

CONGRESS IN THE MASS MEDIA: HOW *THE WEST WING* AND
TRADITIONAL JOURNALISM FRAME CONGRESSIONAL POWER

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CONGRESS IN THE MASS MEDIA: HOW *THE WEST WING* AND
TRADITIONAL JOURNALISM FRAME CONGRESSIONAL POWER

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

To everyone who has given me an education.

To my parents, Joe and Katie, who sacrificed so much to ensure that my brother and I had the best educations possible. They taught me more than I can fit on this page.

To my big brother Joey, who taught me about sports and '90s rap music.

To my Belek and Lankas extended families, who taught me where I come from and support me in where I am going.

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ABSTRACT

Congress is often overshadowed by the presidency in the mass media, and research into portrayals of Congress in the mass media is limited. This study seeks to add to existing scholarship on Congress in the mass media and specifically looks at how traditional journalism and fictional entertainment frame congressional power. Guided by framing theory and the social construction of reality, the study uses qualitative textual analysis to analyze articles from *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times*, and *The New York Times* and episodes from *The West Wing*. The study employs literature on congressional history and Congress in the mass media to identify existing frames; however, the study also acknowledges additional frames that have not already been identified. The results show that both the newspaper sample and the *West Wing* sample predominately use conflict frames to portray congressional power. The conflict frames focus on conflict between parties, conflict between the legislative and executive branches, and even conflict between the chambers of Congress. Congressional power is framed as being dependent on these conflicts. The study shows how traditional journalism and fictional entertainment complement each other and suggests that the two types of media can affect citizens' social realities.

CHAPTER ONE

Exploring Congressional Power

Introduction

The framers of the Constitution established the United States Congress as a separate branch of government along with the executive and judicial branches, and they enacted a system of checks and balances to ensure that no one branch could encroach power from another. However, with presidents such as Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt, the twentieth century saw an increase in executive power and prominence at the expense of the legislative branch (O'Connor and Rollins, 2003, p. 1). Political philosopher John Locke, who influenced the framers, believed the legislature to be the greatest of the three branches (Locke, 1690). Over the years, however, American politics has seen a rebalancing of power between Congress and the presidency. The legislature began as the dominant branch, but the executive now holds more power. The United States has become more and more focused on the president, and the mass media might share some of this responsibility.

People's perceptions of individuals and institutions are influenced by many forces. The news they hear and read, the films and television they watch, and the conversations they have with others all have a hand in shaping their perceptions of reality. An episode of fictional television might have just as much influence in shaping perceptions as a news story does. Traditional journalism and fictional entertainment are two different mediums, but together they help comprise the mass media. It is important

to study the mass media in order to discover what portrayals of people and institutions the media is producing.

Congress has certainly been a subject of both traditional journalism and fictional entertainment. Traditional journalism covers Congress in journalism's quest to serve the public and uphold democratic values. Congress has also been featured in fictional television shows. Perhaps the most successful political television show to come to mind is NBC's *The West Wing*. As its name suggests, *The West Wing* focuses on the president and his staffers in the executive branch, but the series also features several subplots dealing with Congress. This study uses both traditional journalism, specifically newspapers, and *The West Wing* to explore the portrayals of Congress in the mass media. Guided by framing theory and the social construction of reality, this study looks at frames of Congress in *The West Wing* and in traditional journalism. However, it is first necessary to conduct a thorough review of literature on these topics and theories.

A Portrait of Congress

Before examining the portrayals of Congress in the mass media, it is important to look at what Congress was intended to be and how it evolved into the institution it is today. When the framers were drafting the United States' founding documents, they looked toward Locke's writings for inspiration. Locke's influence can be found in the *Declaration of Independence*, the Constitution, and *The Federalist Papers*. Even though the Constitution outlines a series of checks and balances among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, Locke (1632-1704) held the legislative branch in the highest esteem. In his "Second Treatise of Government," he calls establishing the legislative

power “the first and fundamental positive Law of all Commonwealths” (Locke, 1690). Locke (1690) says, “This Legislative is not only the supream power of the Commonwealth, but sacred and unalterable in the hands where the Community have once placed it...” (Locke, 1690).

In “Federalist No. 48,” James Madison echoes Locke and says the legislative branch “derives a superiority.” Madison says that this superiority and extensive powers make it easier for Congress to encroach power from other branches of government. To prevent one branch from encroaching power from any other branch, Madison argues for a system of checks and balances. He says that in a republican form of government, the legislature is dominant. However, he writes:

The remedy for this inconveniency is to divide the legislature into different branches; and to render them, by different modes of election and different principles of action, as little connected with each other as the nature of their common functions and their common dependence on society will admit. (Madison)

The framers viewed a government without checks and balances as dangerous to the republic. Kommers, Finn, and Jacobsohn (2004) write:

In defending the Constitution, Madison and the framers held that government would be most effective in protecting both liberty and democracy by incorporating a series of checks and balances into the system of separated powers, so long as each department retained its essential independence. (p. 110)

Even though Madison and Locke believed Congress to be the superior branch, they called for limits on congressional power so that Congress would not abuse that power.

In the Constitution, Congress is the first branch of government to be discussed. Article 1, Section 1 says, “All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of

Representatives.” Article I then continues to outline Congress’ powers, which range from regulating commerce and coining money to declaring war and raising and maintaining armies and a navy. Article I even grants the House of Representatives the sole power of impeachment, a significant check over the other branches. Additional congressional powers can be found in other parts of the Constitution as well. Article III authorizes Congress to establish inferior federal courts, Article IV gives Congress the power to make rules for territories and properties of the United States. The 16th Amendment gives Congress the power to lay and collect income taxes, and Article II gives the Senate the power to participate in the treaty-making process. This last power was important to the framers because it withheld from the president the exclusive authority to make treaties, a power held by European monarchs (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 3).

When drafting the Constitution, the framers wanted to ensure that the president would never amass as much power as the monarch they had sought independence from. This resulted in giving Congress foreign relations powers. Congress had the power of the purse, the right to regulate commerce with foreign nations (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 3). Additionally, not only was Congress involved in the treaty-making process, but it also was given the sole power to declare war. Congress had the right to authorize war, but the president was to be the commander in chief of the army and navy and had the power to execute war (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 5-6). Schlesinger (1973) writes, “This division of powers was inherently unstable” (p. 35).

Despite the framers’ original intent of the text, Congress and the Constitution evolved. Congress in practice is not the same as Congress on paper, and over the years, Congress has seen itself gain additional powers while still losing authority and

prominence to the executive. Congress has even given away some of its powers to the president. This rebalancing of powers has occurred under the guidance of the same Constitution ratified by the early republic. However, neither Congress nor the executive can adequately define the extent of their powers. This is the duty of the Supreme Court. Kommers, Finn, and Jacobsohn (2004) write, “[T]he Supreme Court often reserves the right to define the limits of each branch’s power unless, of course, a legislative decision or an executive practice falls within the scope of the political question doctrine” (p. 112).

Supreme Court cases have granted Congress powers that are not explicitly outlined in the Constitution. For example, *Watkins v. United States* in 1957 gave Congress the “power of inquiry,” meaning the power to carry out congressional investigations (Kommers, Finn, and Jacobsohn, 2004, p. 114). The Court argued that this was an implicit power in the Constitution. Kommers, Finn, and Jacobsohn (2004) write, “In short, if Congress seeks information on a matter concerning which it is authorized to legislate, Congress may require an investigation into that matter” (p. 114).

The theory of implied congressional powers originated with *McCulloch v. Maryland* in 1819. The case arose when Congress established the Second Bank of the United States. The issue was the power relations between the federal government and the states, but Chief Justice Marshall also sought to justify Congress’ implied powers.

Kommers, Finn, and Jacobsohn (2004) write:

By examining the words and structure of the Constitution, and aided by the magnetic force of his own rhetoric, Marshall set out to show that even in the absence of any express language conferring on the national government the power to incorporate a national bank, Congress was nevertheless empowered to do so. (p. 234)

Marshall wrote in the opinion of the court that a national government given such vast powers “must also be intrusted with ample means for their execution” as long as those means are consistent with the letter and spirit of the Constitution (*McCulloch v. Maryland*). The case expanded Congress’ power to include implied powers and not just those powers explicitly stated in the Constitution.

Throughout American history, Congress has gone through periods of both gaining and losing power to the executive branch. Zelizer (2004) divides the history of Congress into four eras: the formative era (1780s-1820s), the partisan era (1830s-1900s), the committee era (1910s-1960s), and the contemporary era (1970s-today). In mapping out the history of Congress, Zelizer (2004) looks at how the branch evolved over the centuries. He writes about initial feelings toward Congress:

When the United States Congress came into being, its future was unclear. The colonial and revolutionary eras left two contradictory legacies for the creators of the new country. On the one hand, the eras generated tremendous respect for, and extensive experience with, representative institutions...On the other hand, the colonial and revolutionary eras inspired grave fears about the dangers of excessive legislative powers. (Zelizer, 2004, p. 2)

Colonists saw the forcefulness of England’s Parliament as a warning that a collective body could be just as powerful and tyrannical as a monarch (Zelizer, 2004, p. 2). After the Revolution, states’ constitutions required regular elections, and they checked power through bicameral legislatures in order to limit legislative dominance (Zelizer, 2004, p. 2).

Zelizer (2004) calls the formative era of Congress an era of “experimentation and transformation” (p. 3). Even though major procedures still used by legislators today, such as standing committees, political parties, and rules concerning the majority and

minority, emerged during the formative era, none of these procedures were well-defined until the 1830s. No one knew which procedures would survive either (Zelizer, 2004, p. 3).

The largest project undertaken by Congress in this period was territorial expansion. In 1803, the Senate approved Thomas Jefferson's deal with France to acquire the Louisiana Purchase, doubling the size of the United States (Zelizer, 2004, p. 4). Of course, once the president acquired territories, it was up to Congress to make the rules necessary to deal with "relations with Native Americans, the treatment of foreign nationals, the distribution of public lands, the establishment of territorial government, and the admission of new states" (Zelizer, 2004, p. 4).

Also in 1803 was the landmark Supreme Court case *Marbury v. Madison*, which checked Congress' power by establishing judicial review. Judicial review meant the Court had the authority to strike down acts of Congress and to have the final say on constitutional questions (Zelizer, 2004, p. 4). In delivering the opinion of the court, Chief Justice Marshall wrote, "The powers of the legislature are defined and limited; and that those limits may not be mistaken or forgotten, the constitution is written" (*Marbury v. Madison*).

A major challenge Congress faced during this formative era was figuring out how to use its war power. It did not formally declare war against the French at the end of the eighteenth century, but the government did recruit troops, raise money, and engage in some naval battles. The War of 1812 against Great Britain put more strain on the government because of underdeveloped capacities, and it caused deep divisions among Republican legislators (Zelizer, 2004, p. 4).

The Constitution established that Congress would share the war power with the president. Although Schlesinger (1973) believes this division of powers was unstable, he writes, “Still, written and unwritten checks managed to keep these two powers in rough balance in the early republic” (p. 35). He says that the balance even survived Andrew Jackson’s expansion of presidential power (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 35). Even though Jackson did not disrupt the division of war powers, he did change the nature of the presidency and limit congressional powers. In the 1820s, the Jacksonians deposed the congressional caucus as the way to choose party candidates for the presidency. Kommers, Finn, and Jacobsohn (2004) write, “President Jackson turned the presidency into an office representative of the people as a whole and claimed to base much of his power on that fact, as would other presidents after him” (p. 111). Although Congress is the institution more representative of the people, Jackson’s changes allowed the country to unite under one person. However, Jackson still deferred to Congress in situations where there was a threat of war (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 43).

In the formative era, the executive also tried to limit the information that it transmitted to Congress (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 43). Just as the president and Congress had to balance their war powers, the president and Congress had to balance the president’s right to withhold information with Congress’ right to request and receive information. Schlesinger (1973) writes:

Presidents acceded to most congressional demands but sometimes asserted and once in a while insisted on their right not to do so (even while they very often did so). Congress accepted the principle of limited but not of uncontrolled presidential discretion. (p. 49)

This balance proved challenging as the executive branch began to develop its war-making powers (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 43).

