking into consideration events occurring during the time frame, and thusly, no partisan bias will exist.

## *Research Design*

My hypothesis argues that mainstream media sources such as ABC, NBC, and CBS do not have a conservative bias. I believe the mainstream media will equally and accurately display the two different political parties. To test this hypothesis I examined the nightly news programs on three major mainstream broadcast news outlets: ABC, CBS, and NBC. I chose these channels because they are basic broadcast channels that everyone with a television receives freely. This makes them likely to be the most viewed channels on television. I examined a roughly three-week window from October 7 and ending on October 25. I chose this time frame because it covers the end of the government shutdown and the initial days of the healthcare website, part of the Affordable Care Act. These two events are linked to both parties in a negative way. I only examined coverage on weekdays to keep consistent among the channels. Some channels do not offer weekend programs, and those that do not follow the same structure or have the same host as weekday programs.

To measure for bias I recorded the number of times one of the following categories was mentioned: Republican, Conservative, Tea Party, Democrat, or Obama. I also examined whether a positive or negative tone was used when mentioning the parties. The terms “Republican,” “Conservative,” and “Tea Party” were the terms looked for when examining the framing of the Republican Party due to their interchangeable use by the media. When the terms were placed directly next to each other, it only counted once so as to not artificially inflate the number of times the Republican Party is mentioned. “Democrat” and “Obama” were counted as the Democratic Party. Obama as the Democratic President can be seen to be the head of the Democratic Party. If Democrat and Obama appeared directly next to each other, then it was only counted once as to not artificially inflate labeling in the opposite direction. To record the tone I looked for words that carry negative or positive connotations. Table 1 shows the categories of terms used to count as negative and positive, as well as what these terms look like within the broadcast. The categories are negative or positive based on the way it makes the party appear

to be doing its job. Some mentions of the parties will not fall into either category, as they will appear to not contain any of the words or categories of words listed in the table. For research purposes, I have labeled these as neutral, but they have been removed when closely examining the data in the next section as they do not add to or detract from the evidence.

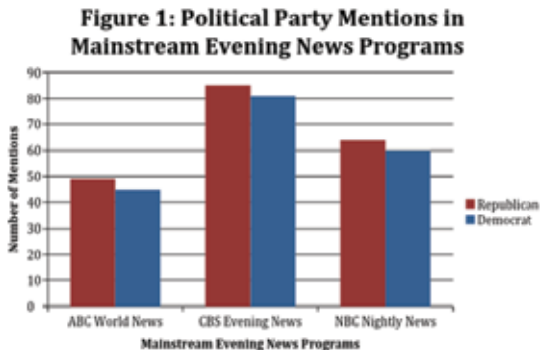
**Table 1**  
**Language Used to Distinguish Tone**

	<b>Words Indicating Negative Tone</b>	<b>Words Indicating Positive Tone</b>
	Poor Public Opinion Poll Number (i.e., X has seen a drastic drop in public opinion lately; X's public opinion ratings are far lower than that of Y's)	Good Public Opinion Poll Numbers (i.e., X is doing better in the polls than Y; X isn't seeing an effect in terms of public opinion)
	Causing the Government Shutdown (i.e., Many view it the fault of X that the government shut down; the inabilities of X to negotiate led to a shutdown of the government)	Ending the Government Shutdown (i.e., X helped aid in the ending of the government shutdown; X helped to bring about negotiations to help end the government shutdown)
	Failed or Troubled Policy (i.e., X had to apologize again today; X's policy had a disastrous rollout)	
	Disunification of the Party (i.e., Part of X is pressuring the other part of X; X is not getting along with its superiors)	



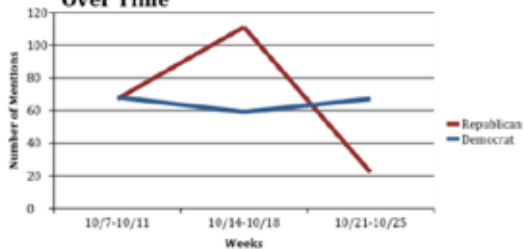
## Results

Consistent with my hypothesis discussed earlier, there does not appear to be a partisan bias within the mainstream media. Figure 1 demonstrates the number of times the Republican Party and the Democratic Party were mentioned over the three-week window by the mainstream evening news programs.