The partisan era (1830s-1900s) that Zelizer outlines was marked by unstable congressional membership. With high turnover rates and few long incumbencies, many congressmen never got past one term (Zelizer, 2004, p. 133). Zelizer (2004) says that congressmen went in and out of several political jobs: “A person might be a governor one year, a senator a few years later, and then a representative. Since elections were competitive, few legislators counted on winning their seats in the next season” (p. 133). Party leadership was not formalized until after the Civil War, but party divisions ran deep within Congress and American politics. State legislatures kept an eye on representatives and senators, and speakers made committee assignments based on party loyalty. Those who stepped out of party lines were punished (Zelizer, 2004, p. 133).

The rise of partisanship coincided with Congress’ continued struggle with the executive over war powers. The Civil War saw Abraham Lincoln take unprecedented steps in the executive to act as commander in chief. His actions, some unconstitutional, encroached on congressional power. When Fort Sumter was fired upon, Lincoln delayed the meeting of Congress until July in order to act without the hindrance of Congress (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 58). Schlesinger (1973) writes:

In his twelve weeks of executive grace, Lincoln ignored one law and constitutional provision after another. He assembled the militia, enlarged the Army and the Navy beyond their authorized strength, called out volunteers for three years’ service, spent public money without congressional appropriation, suspended habeas corpus, arrested people ‘represented’ as involved in ‘disloyal’ practices and instituted a naval blockade of the Confederacy... (p. 58).

Lincoln acted in this way because he believed that the Constitution was nothing without the nation and because he assumed Congress would approve anyway. He continued similar activities even when Congress was in session (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 58-59).

Congress made attempts after the Civil War to regain the power it had lost. The first half of the nineteenth century had drained away its war-making power. Congress handed the war-making power to the president when congressional consent seemed too trivial and when the threat seemed too important to wait for congressional consent. By deferring to the president in both situations, Congress contributed to its own weakening of war powers. At the same time, history has shown that whenever a president sought to increase executive power, Congress has reacted to restrict that executive power (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 68). The post-Civil War era saw the impeachment of Andrew Johnson and few urgent foreign affairs issues that required a revival of the presidency (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 77). Schlesinger (1973) writes:

With the Presidency denied the plea of crisis and Congress determined to reclaim lost authority, the country moved into the period which Woodrow Wilson described, twenty years after Appomattox, as 'congressional government.' Congress, Wilson wrote in 1885, had entered 'more and more into the details of administration until it had virtually taken into its own hands all the substantial powers of government.' (p. 77)

As Congress regained power in American politics, the partisan era began to fade. Although parties remained important, their influence diminished (Zelizer, 2004, p. 137). By the 1890s, partisan roll call votes declined, dramatic scandals rocked both parties, turnover rates decreased and incumbency rates increased, Congress adopted a model of seniority over party loyalty, congressional committees gained autonomy, the size of the

House and Senate became stable, and parties began delegating some authority to federal commissions run by nonpartisan experts (Zelizer, 2004, p. 138).

According to Zelizer (2004), the committee era (1910s-1960s) followed the partisan era, and Congress acquired an unfavorable reputation during this period of time (p. 312). Zelizer (2004) writes:

For many observers, this era showed why Congress was an inferior branch of federal government. In the modern age of centralization and bureaucratic efficiency, Congress seemed to be a relic from an earlier century, a decentralized body in which authority was scattered among committee chairs and where policymaking took a long time. (p. 312)

The committee era was a secretive time when committee chairs and select senior members were the only ones with access to restricted information. Transparency was at a minimum, and the public had little access to what was going on in Congress. The mainstream media did little in their watchdog role, and reporters kept quiet about the private lives of legislators (Zelizer, 2004, p. 313).

As Congress fell out of favor in the first half of the twentieth century, the presidency began to gain back the executive power it had lost after the Civil War, thanks to a rise in interventions in foreign affairs. The struggle between Congress and the president continued, and it was no surprise that this struggle included the division of war powers. Theodore Roosevelt shifted the norm for presidential use of armed forces overseas by using the U.S. military against sovereign states rather than just nongovernmental organizations, especially in Latin America (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 89). During World War I, Woodrow Wilson deferred to Congress for authorization before entering the war, but war only increased the prominence of the presidency (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 92).

Congress used its treaty power as it reacted against the resurgence of the presidency under Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson. Wilson ignored the Senate as he labored over the Fourteen Points of the Treaty of Versailles, and Congress failed to ratify the strictly presidential initiative (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 92). Congress' actions after World War I to ensure that the president could never seize total control of foreign policy would soon backfire once the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941.

After World War I, Congress was successful in gaining back power in foreign affairs. However, it continued to weaken its own power, particularly its policy-making power. In the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921, Congress gave its budget power to the president when it established the Bureau of the Budget and left drafting the budget to the executive branch. Pompper (2003) says that since the 1921 act, the president has played a much greater role in policy making, and policy-making power has shifted from Congress to the president (p. 25).

The president continued to gain domestic powers while battling the Great Depression (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 95). Congress used neutrality legislation to limit the president's involvement in foreign affairs, but this policy, which emasculated American foreign policy, ultimately failed (Schlesinger, 1973, p 97). Schlesinger (1973) writes:

No one for a long time after would trust Congress with basic foreign policy. Congress did not even trust itself. The grand revival of the Presidential prerogative after Pearl Harbor must be understood as a direct reaction to what happened when Congress tried to seize the guiding reins of foreign policy in the years 1919 to 1939. (p. 98-99)

World War II would only bring about a resurgence of presidential power, and this time Congress would not escape the shadow of the presidency for the remainder of the twentieth century.

The country united behind Franklin Roosevelt during World War II and accepted him as the undisputed authority as commander in chief. Even in the postwar years, Americans held an exalted conception of presidential power (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 122). Schlesinger (1973) writes, “This conception was strengthened by the vivid memory of the poor congressional performance in the years between Versailles and Pearl Harbor—a performance generally regarded as compounded of presumption, ignorance and folly” (p. 123).

Congress’ only means of regaining power after World War II came in the form of domestic policy. Because of the external danger posed to the United States with the Cold War, Congress’ revival was limited and could not bring about another age of congressional government (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 127). Schlesinger (1973) writes, “The menace of unexpected crisis hung over the world, demanding, it was supposed, the concentration within government of the means of instant decision and response” (p. 128). The Cuban Missile Crisis only exacerbated the belief that foreign affairs should be left to the president, a person who could act quickly and unilaterally (Schlesinger, 1973, p. 176).

In the 1960s, hostility toward Congress grew. Liberals attacked the branch for allowing Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon to carry on the Vietnam War, and conservatives attacked it for being “insufficient, spendthrift, and corrupt.” (Zelizer, 2004, p. 317). Others attacked Congress for failing to represent the average American citizen and for impeding authentic democracy (Zelizer, 2004, p. 317). The 1970s brought about an end to the unpopular committee era when Congress deposed powerful committee chairmen, gave parties power against committee chairs, weakened the procedural autonomy of the

chairs, and changed the filibuster process in order to make it easier to end debates (Zelizer, 2004, p. 318).

While Congress lost prominence, the war in Vietnam carried on. By sending 16,000 “advisers” to Vietnam, Kennedy did not raise any constitutional questions, and Congress did not stop him. However, Lyndon Johnson believed in a wide presidential authority to send the military abroad in the service of foreign policy. This included sending troops to the Dominican Republic and Vietnam without congressional consent. Schlesinger (1973) writes:

Not only had the war-making power passed from Congress, not only had Congress now placed a professional army at presidential disposal, but the Presidency in these years asserted as never before an authority to make international commitments without the consent and, on occasion, without the knowledge of Congress. (p. 200-201)

Congress had lost its war-making authority, and the president acting by himself in foreign affairs became the new norm.

Zelizer (2004) says that the contemporary era (1970s-today) of Congress has fluctuated between extreme division and strong partisan centralization. From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, Congress was divided and unorganized (Zelizer, 2004, p. 618).

Zelizer (2004) writes:

Individual legislators, caucuses, subcommittees, and the congressional minority pursued their own electoral and ideological interests. Although committee chairs lost their authority, party leaders were unable to step in and impose their will on a rebellious House and Senate floor. (p. 618)

Partisanship grasped Congress in the mid-1980s, and party leaders seemed to replace committee chairs as the central decision-makers in the House and Senate (Zelizer, 2004, p. 618). This partisanship was different from the partisanship of the nineteenth century

because the parties no longer had strong ties to most citizens. Voter turnout had decreased over the years, and those who supported parties did so financially (Zelizer, 2004, p. 619).

Another development of this era was conditional party government within Congress. The theory of conditional party government says that the more homogenous the preferences of members are within each party, the more different the preferences of members are between opposing parties (Aldrich and Rohde, 1998, p. 5). Ladewig (2005) says that most literature on conditional party government has found evidence of homogeneity and polarization in the 1980s and 1990s but not before (p. 1006). Therefore this internal homogeneity and external polarization is a newer development of the contemporary era. Party members cede power and influence to the legislative party as long as these actions do not compromise their policy preferences. Members must still answer to their constituents and run for re-election, but having homogenous policy preferences helps create a strong party capable of either accomplishing more or obstructing more in the legislature (Moscardelli, Haspel, and Wike, 1998, p. 692). Roberts and Smith (2003) offer three explanations for party polarization: electoral coalitions have changed, congressional agendas have changed, and congressional parties' strategies have created more polarized voting divisions (p. 306).

Congress faced several constraints that hindered it from once more becoming the dominant branch of government. One constraint was internal power struggles. Public policy and the limits of the federal budget was another (Zelizer, 2004, p. 620). The news media was a third constraint. The media no longer kept quiet about congressional indiscretions, but at the same time they were exposing presidential corruption as well.

Scandals among members of Congress do not necessarily have the same impact as scandals with the executive, but the media and Congress nevertheless had a new and hostile relationship, and a new generation of reporters and editors sought to expose corruption (Zelizer, 2004, p. 621). Interest groups, think tanks, political activities, and divided government also constrained Congress. Although Congress has been productive in the past when different parties controlled both the legislative and executive branches, divided government is not always the most conducive environment to pass influential legislation or reform (Zelizer, 2004, p. 622).

Despite the constraints on Congress in the modern era, it still has had moments of great power over the executive branch, particularly during the presidencies of Nixon and Clinton. The hearings of the Senate Watergate Committee in 1973-1974 revealed the existence of the incriminating Nixon tapes. President Nixon at first refused to release the tapes, claiming executive privilege, but in 1974's *United States v. Nixon*, the Supreme Court rejected that claim, and the president was forced to hand the tapes over to the committee (Kommers, Finn, and Jacobsohn, 2004, p. 121-122). With impeachment looming, President Nixon became the only president in history to resign from office. Congress proved to be a check on presidential power. Congress also acted as a check on power in 1998 when the House of Representatives impeached President Clinton "for giving misleading testimony to and perjuring himself in front of a grand jury, obstructing justice, tampering with evidence, and impeding the independent counsel's investigation" (Kommers, Finn, and Jacobsohn, 2004, p. 123). However, President Clinton was acquitted in the Senate, just like the impeached Andrew Johnson in 1868 (Kommers, Finn, and Jacobsohn, 2004, p. 123).

Congress today is an institution divided by partisanship, limited by constraints, and overshadowed by the executive. Despite the view the framers had when drafting the Constitution, Congress and the separation of powers are in different states today, and the president has become dominant in American politics. O'Connor and Rollins (2003) write, "Most historians agree that during the twentieth century the role of the American presidency and the executive branch expanded significantly in relation to other institutions of American government—Congress and the judiciary" (p. 1). Kommers, Finn, and Jacobsohn (2004) write, "Although the formal distribution of power among the branches still prevails today, the executive branch has become largely dominant, largely at the expense of Congress and the judiciary" (p. 111). Congress and the judiciary had a hand in this growth of the executive branch with Congress creating a massive federal bureaucracy and the judiciary's expansive interpretation of executive power. Judicial and congressional powers have increased, but the presidency still overshadows Congress through its visibility and its role in pushing legislation (Kommers, Finn, and Jacobsohn, 2004, p. 111). The president's dominance in foreign affairs has also contributed to Congress' weakened authority.

Zelizer (2004) writes, "...legislators today continue to face a bewildering number of constraints; they work in a nation that does not trust their institutions, and they have not emerged as the dominant branch of government" (p. 623-624). Despite the challenges Congress faces, however, Zelizer (2004) says, "Congress is the heart and soul of our democracy, the arena where politicians and citizens most directly interact over pressing concerns" (p. xiv). He says that the process of congressional decision-making might be messy, but that very messiness "reflects the diversity and richness of the nation"

(p. xiv). However, the reality remains that Congress is not the dominant branch exalted by Locke and the framers. When the Congress in the text of the Constitution came alive, the separation of powers rebalanced. Congress experienced eras of both greater and weaker power and ultimately sacrificed power to the dominant president of the twentieth century.

From this congressional history emerge certain themes. The newer partisanship of the 1980s combined with the recent theory of conditional party government suggests that Congress has been divided by partisanship. Division between the executive and legislative branches is also apparent because of Congress and the president's struggle for power throughout the years. Presidential dominance is a theme that especially emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. This dominance also seems to be a cause of Congress' lack of involvement in foreign affairs even though Congress shares the war power. The sharing of powers between the executive and legislative branches appears to have impeded Congress' ability to govern and assert power. These themes share the common thread of relating to congressional power, which history has shown has decreased since the ratification of the Constitution.

Congress and the mass media

Zelizer (2004) cites the media as one of the modern constraints on Congress. He says that reporters have hostile relationships with Congress and seek to expose corruption. However, much of the scholarship devoted to Congress and the media focuses on the president's dominance over Congress in media coverage and not necessarily on the content or portrayals of Congress in the coverage. Studies focus on the

amount of congressional coverage versus the amount of presidential coverage, with results indicating that the president receives greater coverage. Goodman (1998) attributes this to the president's ability to create and distribute information as the most prominent spokesman in the country (p. 41).

Her study sought to determine whether congressional or presidential press coverage was more dominant when both branches of government were locked in a debate. Using articles from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, she looked specifically at the Most Favored Nation China debates during the first President Bush's term. Goodman (1998) hypothesized that Congress would receive more coverage than the president because human rights sanctions against China were a high priority for Congress and the mass media at the time, congressional hearings during the debates would bring more attention to Congress, and because reporters increase their coverage of Congress when it is locked in a debate with the president (p. 45).

Goodman's data only partially supported her hypothesis. Although congressional coverage was more dominant in the quote category, the president received more dominant coverage in word, lead, and source categories (Goodman, 1998, p. 48).

Goodman (1998) suggests that the president had more access to the media and therefore received greater coverage (p. 51). She writes:

The president's special access to the media via devices such as presidential campaigns, debates, State of the Union addresses, weekly radio talks and press conferences provides him with ample opportunities to influence and receive media coverage. (p. 42-43)

Therefore, Goodman suggests that Congress does not have the same tools and access to the media as the president does. The president has the opportunity to

Speak directly to the entire country, a tool that Congress does not have (Becker, 1961, p. 18).

Foote and Steele (1986) conducted a study on the lead stories of evening network television newscasts and found that two of the three networks had the same lead 91 percent of the time, and all three had the same lead 43 percent of the time (p. 19). These statistics are significant because the researchers also discovered that most of the news coming from Washington came from the same sources that comprised the “golden triangle”—the White House, the State Department, and the Pentagon (Foote and Steele, 1986, p. 22).

Absent from this triangle is Capitol Hill. The study found that Capitol Hill reporters were less visible and were not routinely called on for congressional perspectives to stories that networks would use as the lead stories (Foote and Steele, 1986, p. 23).

Foote and Steele (1986) write:

While the level of exposure cannot be equated with its quality, and even though much network coverage is critical of the Administration, consistent exposure could help the executive branch to dominate the issues dialog and influence public opinion. (p. 23)

Their study suggests that the president’s dominant coverage on network news stems from a uniformity of sources that excludes congressional perspectives to stories.

Balutis (1976) conducted a study that employed the same methodology as Elmer Cornwell’s study of news content of the mass media during the years 1885 to 1957. Cornwell had found that presidential news greatly and steadily increased in the twentieth century, especially after World War II. Presidential news had also increased more

rapidly than both government news as a whole and congressional news (Balutis, 1976, p. 509). Analyzing news content from 1958 to 1974, Balutis (1976) concluded that a dominance of presidential news continued as congressional news steadily declined (p. 513). Balutis places some of this blame on Congress. He says:

Criticism of Congress and its activities currently is widespread, as is public unfamiliarity with the institution, its membership, its procedures and its duties under the Constitution. There seems little doubt that the lack of information about Congress—combined with a good deal of misinformation—is one factor in producing the public’s cynicism and alienation toward the institution. (p. 514)

Balutis (1976) states that the dominance of presidential news is no longer an exception, as in earlier periods, but has now become routine (p. 513).

In their study of congressional coverage in the 1990s, Morris and Clawson (2005) discuss low public approval ratings of Congress and speculate that low approval ratings are due to the mass media’s focus on the democratic legislative process in congressional news (p. 298). Mark Twain once said legislation resembles sausage: “The taste may be good, but people do not want to see how it is made.” Morris and Clawson (2005) describe the democratic process as “the activity in which lawmakers engage when attempting to formulate, pass, and implement public policy” (p. 300). It is this democratic process, they find, that remains the focus of the mass media in congressional news. Although scandals and personality-driven articles enter into congressional coverage, issue-based news on the process remains at the forefront of coverage (Morris and Clawson, 2005, p. 298). Morris and Clawson (2005) also write, “Our data paint a picture of the legislative process defined primarily around the themes of interparty interaction and conflict and compromise between Congress and the president” (p. 310).

The data frames Congress as an institution with parties in conflict with one another and as an institution in conflict with the president.

Despite the dominance of presidential coverage over congressional coverage in the modern era, journalists have had more access to Congress and its processes than ever before (Schudson, 2004, p. 650). Gone were the secretive days of Zelizer's committee era. According to Schudson (2004):

This institutional secrecy reflected the widely shared understanding that the work of Congress could and should proceed with relatively little oversight by the general public, either by their reading newspapers or by the proxy oversight of lobbying groups. (p. 650)

However, the Congress of the twentieth century and today has become more transparent and accessible to the mass media.

Congress took steps to make itself more open and public, including recording House votes on floor amendments and making committee and subcommittee meetings public (Schudson, 2004, p. 652). C-SPAN and C-SPAN 2 now air live coverage of the House of Representatives and the Senate. Even though Congress is more open today than it once was, Schudson argues that journalists now are also less cooperative than those of the committee era. Schudson (2004) writes:

Journalists expressed a new critical stance and announced their break from overcooperation by more frequently challenging the politicians they covered, interrupting them in broadcast interviews, and undercutting them in news stories by reporting not only what they said but what political strategy led them to say it. (p. 657-658)

Despite the openness between the media and Congress, Schudson (2004) agrees that Congress has lost prominence in the media. He says, "Congress still does not often attract a great deal of media attention and receives even less of it today, compared to the

president, than in the past” (p. 659). When Congress does receive media attention, the coverage generally goes to members of Congress with formal leadership positions. Senators also receive more coverage than representatives in the House (Schudson, 2004, p. 659). However, no one’s coverage compares to that of the president’s.

Although this study does not seek to compare the amounts of coverage both Congress and the president receive, it cannot be overlooked that the president is dominant in the mass media. It is important to note that most research focuses on amounts of coverage of the branches and not necessarily on how Congress or the president are framed in the mass media. This study looks specifically at frames, but Congress’ substantially less coverage points to a Congress overshadowed by the presidency.

Traditional Journalism vs. Fictional Entertainment

This study examines the frames of Congress that exist in *The West Wing*, a fictional television series, and in traditional journalism. It is important to discuss the similarities and differences between these two genres and the relationship between them. Pompper (2003) argues that traditional journalism often offers an incomplete story in political accounts, and she suggests that there are other types of media that can fill in the gaps, including fictional entertainment. She says:

...the news media environment and various types of genres like feature films, docudramas, talk shows, web sites, and popular music that the public uses for political information may be challenging traditional journalism’s status as gatekeeper for political news. (Pompper, 2003, p. 19-20)

Mutz (2001) argues to expand what is traditionally considered political communication. Researchers must look beyond the evening news and newspapers for

political information (Mutz, 2001, p. 231). Mutz (2001) says: “Too large a proportion of the political information environment is now outside of these traditional political communication forums” (p. 231). Holbert, et al. (2005) include fictional entertainment under political communication and specifically reference *The West Wing*. They write: “This fictional show offers something to the American public that it can not get from any other source, an insider’s view of what it is like to be President on a daily basis. In short, *The West Wing* represents the fly on the wall that the press wishes it could be” (Holbert, et al., p. 506). Traditional journalism offers some behind-the-scenes information with campaign coverage and White House specials, but it doesn’t go as far as *The West Wing* does to show the day-to-day activities of the executive branch and the power struggles between the president and Congress.

Williams and Carpini (2009) look at the eroding boundaries between news and entertainment and support Mutz’s argument that political information is now available outside of traditional political communication forums. Williams and Carpini (2009) say that a media regime change has taken place. Since the 1980s, people have received more cable channels, more families have VCRs and DVD players, PC sales have gone up, and the number of families with a home Internet connection has increased. DVRs have also entered the picture (p. 180). All of these changes, particularly the Internet, affect the way people consume and create information. Williams and Carpini (2009) write:

[T]hese changes have blurred the distinction between ‘political’ and ‘non-political’ media and genres, eroded the gatekeeping and agenda-setting roles of the news media, muddied the line between producers and consumers of media, and challenged the professional bases of modern journalism. (p. 180)

The scholars question whether distinctions between news and entertainment are even necessary anymore. They consider entertainment as politically relevant media just as the news is. Williams and Carpini (2009) write:

A Jay Leno monologue that satirically points out the political ignorance of the general public, a scene from the HBO series *The Wire* exploring racial injustice in our legal system, or an Internet chatroom discussion of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* are all as politically-relevant as a newspaper or the nightly news. (p. 183)

The two outline four qualities of politically relevant media that are most likely to influence democratic participation. They include transparency, pluralism, verisimilitude, and practice.

Williams and Carpini (2009) specifically draw connections between news and entertainment using transparency and verisimilitude. They say it is just as important for Brian Williams to be transparent about sources, biases, and intentions as it is for Jon Stewart (Williams and Carpini, 2009, p. 185). When talking about verisimilitude, Williams and Carpini (2009) are referring to the assumption that those in the media will take responsibility for the truth claims they make, whether those claims are explicit or implicit (p. 185). They write:

This is applicable to a newspaper or network news broadcast as it is to documentaries like *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *An Inconvenient Truth*, more traditional Hollywood movies like *Good Night, and Good Luck* and *Breach*, or to television series like *Law and Order* and *CSI: Miami*. (p. 185)

Just as Williams and Carpini (2009) acknowledge the political relevance of entertainment, Entman (2005) acknowledges the news value of fictional entertainment when he writes about the differences between traditional journalism and fictional entertainment in "The Nature and Sources of News." In regard to traditional journalism,

he says, “The ideal goal of traditional journalism has been to make power accountable, to keep ordinary citizens apprised of what government is doing, and how it affects them both individually and with respect to the groups and values that they care about” (Entman, 2005, p. 48). He puts newspapers, broadcast news programs, and newsweeklies in the category of traditional journalism. Entman (2005) argues that traditional journalism adheres to all five key journalistic standards of accuracy, balance, checks on pure profit maximization, democratic accountability and editorial separation. Traditional journalism acts as a democratic watchdog but also is motivated by profit (Entman, 2005, p. 52).

Entman talks about entertainment in general and not fictional entertainment specifically, but his arguments still apply to fictional entertainment. Entman (2005) says entertainment “is neither produced by journalists nor consciously consumed as news” (p. 50). He says that entertainment is committed to zero to four key journalistic standards, has goals of profit and amusement and has news functions that are indirectly performed (Entman, 2005, p. 52). For the sake of this study, fictional entertainment is regarded as scripted, non-reality programming. By including both “scripted” and “non-reality,” it eliminates any confusion caused by mixed genres. For example, *The Hills* is considered a reality program, yet many of its scenes are scripted. This definition also excludes talk shows such as *The View* and *The Daily Show*, which sometimes blur the line between strict news and entertainment.

The genres might have many differences, but Pompper (2003) says that fictional entertainment and traditional journalism can complement each another. She argues that fictional entertainment can help provide a complete story and fill in information gaps that

journalists alone cannot fully do (Pompper, 2003, p. 17). Pompper specifically uses *The West Wing* as an example of how a popular culture text can enhance political narratives. She says, “This premise is based on general agreement among mass media researchers that journalism fails in its attempt to mirror reality for audiences” (Pompper, 2003, p. 17). Pompper agrees with Mutz and Holbert, et al. that fictional entertainment can inform viewers beyond the limits of traditional journalism. Holbert, et al. (2003) say:

Prime-time entertainment television fare provides a nightly forum where issues of human rights, race, the environment, and other important topics are discussed. In addition, the trials and tribulations that various characters have to go through when confronting these issues personalizes matters of public policy for the audience. (p. 57)

As researchers have stated, *The West Wing* is an example of this.