The figure illustrates that the Republican Party was mentioned slightly more than the Democratic Party. This slight margin is present across all three channels and is of a similar magnitude among the channels. Therefore, if a bias did exist, it would be equally present among the channels. However, the margin is too close to give strong evidence for a bias and, therefore, one would be justified in believing that no true partisan bias, in the aspect of frequency mentioned, is present within the mainstream media. The slight mention of the Republican Party over the Democratic Party could be the result of the government shutdown occurring during the timeframe as I expected to see in the evidence. This possible explanation is similar to the one given by researchers Eisinger, Veenstra, and Koehn (2007) and is given more weight when looking at Figure 2. Figure 2 looks at the number of mentions over the span of the three weeks across the three channels and how the numbers between the parties are in flux.

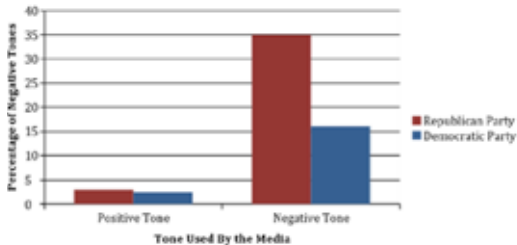
**Figure 2: Mentions of Political Parties Over Time**



This figure illustrates a dramatic increase in the number of times the Republican Party is mentioned during the week of October 14 through the 18. The coverage of the Republican Party drops off dramatically the following week followed by an increase in the number of times the Democratic Party is mentioned in that week. This examination of the evidence over time is similar to that done by researcher Entman (2010). The second week that was examined, October 14 through October 18, was during the end of the shutdown of the United States government. The drop-off seen in the number of times the Republican Party is mentioned and the increase in the number of times the Democratic Party is mentioned is during the first week of the rollout of the healthcare website. These events would explain the difference and shift in the number of times the political parties were mentioned. With these events lining up with the changes in the number of times the parties were mentioned, it would show that no true partisan bias exists. The differences are reflective of the events of the time and not a favoring of one party over the other. Therefore, even though there is a difference in labeling between the parties, when the data is looked at more closely this is only due to events occurring at this time. In terms of the number of times a party is mentioned, it is clear that there is no partisan bias.

However, Figures 3 breaks down the tone used when each of the parties are mentioned and shows a disparity between the parties.

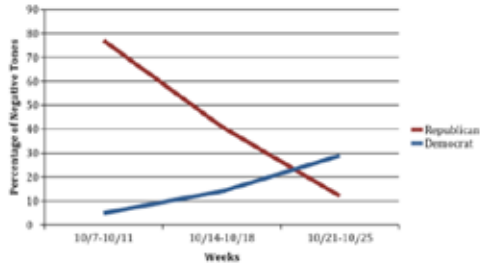
**Figure 3: Tone Used by Mainstream Media in Reference to Political Parties**



This illustrates that both parties are represented in a more negative tone than in a positive tone, but the gap between the two is far smaller for the Democratic Party than the Republican Party. The Republican Party is mentioned at a higher percentage of the time in a negative tone than in a positive tone. The Democratic Party is mentioned at a higher percentage in a negative tone than a positive tone. However, the difference between the percentages is far smaller in comparison to that of the Republican Party. The percentage of times the Republican Party is mentioned in a negative tone is over twice that of the Democratic Party. From this one could draw the conclusion that there is a partisan bias within evening news programs. It would seem that the mainstream media portrays the Republican Party in a far more negative manner and a far less positive manner than the Democratic Party.

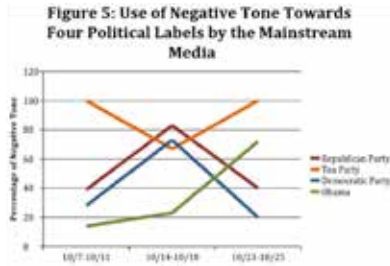
In contrast, Figure 4, similar to Figure 2, shows the trend by week of the negative tone used for each party and shows a dramatic flux between the parties among the three weeks.

**Figure 4: Use of Negative Tone Towards the Two Political Parties by the Mainstream Media**



This figure illustrates a drastic shift in the use of a negative tone for both parties over the course of the three weeks. During this time, the percentage of times the Republican Party was mentioned negatively drops significantly. The percentage of times the Democratic Party was mentioned in a negative tone appears to have an increase, though far less dramatic. The last week examined actually shows that the Democratic Party is discussed in a negative tone at a higher percentage than the Republican Party. This shows that the percentage of times one of the parties is referenced in a negative tone is not consistent. The peak in the percentage of a negative tone used to describe the Republican Party was in the middle of the government shutdown and the upturn in the percentage of times a negative tone was used for the Democratic Party was the rollout of the healthcare website. This would show that the shift in tone was influenced by the events that were occurring during the times that were examined and, therefore, no partisan bias exists.