The West Wing is an American television drama that premiered in September 1999 and ended its run after seven seasons in May 2006. The series focuses on President Josiah Bartlet and the staffers in the executive branch. Aaron Sorkin created the series and served as head writer and executive producer for four seasons before leaving the show. During his four seasons with *The West Wing*, the series won an impressive four consecutive Emmys for outstanding drama.

The West Wing is fiction, but its storylines are based on real-life issues and events. Sorkin even employed political experts to serve as creative consultants on the series for accuracy purposes (Pompper, 2003, p. 24). Pompper (2003) lists some of the real-life issues that *The West Wing* tackled in its seven seasons. The issues, many of them complex debates, include the use of statistical sampling to improve the U.S. census, passing legislation, the environment, domestic terrorism, hate crime and gun control legislation, gays in the military, school vouchers, drug abuse, labor disputes, anti-

Semitism, Christian fundamentalism, and living with physical handicaps (Pompper, 2003, p. 30). Pompper (2003) writes, “*The West Wing* creator Aaron Sorkin and his team create an aura of reality and explanations for complex issues that are difficult for journalists to address due to space and time constrictions” (p. 30). She also says that leaving many of the debates fundamentally unresolved gives audiences a sense of debates in progress, which mirrors what happens in reality (Pompper, 2003, p. 30).

Pompper (2003) argues that objectivity is impossible to achieve because news is a social construction, but she also acknowledges the importance of reporters’ independence from politics in a democracy (p. 17). She argues that journalism is lacking because reporters exclude details related to the inner workings of news production, and they cannot provide eyewitness accounts of areas where they are denied access (Pompper, 2003). The author argues that *The West Wing* can pursue the how and the why behind governance, which she says the White House Press Corps does not do (Pompper, 2003, p. 19). Therefore, traditional journalism and fictional entertainment can complement each other within the mass media.

Congressional history has revealed that Congress has lost power to the executive branch over the years, and research in presidential and congressional coverage has shown that the amount of presidential media coverage is greater than congressional media coverage in the twentieth century. The two trends appear related. As the president’s power has increased, so has the amount of his media coverage, leaving Congress out of the spotlight. However, this study is specifically looking at the content of media sources. It is looking at portrayals of Congress in both traditional journalism and fictional entertainment. Looking at two different genres can offer a more complete picture of

congressional portrayals in the mass media. Knowledge of congressional history and past studies on media coverage informs the study on congressional portrayals in the media.

Framing Theory

Now that the position of Congress in American politics and the differences between traditional journalism and fictional entertainment have been explored, the focus turns toward the theories that guide this study. Framing theory and the social construction of reality have guided the research as it reveals how Congress is portrayed in both traditional journalism and fictional entertainment. Holbert, et al. (2005) indicate that most research in framing theory applies to the analysis of news content, but their study of *The West Wing* and its framing of the presidency extends framing theory to fictional entertainment as well.

Cappella and Jamieson (1997) compare framing to the process of building a house. They write, “Like the framing of a house, a news frame creates a structure on which other elements are built. There is much in a house that is not the frame, but without the frame there is no house. And the frame determines the shape of the house” (p. 38). They say that framing determines what is included and excluded, what is salient, and what is unimportant (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997, p. 38).

This study looks at which frames are used in both *The West Wing* and traditional journalism, specifically newspapers, to portray Congress. De Vreese (2005) writes, “Frames in the news may affect learning, interpretation, and evaluation of issues and events” (p. 52). Cappella and Jamieson (1997) write:

Framing not only make the interpretations possible but they also alter the kinds of inferences made. The inferences derive from well-established knowledge structures held by the audience and cued by the messages read or watched. (p. 42)

This possibility to influence individuals' perceptions makes it necessary to look further into the frames the press and fictional entertainment use when portraying Congress.

Goffman (1974) says that framing starts with the question: "What is it that's going on here?" (p. 8). The answer is below the surface of a text. Entman (1993) says:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (p. 52)

De Vreese (2005) defines frames as "parts of political arguments, journalistic norms, and social movements' discourse. They are alternative ways of defining issues, endogenous to the political and social world" (p. 53).

Entman (1993) says that frames have four locations—the communicator, the text, the receiver and the culture. All four locations have similar functions. They select and highlight, and they use "the highlighted elements to construct an argument about problems and their causation, evaluation, and/or solution" (p. 53). This study focuses on the frames present in the text, but it is important to note where else frames exist. Tankard (2001) suggests 11 framing mechanisms for identifying news frames: headlines, subheads, photos, photo captions, leads, source selection, quotes selection, pull quotes, logos, statistics and charts, and concluding statements and paragraphs (p. 101). These mechanisms can contribute to the exploration of the news frames within the text.

Framing differs from the agenda-setting function of the press. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) say that frames might have an agenda-setting function because they

highlight what is important and force certain topics into the background (p. 45), but they and de Vreese (2005) argue that the two are different. De Vreese (2005) says, “While agenda-setting theory deals with the salience of issues, framing is concerned with the presentation of issues” (p. 53). Framing says what is important within a text while agenda setting says what stories are important in the first place.

De Vreese (2005) gives two ways of identifying news frames. The first way refrains from analyzing news stories with any prior knowledge of the frames that are to be found. The researchers discover the frames through their source material (p. 53). The second way of identifying frames is the deductive approach of investigating frames that are already defined prior to beginning the research (p. 53). The deductive approach to framing is favored by scholars because an inductive approach in which frames are determined during the analysis can lead to too broad results (de Vreese, 2005, p. 54). Additionally, the inductive approach has been criticized for relying on a small sample and being difficult to replicate (de Vreese, 2005, p. 53). This study will primarily employ the deductive approach because of its greater reliability and specificity and because some congressional frames can already be determined from prior research. However, the study will not ignore any additional dominant frames in the samples because doing so would be to ignore potentially important data.

It has already been established that frames function by highlighting certain aspects of the text, making those aspects salient. Entman (1993) expands on this and says:

Texts can make bits of information more salient by placement or repetition, or by associating them with culturally familiar symbols. However, even a single unillustrated appearance of a notion in an obscure part of the text can be highly salient, if it comports with the existing schemata in a receiver's belief systems. (p. 53)

Entman (1993) also says that frames are defined by what they exclude, and these exclusions might be just as important to the interpretation of the text as what is included (p. 54).

According to Cappella and Jamieson (1997), frames come with certain criteria. First a news frame must have "identifiable conceptual and linguistic characteristics." Second, the frame should be commonly observed in journalism. Third, the frames should be distinguishable from other frames. And finally, a news frame must have representational validity, and it shouldn't simply be a figment of the researcher's imagination (p. 47).

Framing offers some dangers and limitations. Goffman (1974) points out that just as a golfer and caddy might see the game of golf differently, one person might interpret frames differently from another person (p. 8). This could be due to the fact that people come from different social and economic backgrounds. A woman might find sexism in a television show where a man would find nothing offensive. Cappella and Jamieson's fourth criterion for news frames appears to combat this concern. Researchers cannot create frames without any basis for those identifications. Johnson-Cartee (2005) argues that a reliance on official sources, and sometimes the same official sources, creates standardization in framing. This arose in Foote and Steele's study when they discovered that sources were consistently coming from the "golden triangle" of Washington. Johnson-Cartee (2005) points out that journalists often have to write about subjects they

know nothing about, so they rely on official sources (p. 223). Reporters still have a role in framing the story because they have chosen whom to interview, but when these same sources appear in multiple articles on a subject, it creates a standardization in framing.

Framing theory also encompasses the study of framing effects; however, this study focuses first on identifying frames. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) say, “Framing is a very general phenomenon whose specific effects cannot be anticipated until the nature and structure of a particular message frame have been uncovered” (p. 56). Although this study identifies frames traditional journalism and fictional entertainment use to portray Congress, it does not explore the effects these frames have on audiences. The purpose of the study is to explore the portrayals of Congress across different types of media.

Social Construction of Reality

Both fictional entertainment and traditional journalism portray Congress in particular ways, but it is impossible for them to portray Congress objectively. Schudson (2001) writes about the objectivity standard of the news, calling it “the chief occupation value of American journalism” (p. 149). According to Schudson, objectivity forces the journalist to separate facts from values, to fairly represent each side, to report the news without commentary, and to use a cool, not emotional tone (p. 150). However, Lichter (1996) argues that objectivity is impossible. He says:

Even the most conscientious journalists cannot overcome the subjectivity inherent in their profession, which is expressed in such basic everyday decisions as whether a topic is newsworthy or a source trustworthy. (p. 33)

He says that the news is more a prism than a mirror “whose images of reality reflect the eye of the creator as well as that of the beholder” (p. 33). Meanwhile, fictional television

might try to represent the world accurately, but the mere fact that it is fiction means it can never achieve objectivity.

Fictional entertainment and traditional journalism instead construct a social reality. The social construction of reality is a theory “that assumes an ongoing correspondence of meaning because people share a common sense about its reality” (Baran and Davis, 2000, p. 235). Johnson-Cartee (2005) says:

Reality, then, is created through the social process of communication. What one knows and what one thinks one knows are both shaped by the communication process. Thus, what one responds to is a subjective reality created through the process of social interaction. (p. 1-2)

The mass media is a form of communication; therefore, social realities can form from mass communication.

Social construction of reality applied to mass communication operates on the assumption of an active audience that uses symbols created by the media to make sense of the world. These symbols have little meaning, however, unless others share the meaning (Baran and Davis, 2000, p. 237). Baran and Davis (2000) use an example of a Porsche and a Rolls Royce. They say that both are expensive cars, but they each have different “realities” that surround them. The “realities” associated with the cars are also used to define the drivers of those cars (p. 237). Berger and Luckmann (1966) say:

The world of everyday life is not only taken for granted as reality by the ordinary members of society in the subjectively meaningful conduct of their lives. It is a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these. (p. 20)

In other words, what people think is reality is not actually an objective reality. It is a subjective reality that they have interpreted to be true, so they live life as if it were true.

Tuchman (1978) specifically explores news as a constructed reality. She mentions two different approaches to the constructed reality of news. The first comes from more traditional sociologies and argues that news presents society with a mirror of its concerns and interests (Tuchman, 1978, p. 182). The second, which Tuchman gives more credence to, is from more recent interpretive sociologies. Tuchman (1978) says that two processes occur simultaneously:

On the one hand, society helps to shape consciousness. On the other hand, through their intentional apprehension of phenomena in the shared social world—through their active work—men and women collectively construct and constitute social phenomena. (p. 182)

As news describes an event, it shapes that event as well. Tuchman (1978) says, “By imposing such meanings, news is perpetually defining and redefining, constituting and reconstituting social phenomena” (p. 184). Individuals are not passive in the construction of social reality. They actively create it, and then they live by it.

Johnson-Cartee (2005) explores the idea of media dependency and how it relates to the social construction of reality. She says that people turn to the mass media for information and guidance because they want to be able to function effectively in their world. She argues that people want to appear to be informed, especially when it comes time for elections (Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 6).

Depending on the media can be harmful. Johnson-Cartee (2005) writes:

We treat news-media messages as if they were real, and we act upon them without considering how or in what manner these messages were produced. And we often develop, through a steady diet of news messages, pictures of reality that have little to do with an objective reality. (p. 41)

She gives the example of President George W. Bush and weapons of mass destruction.

Johnson-Cartee (2005) says that President Bush’s pronouncements that Iraq had weapons

of mass destruction was the main way that Americans were persuaded that the United States needed to invade Iraq, but those claims ended up being false (p. 16). A reality was constructed based on those pronouncements and the news media's coverage on them, but it was not an objective reality. Johnson-Cartee (2005) writes, "Our social perceptions, particularly with regard to the social judgments of others and the public opinion process, are critical in understanding the American democratic process" (p. 41).

Herda-Rapp (2003) looks at social construction in the news in her study "The Social Construction of Local School Violence Threats by the News Media and Professional Organizations." She explores social construction of local school violence surrounding a prevented school shooting in Burlington, Wisconsin. Herda-Rapp (2003) says, "Social constructionist scholarship has shown that claims made about a problem and the way it is framed in the news media and other informational contexts shape an audience's perception of a social problem's seriousness, prevalence, setting, and causes" (p. 545).

She looks at frames from two different outlets and finds: "Together, the news media and professional organizations created an interactive informational context that reinforced each others' messages and images, thereby constructing notions of threat" (Herda-Rapp, 2003, p. 548-549). By looking at two different sources, she was able to determine that a social reality was constructed. This study will take a similar approach, but will instead look at traditional journalism and fictional television. Looking at congressional frames from both types of media will reveal what reality of Congress has been constructed in the mass media.

Statement of Research Question

In conclusion, Congress is a branch of government that has become overshadowed by the president and the executive branch in both politics and the mass media. The framers and those who influenced them believed Congress to be the dominant branch. Even so, the framers instituted a system of checks and balances to ensure that no branch would encroach power from any other branch or become dominant. However, the same Constitution that guided a dominant Congress at various times in American history now guides a dominant executive branch in modern history. Congress and the president have been in a power struggle since the early days of the United States. Perceptions of Congress have changed, especially in the twentieth century, and the executive branch has gained power and prominence at the expense of Congress.

This study attempts to find how the mass media portrays Congress by looking at fictional entertainment and traditional journalism—two genres that complement each other and inform audiences. Because much of Congress' history is a history of the ebb and flow of its power, this study looks specifically at portrayals of congressional power in the mass media. Using previous research, this study identifies the major frames of congressional power that already exist and uses those frames to guide the analysis of the source materials. Those frames are: Congress is dominated by the president, Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch, Congress is impeded by the division of powers between the executive and legislative branches, Congress is internally divided by partisanship, and Congress is uninvolved in foreign affairs. Beyond these five frames, the study acknowledges additional dominant frames found in the texts.

Identifying these portrayals helps discover peoples' perceptions of Congress and congressional power in the United States because the mass media contributes to the formations of individuals' opinions. Guided by framing theory and the social construction of reality, this study answers: What frames are used to portray congressional power in both traditional journalism and in *The West Wing*, a fictional entertainment program?

CHAPTER TWO

Research Design and Methodology

This study seeks to explore portrayals of congressional power in the mass media by using both fictional entertainment and traditional journalism. Guided by framing theory and the social construction of reality, the study answers the following research question: What frames are used to portray congressional power in both traditional journalism and in *The West Wing*, a fictional entertainment program? This study uses frames found in prior research to see how congressional power is portrayed in the mass media. The study also acknowledges additional dominant frames found in the samples. Qualitative textual analysis is the chosen method for the analysis of selected episodes of *The West Wing* and for a sample of news stories from *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times*, and *The New York Times*.

The Washington Post, *The Washington Times*, and *The New York Times* were deliberately selected for various reasons. Both *The Washington Post* and *The Washington Times* were chosen for their locations in Washington, D.C., the nation's political capital and the setting of *The West Wing*. Both papers benefit from a home-field advantage in political coverage, and they would have been the hometown papers of the characters in *The West Wing*.

However, both papers were also chosen for their differences, particularly in political slants. Along with *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* traditionally leans to the left politically (Song, 2004, p. 39). *The Washington Times* has a more conservative editorial orientation (Song, 2004, p. 39). Song (2004) writes:

The *Times*, which was founded and is owned by News Worlds Communications, a conglomerate funded by the Rev. Sun-Myung Moon's Unification Church, has made it relatively clear that the paper is devoted to the support and dissemination of conservative causes. (p. 39)

The New York Times might be a liberal newspaper, but it was primarily chosen because it is a source outside of Washington, D.C. However, it still commits a great many resources to national coverage, and it has a bureau in Washington, so it covers the same news as *The Washington Post* and *The Washington Times*. *The New York Times* could provide a different perspective than the Washington papers, just as *The Washington Times* could offer a different perspective than the papers with a liberal slant. This variety of sources helps eliminate alternative explanations for the results because the results are not skewed based on selecting papers from one political slant.

This study analyzes episodes of *The West Wing* and news stories that were published when *The West Wing* originally aired. An analysis of all seven seasons of *The West Wing* and every article written about Congress during the series' run would require an extensive amount of time; therefore, the field of analysis was narrowed. Episodes of *The West Wing* were selected only from seasons two and three. This was an attempt to narrow the sample. Also, two seasons were chosen over one to ensure more consistent results.

Seasons two and three were chosen over later seasons because of the consistency of production. Aaron Sorkin, the series' creator, left the show after the fourth season. He had served as both executive producer and head writer, which meant he had the primary hand in creating messages and themes that would be included in each episode of *The West Wing*. Sorkin is sometimes referred to as a television auteur along with producers

such as Joss Whedon and J.J. Abrams. Sarris' (1962) auteur theory in film studies applies the term *auteur* only to directors, but the definition of auteurism has expanded over the years as the question of true authorship has arisen. Of course Sorkin is not the only "author" of *The West Wing*, but he had the largest role in its early production and in establishing the pace, tone, and messages of the series. Therefore, seasons from Sorkin's era have been chosen over seasons from the post-Sorkin era.

To further narrow the sample of television episodes, only episodes where a main storyline deals with Congress or individual members of Congress were selected. Based on the episode synopses published on TV.com, this search yielded six out of a possible 22 episodes from season two and nine out of a possible 21 episodes from season three for a total of 15 episodes. This sample size allowed for a thorough analysis of the episodes, and its span across two seasons ensured greater consistency in portrayals.

The sample of news stories from *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times*, and *The New York Times* was taken from dates ranging from October 4, 2000, the season two premiere date of *The West Wing*, to May 22, 2002, the season three finale date. An analysis of frames of Congress in the newspapers was done during this date range because the range coincides with the original air dates of the two seasons of *The West Wing* being used. Just as the Congress of *The West Wing* deals with several different issues and debates, so does the Congress that traditional journalism portrays.

In order to ensure the analysis of an appropriate sample, a Lexis-Nexis search was conducted with the three newspapers using the search terms "Congress," "White House," and "legislation." "Congress" was chosen so that only articles about Congress appeared in the sample. "White House" was used because it is often used in news stories to refer

to both the president and his administration, and episodes of *The West Wing* deal with relationships and negotiations between Congress and the White House. “Legislation” was chosen in order to reflect content in episodes of *The West Wing* as well. Many episodes of the series focus on legislation put forth either by the president or by Congress. The use of these three terms narrowed the sample to news stories reflective of Congress-related content in *The West Wing*.

The Lexis-Nexis search with the stated search terms yielded 933 articles in *The New York Times*, 1,025 articles in *The Washington Post*, and 714 articles in *The Washington Times*, for a total of 2,672 articles. This sample size was far too large for a thorough textual analysis; therefore, the field was further narrowed by selecting one out of every 20 articles in chronological order of publication date.

Certain types of articles were removed from the initial sample because they would have yielded inefficient analyses. These types included reviews, news briefs and summaries, corrections, and obituaries. Duplicates of articles, articles written by non-staff members, and magazine articles were also removed from the initial sample. Unbylined editorials were included because they are essential to the voice of the individual newspapers, but op-eds and bylined editorials were removed because they are often associated more with individual writers than with the newspapers they appear in.

The narrowed sample included 42 articles from *The New York Times*, 41 articles from *The Washington Post*, and 25 from *The Washington Times*, for a total of 108 articles. When an *Associated Press* article was mistakenly found to be in the final *New York Times* sample, the next article in chronological order was chosen for analysis.

This study primarily identified frames based on prior research of Congress' history and the limited scholarship that exists about Congress and the mass media. The frames especially point to the themes emerging from congressional history as discussed in the review of literature. The following five frames related to congressional power were used to guide this research: Congress is dominated by the president, Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch, Congress is impeded by the division of powers between the executive and legislative branches, Congress is internally divided by partisanship, and Congress is uninvolved in foreign affairs. This study explores the extent to which these frames exist in *The West Wing* and in the newspapers that belong in the category of traditional journalism.

The frame "Congress is dominated by the president" emerges from the history of Congress and the evolution of its power relations with the president. In the contemporary era that Zelizer (2004) outlines, Congress has lost power and prestige to the presidency. However, this presidential dominance extends further back into the twentieth century with the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. Even though Congress gained back power after World War I, the wars of the twentieth century only solidified the president's dominance in foreign affairs and in media coverage.

"Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch" also emerges from history. Research has shown that Congress and the president have been in a continuous struggle for power. Congress would fight to regain power because of negative reactions to the president's usurpation of power. Congress and the president also battle over passing legislation, which is a difficult process where neither Congress nor the president get exactly what they want. The frame "Congress is impeded by the

division of powers between the executive and legislative branches” refers to Congress’ inability to accomplish its agenda and gain power because of divided powers between the two branches. This is particularly true with the war-making power.

“Congress is internally divided by partisanship” also speaks to congressional power. Zelizer (2004) considers partisanship to be a constraint on Congress’ ability to regain dominance in American politics. If Congress cannot unite internally, it cannot unite to challenge the president. The final frame, “Congress is uninvolved in foreign affairs,” refers in large part to Congress’ war-making power. According to Schlesinger (1973), Congress all but lost its war-making power during Vietnam. The era established a new norm where the president acted alone in foreign affairs. Congress’ foreign affairs powers still exist in the Constitution, but they have evolved over time, especially in the twentieth century.

Even though the study was primarily guided by the frames identified from prior research, it did not ignore additional dominant frames found in the *West Wing* and newspaper samples. The researcher noted when additional frames began occurring frequently in the samples. Because of the frequency and dominance of these additional frames, the study had to explore their meaning and importance. Therefore, the study primarily used the deductive approach to frame analysis, but it also acknowledged additional dominant frames in the results.

This study uses the qualitative method of textual analysis as its research method. Textual analysis differs from quantitative content analysis with its attempt to move past coding and look at the hidden meanings of the text that might not be revealed through coding. Lester-Roushazamir and Raman (1999) put it simply: “Textual analysis differs

from content analysis in that it is an interpretive method which allows the researcher to take account of all aspects of content (including omissions)...” (p. 702).

This study is best served by qualitative textual analysis rather than quantitative content analysis because in its search to see how congressional power is portrayed, the researcher must look at both what is hidden and what is omitted, not just what is on the surface, in the texts of both the news articles and the fictional television episodes analyzed. How congressional power is portrayed might not be apparent on the first reading of an article or the first viewing of an episode. For example in the *The West Wing*, the president and the executive branch are at the forefront while Congress acts as a supporting player. A textual analysis of how congressional power is portrayed requires this study to look beyond what is obvious (portrayal of presidential power) to what is less obvious (portrayal of congressional power). Therefore, textual analysis is the preferred method over quantitative content analysis.

This study uses textual analysis to analyze two different forms of text: news stories and television episodes. Van Dijk (1991) writes specifically about the textual analysis of news stories. He says that researchers should look for both local and global coherence in the text. Researchers must look at how parts of the text close to each other relate, but they also must look at the overall unity of the text, which reveals themes and topics. The theme or topic is usually expressed in the headline or lead paragraph (p. 112-113). According to van Dijk (1991), researchers must also look at implications in the text. He says, “The analysis of the ‘unsaid’ is sometimes more revealing than the study of what is actually expressed in the text” (p. 114). One of the benefits of using textual

analysis over content analysis is that researchers can look beyond what is explicitly stated and can find implicit meanings.

Van Dijk (1991) writes about the superstructure of news stories. They follow a “hierarchical schema” that includes the headline, lead, main events, context, history, verbal reactions and comments. In each category, the most important information is expressed first. Van Dijk says this adds a “relevance structure” to the text (p. 115). Van Dijk (1991) also writes about style and rhetoric in the text. He says, “Style is the textual result of choices between alternative ways of saying more or less the same thing by using different words or different syntactic structure” (p. 116). Even the choice of one word over the other can reveal a reporter’s opinion or bias about events or actors in a news story.

The textual analysis of television differs from the textual analysis of news articles because an analysis of television requires looking for more than just verbal codes. Because the television text goes beyond the script, researchers must also look at visual and acoustic codes (Vande Berg, Wenner & Gronbeck, 2004, p. 69). Verbal codes include how characters are addressed, what words are used to express attitudes, and what evaluative, metaphorical, and ideological language is used. Grammatical, verbal, narrative, and argumentative orientations are other verbal codes (Vande Berg, Wenner & Gronbeck, 2004, p. 70).