This can be strengthened even further when looking at the percentage of times a negative tone was used when referencing Obama, Republican Party, Democratic Party, and Tea Party individually. Figure 5 illustrates the percentages for the four labels mentioned above over the three weeks.



This figure illustrates a drastic shift in the percentage of times a negative tone was used when referencing President Obama and the Democratic Party at the beginning of the issues with the healthcare website. Since the Affordable Care Act is so closely associated with the president and less closely associated with congressional Democrats, it follows that the percentage of times the president is referenced in a negative tone increases while the percentage of times the Democratic Party is referenced in a negative tone decreases. The percentage of times a negative tone is used to reference the Tea Party seems to go down during the end of the government shutdown and this could be caused from the focus at the end of the government shutdown to shift more generally to all congressional Republicans. The peaks in percentages of times a negative tone was used for both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party is at the end of the government shutdown, which was driven by a deadlock in Congress. Therefore, it would follow that these peaks should exist between these two labels. This breakdown of the labels helps to give stronger evidence that the alignment of the percentage of times a negative tone was used with the actual events at the time. From these figures, it can be again inferred that no partisan bias exists.

## *Conclusion*

In this paper, I examined whether there was a partisan bias towards the Republican Party within the mainstream media. I believed that no partisan bias existed in the mainstream media due to prior findings in research, as well as the changes in the media's coverage reflecting the recent government activity of the government shutdown and issues with the Affordable Care Act website. The evidence confirmed my hypothesis and linked closely with my reasoning for this occurrence. The Republican Party was mentioned at only a slightly higher rate than the Democratic Party, which I expected to see when looking at the specific timeframe. When I examined the evidence in reference to the exact weeks, the differences in the number of times each party was mentioned tracked closely with the events occurring at those times. Also the gap in just the basic mentioning of the parties between ABC, NBC, and CBS was present among all three evening news programs. Therefore, no bias was present among the different programs.

I was surprised, however, to see how much more frequently the Republican Party was referred to using a negative tone. The evidence showed that the percentage of times a negative tone was used when referring to the Republican Party was nearly twice as high as the Democratic Party. In addition to the negative tone, the Republican Party was referred to in a positive tone at a smaller percentage than the Democratic Party. I did not expect to see such dramatic gaps between the percentages of the tones used to cover the two parties. However, when breaking the evidence down in terms of the weeks, it was clear that the driving force for this was the recent government shutdown. The percentage of times a negative tone was used to refer to the Republican Party peaked significantly during the shutdown of the government. After the government shutdown, an equally significant drop occurred in the percentage of times the Republican Party was referenced in a negative tone. There was also a slight increase to be found in the percentage of times the Democratic Party was mentioned in a negative tone, and this increase coincides with the initial rollout of the healthcare website. This

is also further strengthened when examining the specific labels of Democratic Party and Obama. The percentage of times a negative tone was used increased dramatically when referencing Obama on the week the focus shifted to the healthcare website issues, and the percentage of times a negative tone was used decreased dramatically when referencing the Democratic Party or Republican Party after the shutdown of the government. This strengthens the evidence that the percentage of times a negative tone is used is linked closely to who is involved in the events occurring at the time. Therefore, one can conclude that the events drove the difference in the number of times the parties were mentioned, over an actual partisan bias. Thusly, no true partisan bias exists within the mainstream media.

It is important to keep in mind that this is only representative of the television media. This does not take into account areas such as print and radio. Also, it does not take into account local news programs on those basic broadcast channels. Local news programs could have different biases or ways of covering events that were not captured in this research. I wish I had more time so that I could have examined the tone and number of times mentioned over a larger timeframe. It would have been beneficial to see if the trend of increased negative tone towards the Democratic Party would have continued given the continued issues with the healthcare website. A larger amount of time would have allowed for a stronger and clearer pattern between events and the tone or number of mentions of the political parties.

That concern aside, this research helps to strengthen prior research on the topic of media framing and shows that a partisan bias does not exist within mainstream media because the coverage reflected the events that occurred during the time in which I conducted my examination. In addition, the way to obtaining the clearest picture of the way the parties are portrayed is by examining the research in increments of time. This allows for an easier examination of the possible causes for the framing or discussion of one party over another. I also think it will be important for citizens to be aware that the information they are receiving from their mainstream media outlets does not come with a partisan bias and

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