Visual codes include color, framing, lighting, *mise-en-scène*, icons, how emotions are coded into shots, and visual quotations. Finally, acoustic codes include auditory signs, paralinguistic cues, spatial organization, and auditory echoes. The researcher must also look at how verbal, visual, and acoustic codes interact with each other and how those

interactions affect the meanings of the codes (Vande Berg, Wenner & Gronbeck, 2004, pp. 70-71).

Although research revealed no previous studies on portrayals of congressional power in *The West Wing*, Holbert, et al. (2005) did a study on depictions of the presidency in the series. Using framing theory, the researchers analyzed three different presidential depictions—chief executive, political candidate, and private citizen. They performed a quantitative content analysis and broke down episodes scene by scene for the analysis. Holbert, et al. (2005) found that the chief executive frame dominated even though all three roles were well represented (p. 505).

The most significant difference between this study and Holbert, et al.'s study is the difference in research method. This study employs qualitative textual analysis in order to look at the text as a whole. However, Holbert, et al.'s study suggests using scenes as units of analysis when analyzing fictional entertainment, which is useful for this study.

This study certainly has limitations. It reveals how congressional power is portrayed in both *The West Wing* and in traditional journalism, but it does not look at either the production processes behind the television episodes and the news stories nor does it look at audience reception and interpretation of the television episodes and news stories. This study focuses solely on the product—not on how it's produced and not on how people use or interpret it. The researcher also runs the risk of interpreting the text differently than another scholar would.

Although this study has its limitations, it serves as a basis for further research for those wanting to study the production process or audience reception of these texts. It also

further the research in the field of portrayals of government in the mass media, and it shows how traditional journalism and fictional entertainment complement or differ from each other. There is little research in the area of congressional portrayals in the mass media, so this study certainly helps fill the gap in that area of scholarship.

CHAPTER THREE

Results: Newspaper Articles

Overview

One hundred eight articles from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Washington Times* were analyzed in this study. The analysis was conducted with the expectation of finding five frames identified from prior research. Those five frames were:

1. Congress is internally divided by partisanship.
2. Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch.
3. Congress is dominated by the president.
4. Congress is impeded by the division of powers between the executive and legislative branches.
5. Congress is uninvolved in foreign affairs.

The first three frames were dominant within the sample; however, the last two frames occurred rarely. Outside of these five frames, three additional frames were found to be dominant within the sample. The three frames were:

1. The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch.
2. Congress is influenced by outside actors.
3. The House and Senate have an oppositional relationship.

Identified Frames

Congress is internally divided by partisanship

A dominant frame within the results was “Congress is internally divided by partisanship.” This frame relates to congressional power because a Congress plagued by partisanship can have difficulty compromising and passing legislation. Articles were often structured as arguments between the Democrats and Republicans. This is the case in the *Washington Times* article “House approves Bush budget and tax cut; Plan reduces debt, creates drug benefit.” The article alternates quoting Republicans and Democrats. One party says something, and the other party responds. For example, when Representative Jim McDermott, Democrat, calls the Medicare proposal a “shell game,” the article immediately includes a response from House Majority Whip Tom DeLay, Republican: “Mr. DeLay countered by calling the Democratic alternative a ‘beguiling mirage.’ He said the Democratic plan promises tax cuts and fiscal restraint, but continues to sustain big government while giving taxpayers ‘paltry relief.’” The use of these back-and-forth quotes pits the two sides against each other within the article.

This article employed other framing techniques as well. Even though the headline suggests a united House, the lead suggests something quite different. It says, “The House passed a \$1.98 trillion budget framework for fiscal 2002 yesterday on a mostly party-line vote.” The inclusion of “party-line vote” not only presents the reader with information, but it also services the partisanship frame by suggesting that partisanship will be highlighted in this article.

How congresspeople are identified is also an important framing technique. The article identifies all congresspeople as either Democrat or Republican. This is a standard

AP practice. However, these labels also reinforce the partisan divisions. If party membership were not included, the article would present little notion of partisan disagreements. Sometimes labels go beyond just Democrat or Republican. In the *New York Times* article “Bush Faces Defeat on Patients’ Rights Bill,” the author says that “conservative Republicans lashed out.” Inclusion of the word “conservative” implies an even deeper level of partisanship because Republicans are already considered conservative.

In the *New York Times* article “House Moving to Ease California Power Crisis,” the lead also includes language that hints at the partisanship frame used in the article by saying that members of Congress are “stepping up the partisan fight.” In the same sentence, the lead says what the Republicans want and what the Democrats want. Many of the articles take this approach, including “Bush Faces Defeat on Patients’ Rights Bill.” The first sentence, which is also the lead as it is in many of the articles in this newspaper sample, immediately lays out the desires or thoughts of both the Republicans and the Democrats. This beginning set-up initiates the partisanship frame.

The rest of “House Moving to Ease California Power Crisis” is structured as an argument between the two parties. The parties take turns playing the blame game. The article says that the Democrats blame President Bush for the California energy crisis, and in the next paragraph it says that Republicans blame Democratic state politicians in California. Then each side defends itself. The argument-rebuttal structure solidifies that there are two sides and no room for compromise. The second paragraph even says the vote was along “strict party lines.” The use of the word “strict” suggests all members voted according to their party’s policy and did not deviate.

The *New York Times* article “Dogged Fight by Senate Democrats Delays Tax Cut Bill” also frames Congress as divided by partisanship, and it offers a glimpse at partisanship hindering the passing of legislation. The second paragraph says, “Democrats offered dozens of amendments, each of which went down to defeat, gumming up what Republicans had hoped would be a quick path to passage for the tax measure.” The conflict is between Democrats on one side and Republicans on the other. The Democrats are framed as foils to the Republicans. The article later says that “the amendments also seemed designed simply to frustrate the Republicans and Mr. Bush.” The article’s author does not attribute this observation to any official or unofficial sources; therefore, the statement appears to come from the author. The observation further supports the partisanship frame because the article is implying that the Democrats are going out of their way to impede the Republicans.

The article presents Republicans as being accusatory toward the Democrats, which points to the bitterness that can emerge from partisan debates. The article says the Republicans accused Democrats of “playing politics with the economy.” Later, the article acknowledges that the delays are “clearly creating tension on both sides of the aisle.” The phrase “both sides of the aisle” is a commonly used phrase when discussing Congress, but it does evoke a mental image of two sides standing firm on either side of an aisle in opposition with each other.

The *Washington Post* article “Roadblocks Ahead for Governing; Eventual President To Face Divisions” frames Congress as being divided by partisanship almost immediately. Even in the headline, “roadblocks” and “divisions” refer to partisan divisions. The second paragraph cites “nearly perfect partisan splits” in both the House

and the Senate. The partisanship frame takes hold early in the article and sets up what is to come. This article relies on key quotes to reinforce the partisanship frame as well.

Former Clinton White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta calls Washington in the last six years a “dysfunctional place” and says: “I don’t think you’re going to see any new spirit develop in a place that’s been at war for that many years. You’re looking at a prescription for continued gridlock.” His words not only support the partisanship frame, but they also suggest negative effects from the partisan split. Senator Paul D. Wellstone, Democrat, is quoted saying, “People forget that Republicans and Democrats are very divided over [issues] of right and wrong.” This quote affirms the political gap between Republicans and Democrats and the partisanship that takes hold of Congress as a result of that gap.

Language plays an important role in the articles that fall under the partisanship frame. In addition to the inclusions of “Democrat” or “Republican” and “liberal” or “conservative,” these articles employ war terms and metaphors. Articles include references to “battles,” “fights,” “wars,” and “combat.” Nowhere are the war metaphors more evident than in the *Washington Post* article “Tactics and Theatrics Color ‘Decision Day.’” Members of Congress are referred to as “combatants,” and a meeting room is called a “war room.” The article points out Senator John McCain’s bandages from a skin cancer surgery and House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt’s limp from a double hernia surgery. The inclusion of the congressmen’s injured appearances could be to humanize them, but their injured appearances also evoke war-like images. In a war there are two sides, and in partisan debates there are two sides. Through the use of war language, the article frames the debate over campaign finance reform as a partisan

debate. Using war metaphors also suggests that these partisan debates are filled with high stakes and clear sides that will not be crossed.

Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch

The second dominant frame found in the newspaper sample was “Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch.” Oppositional can mean the two branches are on opposing sides, but it can also mean that conflict or hostility exists between the legislative and executive branches. This frame is not to be confused with another frame that was found in the results, which is “The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch.” Most of the articles that fell under the frame being discussed in this section feature Congress as a whole in conflict with the executive branch. This frame relates to congressional power because an oppositional relationship with the executive branch could hinder Congress’ ability to pass legislation. However, that relationship could also help Congress assert its power over the president.

In the *New York Times* article “Senate Clears 4 Money Bills; 5 Tough Measures Remain,” certain words and phrases point to the opposition between the two branches.

The lead says:

The Senate today approved four of the nine remaining spending bills needed to keep the government running, setting the stage for lawmakers and the White House to focus on the most contentious measures next week as Congress prepares to adjourn for the year.

The word “contentious” suggests that the process of passing the legislation is going to be difficult and filled with arguments, and the metaphor “setting the stage” suggests a big

event is going to take place. Therefore the lead indicates that Congress and the White House are about to begin a large but tense undertaking of which they will be on opposing sides.

The article also points to a power struggle between Congress and the White House. Senate Republican leaders “gave in to the White House” over one dispute, and House Majority Whip Tom DeLay is concerned with giving “too much leverage” to the White House. These phrases indicate a tug of war that goes on between Congress and the president. The inclusion of this power struggle supports the frame that Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch because it suggests that Congress tries to retain its authority by not always going along with the president.

The *New York Times* article “Bush, in Reversal, Won’t Seek Cut in Emissions of Carbon Dioxide,” also falls under the frame of Congress having an oppositional relationship with the executive branch. The article says that President Bush received “strong pressure” from conservative Republicans, but then the president suffered backlash from Democrats and moderate Republicans. Members of Congress were upset with the president before he made the decision, and they were upset with him after he made the decision. Congressional Democrats were “angered” and called the president’s decision a “major betrayal.” Moderate Republicans felt “frustration” because they were planning to introduce their own legislation. Even though groups of congressional members were singled out by their political ideology, the article frames all of them as being in opposition to the president and looking out for their own interests.

The frame that Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch is evident early on in the *Washington Times* article “NAFTA hard sell meets

resistance; Mexican truck issue still a roadblock.” The second paragraph says, “But the dispute over opening the U.S. border to Mexican trucks illustrates that the White House has not yet convinced Congress and the public that NAFTA is an unqualified success.” This early mention indicates that there is opposition between Congress and the president. In the very next paragraph, White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card says the president might have to use his veto power for the first time to “kill” legislation that would block the president’s NAFTA goals. The veto is a power that completely overrides Congress’ actions. When describing the veto power, the article uses the word “kill,” a word with a violent connotation. The president can use the threat of the veto as a negotiating tactic to influence Congress. His potential action appears to be a serious threat to congressional power and an action that would intensify the opposition between the two branches.

Toward the end of the article, an anonymous and general group of analysts are credited with saying that “the administration failed to recognize how unpopular the trucking issue is with many members of Congress.” Philip Potter, president of the NAFTA Institute, says, “Every time this issue has come up since NAFTA was passed, the strategy has been to avoid a vote, because you knew you were going to lose.” The background information that Potter provides suggests longstanding opposition between the legislative and executive branches over this issue, opposition that seems to defy party affiliations within Congress and a change in presidents.

Although most of the articles under this frame mainly featured opposition between Congress and the president, the frame leaves room for opposition that extends beyond the president and includes other actors within the executive branch. In the *Washington Post* article “President to Sign Defense Bill; Bush Makes Decision Despite

Delay on Military Base Closings,” Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld is also framed to be in opposition with Congress. The article says, “Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld had threatened to recommend a veto of the bill if Congress did not include base closings to start in 2003.” This sentence reveals that Rumsfeld is using the veto power as a threat in order to coerce Congress to follow the wishes of the executive branch. It is apparent that Rumsfeld is in opposition and conflict with Congress.

The lead indicates that President Bush signed a defense bill “even though Congress refused to order a new round of military base closings as quickly as he wanted...” This lack of cooperation from Congress suggests that it wanted to work at its own pace and not operate on the president’s timetable. Even after the legislation was passed by Congress, the article mentions that there were “strong reservations” from House members. Because of those reservations, base closings were to start later than the executive branch wanted. Congress’ opposition appears as something that hinders the president’s power.

Congress is dominated by the president

The frame “Congress is dominated by the president” was not found as frequently as some of the more dominant frames, but nevertheless, the articles that fell under this frame help reveal how the mass media portrays congressional power. The articles mainly deal with incidents where the president overpowered Congress. The *Washington Times* article “On Hill, fight over trade pact resumes” covers the debate surrounding giving President Bush “fast-track” authority to make trade deals and bring those deals to Congress for an up-or-down vote without the opportunity to add amendments. Approval

would take away some of Congress' power in negotiating trade deals. The article frames the "fast-track" power favorably. It says, "This power, known as 'fast-track,' has been necessary to ensure that Congress does not dismantle the delicately crafted agreements the United States signs with other countries." The article continues to say:

[The power] was vital to the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the creation of the World Trade Organization, both of which have helped tear down barriers to international commerce.

These two statements, made by the author and not by any sources, suggest that the authority is important and beneficial. The author seems to side with the president and favors limiting Congress' trade negotiating powers.

The *New York Times* article "The Education Bill: Many Trials Ahead" focuses on President Bush's new education bill. The article indicates that the bill was mostly written by the White House and then was "given final Congressional approval by the Senate." Congress appears to be passive, and the phrase suggests a lack of involvement and action on Congress' part. The article criticizes the bill and calls it "the president's education program." It says, "But until now, Congress assumed that accountability was best left to states." The "until now" suggests that Congress left accountability to the states until the president pushed for a new education plan. The article suggests that the president exerted power over Congress.

The *New York Times* article "Bush Seeks New Volunteer Force for Civil Defense" is an overview of a speech President Bush made calling for a volunteer civil defense service. The article outlines the president's plan in the first three paragraphs before briefly mentioning that members of Congress have introduced a similar plan. It says, "A similar proposal was introduced this week by Senator John McCain, Republican of

Arizona, and Senator Evan Bayh, Democrat of Indiana.” The article lacks details of the differences between the two plans and lacks any congressional reactions to the president’s speech. It is a one-sided view of the president’s post-9/11 plans. However, the singular focus on the president’s plan could be due to the article’s intent to cover his speech.

Congress is impeded by the division of powers between the executive and legislative branches

Although the frame was prominent in congressional history, “Congress is impeded by the division of powers between the executive and legislative branches” was found only once in the sample. Many times the reverse frame, “The president is impeded by the division of powers,” appeared in the sample. However, these articles also fell under the frame “Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch.”

The *New York Times* article “Clinton and Republicans Gain on Spending Accord” is written from a congressional perspective. The lead says:

Congressional leaders met again today with President Clinton and said they had made modest progress toward a budget agreement that would permit the 106th Congress to finish its work and adjourn for the year.

By leading with information on and from Congress, Congress appears to have the advantage in the negotiations. The article also starts out fairly positively, but the disagreements between Congress and the president are soon revealed. Republicans say they can get a better education deal if they wait for George W. Bush to be sworn in. A Democratic president is hindering them in accomplishing their goals. The “waiting for Bush” plan is echoed again later in the article when Representative Dick Armey says

Republicans can also get a better tax bill under the Bush administration. This Republican strategy suggests an inability for the Republican-controlled House to get what it wants under a Democratic president. Congress is framed as being hindered by the constitutional division of powers.

Congress is uninvolved in foreign affairs

Just like the previous frame, the frame “Congress is uninvolved in foreign affairs” was found only once in the sample. In fact the frame “Congress is involved in foreign affairs” was more common. However, in these articles, Congress’ involvement in foreign affairs is limited to funding and trade agreements and has nothing to do with the war-making power that Congress has lost over time.

The article that does fall under the current frame, “Top U.S. officer in Pacific visits China in exchange,” is notable for its lack of concern in Congress’ non-involvement. The article says the Pentagon is required to give Congress a list of exchange activities between the United States and China. It goes on to say, “Officials said the approval of the program last week by Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld appears to circumvent that law since Congress has not been briefed on the exchanges.” Later in the article, another incident where Congress was not informed is cited. The article leaves out any other mention of Congress or the ramifications of Rumsfeld withholding information from Congress. The omission of ramifications and congressional reactions suggests that Congress not being notified is a minor concern, and it supports the frame that Congress is uninvolved in foreign affairs.

Prominent Additional Frames

The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch

The most common frame that was not identified prior to the research is “The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch.” This differs from Congress as a whole having an oppositional relationship with the executive branch. Often in the sample, articles were framed along the lines of Republicans vs. President Clinton and later Democrats vs. President Bush. This frame occurred as frequently as the partisanship frame and the Congress has an oppositional relationship frame, which means it was more prominent than the remaining three pre-identified frames.

The *New York Times* article “An Instructive Vote” details disagreements between the Democrats in Congress and the president. The article is almost exclusively about Democratic responses to Bush’s tax plan, and there is little input from Republicans. The conflict between the Democrats and the president is set up immediately in the opening paragraphs. It says: “On tax cuts, President Bush has had a single, relentless message for months: It is my way or the highway, and my way is \$1.6 trillion in reductions over the next decade, not a penny more or less. By that standard, Mrs. Bush lost today.” The president was determined to get his way, but the last sentence reveals that something hindered him. That something is the Democrats. The Democrats pushed to lower the total sum of tax cuts, and in doing so, the article says they “showed they can be an effective check on Mr. Bush and his agenda.” The article continues to reveal that the president didn’t lose completely because by not budging on the tax cut figure, he

“forced” Democrats to get closer to his figure than if he had caved earlier in the debates. The use of the word “forced” suggests that Democrats were unwillingly coerced by the president.

The article suggests President Bush aggressively tried to convince Democrats to support his plan. It says “...the president was unable to persuade or threaten 51 senators to stand by him on his signature issue.” The nature of the president’s threats is not revealed, but their mention supports the frame that he has an oppositional relationship with Democrats in Congress. The article mentions that before this recent debate, the president had “unstoppable momentum” that the Democrats could not ebb, but now they “know they can buck the president.” A power struggle between the president and the Democrats permeates throughout the article.

The *New York Times* article “President submits \$2 trillion budget that raises deficit” also falls under the frame “The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch.” The article outlines the reasons the Democrats disagree with the president, but the most notable evidence to support the frame appears later in the article. Democrats call President Bush’s budget “inadequate,” but then they appear to attack the president for the sake of attacking. The article says the Democrats pointed out the flaws in the president’s budget plan, but

...they were unable or unwilling to offer an alternative approach that would reconcile their insistence on fiscal responsibility with their demand for additional spending and their political fear of trying to roll back Mr. Bush’s tax cut.

The use of the words “unable” and “unwilling” suggests the Democrats are not able to back up their complaints with action. The article suggests that the Democrats are attacking the president just to attack, which supports the oppositional frame.

The article “Tests for Bipartisanship” in *The Washington Post* also features a power struggle between President Bush and the Democrats in Congress. It says about the president shortly after he is elected, “Already he’s being pressed by Democrats and pundits to give ground on his campaign proposals.” “Give ground” evokes images of a battlefield. Just as war metaphors were found in the partisanship frame, they were also found in other frames in the sample. In a war there are two opposing sides, and each side is fighting for the advantage, for power. When war language is used in “Tests for Bipartisanship” and in other articles throughout the sample, it suggests an oppositional relationship between two sides. Therefore, even a seemingly simple phrase such as “give ground” can support the frame that the party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch.

The use of war language is also found in the *Washington Post* article “Bush Faces Round Two on Economy; Tax, Spending Battle Will Dominate Agenda.” Not only does the word “battle” appear in the headline, but it also appears three times throughout the article. The article cites administrative officials as saying the president “will wage a vigorous battle with Democrats over the future of the economy.” It also says, “Among the weapons Bush has in the coming battle is division among Democrats.” The author makes the opposition between the Democrats and the president clear throughout the article. The use of war language intensifies this opposition.

Congress is influenced by outside actors

The second most common of the frames not identified beforehand is “Congress is influenced by outside actors.” This frame occurred less frequently than the previous frame but more frequently than the final three pre-identified frames. “Outside actors” refers to people or groups not in the government. These actors can be unions, lobbyists, interest groups, businesses, etc. Congressional decisions are supposed to be influenced by others. After all, Congress is representative of the people. However, the articles that fell under this frame framed congressional power as being significantly influenced and even sometimes controlled by these outside actors. Unions and lobbyists were framed as exerting substantial power over Congress.

In the *New York Times* article “Unions See Bush Moves as Payback for Backing Gore,” members of Congress are framed as being dependent on unions to get elected.

The article says:

Labor leaders also vow to redouble efforts to elect a labor-friendly Congress in 2002. Some union leaders say that means restoring a Democratic majority in both houses; others say that means electing union-friendly Republicans who will team up with Democrats.

The leaders “vow,” which suggests they are serious and committed. The leaders almost make it sound like the unions will be responsible for the outcomes of the election.

The article also mentions congressional reactions to President Bush’s actions against unions. It says:

Some of the president’s actions have upset some Republicans in the House who ran with labor endorsements last November. They voice fears that organized labor might grow so angry at the Republicans that unions might back their Democratic opponents in 2002.

Here, congresspeople are acknowledging the power unions have over elections. They don't want unions to take their anger at the president out on Congress. The inclusion of these congressional reactions gives credence to the notion that unions have an influence on congressional power, and the reactions serve as further evidence that this article falls within the current frame.

Unions come up again in the *Washington Post* article "Union Chief Rallies IMF Protestors from Pulpit." Congress is again framed as being influenced by the unions. The article says, "One immediate goal of labor is to stop Congress from giving President Bush 'fast track' legislative authority that could speed approval of trade agreements." Later the article says, "The unions were able to prevent Congress from giving fast-track authority to President Bill Clinton." The inclusion of this background suggests that the unions stopped Congress once and can do it again. Unions appear to be powerful—powerful enough to influence Congress.

The *New York Times* article "An Ex-G.O.P. Chairman is Comfortable in 2 Hats" profiles Washington lobbyist Haley Barbour. In the process of profiling Barbour, the article also frames Congress as being influenced by outside actors. The article says that lobbyists have "popularity" and "effectiveness" in Washington. They have access to powerful people in Congress and the White House. It is immediately clear in the article that lobbyists have a certain influence over Congress.

Dan Allen, a spokesman for the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, is quoted as saying: "Haley can walk into any room in any state in the country with Republicans and they know who he is. He's done an incredible amount to keep us in power." This acknowledgement of Barbour's influence comes from a secondary source

in a position of power. Charles Lewis, the executive director of the nonprofit Center for Public Integrity, says, “Politicians could not have raised \$3 billion in the last election without lobbyists helping them.” This quote indicates that congresspeople are financially dependent on lobbyists. What is notable about these sources and the sources in the entire article is that none of them are actual politicians. For all the talk of how close Barbour is to Senator Trent Lott, the article never quotes Lott or any other congresspeople. There are no acknowledgements from actual congresspeople that lobbyists exert as much influence as they do. The lack of congressional sources suggests an unwillingness by congresspeople to admit their ties with lobbyists.

The House and Senate have an oppositional relationship

“The House and Senate have an oppositional relationship” is another frame that occurred frequently in the sample but not as frequently as “Congress is influenced by outside sources.” This frame went beyond partisan divides and instead encompasses conflicts between the two chambers of Congress. “The House and Senate have an oppositional relationship” relates to congressional power because a divided Congress makes it more difficult to pass legislation and exert power over the executive branch.

The *New York Times* article “For McCain and the House, a Day of Twists and Turmoil” talks about Senator McCain’s attempts to work with the House, but it makes it clear that McCain’s actions are an exception and that usually, senators do not work so closely with the House. The article says: “Normally, senators are disdainful of the House. They refer to themselves as members of the ‘upper House’ and to representatives as members of ‘the other body.’” The article does not credit this information to any

source, which means the division and acrimony between the two chambers is common knowledge. Donald A. Ritchie, assistant historian of the Senate, says: “The House and Senate are like liberal arts school and an engineering school. They occupy the same campus, but they have nothing to do with each other.” The source affirms what the author writes earlier in the article and supports the frame that the House and Senate have an oppositional relationship.

The frame is also present in the *Washington Post* article “Pressure Rises for Tax Deal; Major Elements May Be Scaled Back.” The lead immediately points to opposition and says, “House and Senate negotiators struggled to complete work on a compromise version of President Bush’s tax cut late last night...” Later the article says that negotiations were held in a “steamy room in the Capitol.” The use of the word “steamy” suggests that negotiations between the two sides were tense and heated. House inferiority issues are also apparent in the article. It says, “House members insisted they would not make a string of concessions to the Senate.” House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert says, “We are a party in this as well, and we expect to be heard.” This information points to difficulties the House has with getting the Senate to listen and pay attention to them. The two chambers are not only framed as being divided, but they are also framed as having ill will toward each other.

This hostility is even more apparent in the *Washington Times* article “House ‘agenda team’ rails against Senate’s inaction.” As in articles in previous frames, this article is filled with war language and metaphors, which only aggravates the appearance of division between the two chambers. The lead immediately sets the tone of the article: “The simmering feud between the House and Senate escalated yesterday as House

Republicans, with the blessing of Speaker J. Dennis Hastert of Illinois, accused senators of ignoring major bills.” Both “simmering feud” and “escalated” are examples of war-like language.

The rest of the article reads like a laundry list of complaints the House has about the Senate. Representative Jack Kingston says: “So many bills we’ve passed in the House have disappeared in the Senate. The charm of Senate wisdom has run thin.” Representative Heather A. Wilson accuses the Senate of intentionally stalling the energy bill. Senate Minority Leader Trent Lott responds by admitting the Senate has overlooked important issues that have come out of the House, but Senator John Edwards comes out in defense of the Senate’s work. In the article, the House is on the offensive and the Senate is on the defensive.

The article cites a particular incident that caused “bad blood” between the two chambers. After both the House and Senate agreed to close the Capitol during the anthrax scare, the Senate backed out of the agreement and then congratulated itself for being brave enough to continue while the House closed. House hostility toward the Senate even appears to surpass party lines. The Republican Representative Kingston is quoted as saying he was “not particularly” concerned about portraying Senate Republicans as ineffective. He says, “We might get them to start acting like Republicans, who knows?” The inclusion of this quote is key because it shows that party membership is not a bond that always extends to the other side of the Capitol. This article paints a picture of opposition between the House and the Senate, and that opposition appears to be just as divisive as partisanship.

Summary

In summary, not all of the identified frames relating to congressional power were dominant in the results. “Congress is internally divided by partisanship,” “Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch,” and “Congress is dominated by the president” occurred frequently in the sample while “Congress is impeded by the division of powers between the executive and legislative branches” and “Congress is uninvolved in foreign affairs” appeared infrequently. Three additional dominant frames found were “The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch,” “Congress is influenced by outside actors,” and “The House and Senate have an oppositional relationship.” The argument-rebuttal structure was used to illustrate debates between two sides, and war language and metaphors were often used in frames related to partisanship. The results differed from what was expected after a review of literature on congressional history and congressional media coverage.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results: *The West Wing*

Overview

Fifteen episodes of *The West Wing* from seasons two and three were analyzed in this study. Several episodes contained more than one frame. The analysis was conducted with the expectation of finding the same five predetermined frames from the newspaper article sample. Of those five predetermined frames, only two appeared in *The West Wing* results. They were:

1. Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch.
2. Congress is dominated by the president.

Two other dominant frames appeared in the results in addition to the predetermined frames. They were:

1. The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch.
2. Congress is influenced by outside actors.

Identified Frames

Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch

The frame “Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch” is present in the episode “Lame Duck Congress.” The episode focuses on whether or not President Bartlet should call a lame duck session in order to get the nuclear test ban treaty ratified. The president and his administration fear they will not get the treaty ratified with

the new Senate that convenes in the next legislative session. As the episode unfolds, however, it becomes clear that the administration would lose even in the current Senate because opposition to the Bartlet Administration is not strictly confined to the Republicans.

The first sign of trouble for the administration comes during a lunch meeting Communications Director Toby Ziegler has with two Republican congressional aides. The aides are portrayed in an almost effeminate manner. They order their food, but they are extremely picky in the way they order. Meanwhile Toby, who is much more focused on the meeting than they are, simply orders a steak. Toby orders meat, like a real man, while the Republican aides look like high-maintenance sissies. Toby visibly has little patience for them. The two speak on behalf of their bosses and say they oppose the treaty. The aides then hint that the administration might not have the Democratic votes it thinks it has. One of them says: “Have you checked your backyard? In the nose count, Toby. I don’t think you have the votes you think you have.” Toby quickly leaves the table while the aides continue to specialize their orders. This interaction suggests that the opposition that exists between the administration and Congress extends to both Republicans and Democrats.

More evidence to support the frame “Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch” comes during a meeting between Deputy Communications Director Sam Seaborn, Associate White House Counsel Ainsley Hayes, and several Republican congressional aides on Capitol Hill. Ainsley surmises the real reason behind the aides and their bosses’ opposition to the treaty by addressing one aide in particular, Peter. She says: “See, I don’t think you think the treaty’s bad. I don’t think you think it’s

good. I think you want to beat the White House.” Peter responds with a simple “Yes.” This interaction suggests that certain members of Congress are more motivated to beat the president than to legislate effectively. They oppose the White House for the sake of opposition.

Toby finds out during his meeting with lame duck Senator Marino that Marino, a Democrat, is the vote they lost. Marino tells Toby he can’t support the White House because his constituents voted him out due to his support for the test ban treaty. He has to respect them. He says, “If you call a session now, I can’t vote for it.” By choosing to respect the wishes of his constituents, Marino is also choosing to oppose the administration. His “no” demonstrates an opposition not limited to Republicans in Congress. The administration accepts defeat, and President Bartlet tells Toby: “The day is over, Toby. We’ll live to fight another one.” The Bartlet Administration is seen as the good guys fighting the good fight.

The episode “Ways and Means” focuses on the estate tax bill and White House Press Secretary C.J. Cregg’s strategy of getting the House of Representatives to prematurely launch an investigation into President Bartlet’s MS cover up. This episode also supports the frame “Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch.” The opposition is reinforced early in the episode during C.J.’s speech to Leo:

Leo, we need to be investigated by someone who wants to kill us just to watch us die. We need someone perceived by the American people to be irresponsible, untrustworthy, partisan, ambitious and thirsty for the limelight. Am I crazy, or is this not a job for the U.S. House of Representatives?

In a parallel to the real-life President Clinton's impeachment, C.J. paints the House of Representatives as a body that inherently opposes the president and will do anything to see him fall from glory.

The episode also visually and acoustically portrays the opposition between Congress and the White House. C.J. successfully manipulates the House into calling for an investigation. At the end of the episode, White House staffers gather in the bullpen area of the West Wing offices to watch Congressman Randall Thomas' press conference announcing the committee that will immediately start conducting hearings. C.J. stands shoulder to shoulder with her fellow staffers. The camera shows a wide shot of the room. They resemble an army, standing firm together against the enemy. They are looking upward at the television screen. The camera alternates between shots of Thomas and shots of the gathered staffers. A soundtrack of drum-heavy music is playing over the scene. The music resembles battle drums used in the Civil War or the Revolutionary War. C.J., looking resolute, says, "Come and get us." The scene acts as a preparation for battle, with two sides—the White House and the House—pitted against each other in opposition.

"Gone Quiet" is another episode that falls under the current frame. In this episode, the congressional storyline revolves around a meeting between Toby and Tawny Cryer, a member of the Appropriations Committee. Tawny and her committee want to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts and use its funding for the national parks instead. To support her case, Tawny has examples of controversial artists funded under the chairmanship of the off-screen character Oakenwood. Toby objects to Tawny's request and says:

Tawny, you'd need the Budweiser Clydesdales to drag my ass to Picasso and Monet! I'm not the guy you want deciding this! And you're not the guy I want deciding this! And I don't know where you get the idea that taxpayers shouldn't have to pay for anything of which they disapprove. Lots of 'em don't like tanks. Even more don't like Congress.

Toby's raised voice coupled with the jab at Congress adds to the opposition that exists between the two. During their final scene together Toby even compares what Tawny is doing to what Nazi Germany did to art it considered degenerate. Tawny counters and says, "I think it's in incredibly bad taste to equate the U.S. Congress with the Nazis." Toby says, "Me too."

The tension between the two is now obvious, and when Toby finds out the Appropriations Committee wants the money specifically for more security at the national parks, he knows Tawny has an ulterior motive because the national parks are already safe. The two stare at each other. An ominous soundtrack plays over the scene. As the two continue to talk, the camera switches to close-ups of their faces, suggesting tension. Toby finally asks, "What do you want?" Tawny says that if the administration fires Oakenwood, then they'll leave the NEA alone. It is now clear that Tawny was trying to manipulate the White House. She was playing a game with politics, and she succeeded. There is clear conflict between Toby and Tawny throughout these scenes, highlighting the opposition that exists between the White House and Congress.

The final episode to fall under the frame "Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch" is "100,000 Airplanes." The episode addresses the Congressional Censure that President Bartlet accepted. If he accepted the censure, then the hearings surrounding his MS cover up would end. However, the White House staffers were not pleased about his decision. As Toby, Sam, and C.J. talk in the

Roosevelt Room, they ponder postponing the State of the Union. Sam says that would be admitting defeat. C.J. says: “He’s accepting a censure. That is defeat. And don’t ask the school bully out to lunch the day after he stole your lunch money.” Sam wonders if they can spin the censure in a bipartisan way, but C.J. quips: “You can’t spin a formal denunciation from the legislative branch. It spins itself.” C.J. later says, “I don’t know how you make a formal report to Congress when Congress just called you a liar.”

The conversation illuminates the tension and opposition between the White House and Congress. On the one side, Congress, the “school bully,” has just censured the president. On the other side, the White House is trying to save face and stand up to that bully. By calling Congress the “school bully,” the show is influencing viewers to take the side of the executive branch. The two branches are in conflict, a conflict not divided down party lines. Congress as a whole censured President Bartlet and has won this round, but the staffers are looking for ways to tug back.

Congress is dominated by the president

As found in *The West Wing*, the frame “Congress is dominated by the president” also applies to storylines where a White House staffer is acting on behalf of the president. For example, in the episode “The Midterms” Sam Seaborn acts on behalf of the president and the White House to convince an old law school friend of his to run for Congress. When his friend Tom and Tom’s wife, Sarah, meet with Sam, Sam politely instructs the two to sit down, but Sam does not do the same. They are in the Mural Room, surrounded by the impressiveness of the White House. Warm light pours in through the windows. Physically, Sam places himself in a superior position. He is towering over the two,

forcing them to look up at him. As Sam begins his pitch to Tom, he slowly starts walking toward them, eliminating the distance between them and eliminating the distance between Tom and a relationship with the White House. Sam delivers the following speech to Tom as the camera zooms toward Sam:

Tom, you'll have the full weight of the Democratic National Committee, the Congressional Campaign Committee, the minority leader whom we hope to make the majority leader, and the president of the United States. What do you say? You want to run for Congress?

Sam's proposition to Tom suggests the White House has the ability to exert a great deal of influence over congressional elections. Sam makes quite a few promises to Tom and makes it seem like his election is guaranteed.

Later in the episode, Sam and Tom both learn how quickly the White House can kill a congressional run. C.J. confronts Sam and tells him that Tom, who is a prosecutor, likes to select white juries for black defendants. White House Chief of Staff Leo McGarry later tells Sam that Tom belonged to an all-white fraternity in college. The combination of the two means the White House can no longer support Tom's congressional run. Leo cancels the president's visit to Tom's district and stops the money supporting Tom's campaign. Sam is furious. He says: "I told him we would stand behind him. I told him he would have our full support. I was the one who asked him to run. I was asked to ask him to run."

The storyline concludes with a final confrontation between Sam, Tom and Sarah in Sam's office on election night. However, the confrontation is actually between Sam and Sarah. Sam walks into his office and passes by Sarah and Tom. Sarah is in the foreground, and half her face is in the shadows. The office has little light, and it is

raining outside. The setting is almost the opposite of the warm Mural Room they met in for the first time. Sam does not notice Tom and Sarah standing in his office until he reaches his desk. Sarah is positioned between Sam and Tom, and Tom remains in the background during the entire scene. Sarah does the talking while Tom passively stands behind her. Sarah is furious that the White House pulled out all support without a word to them. Sam replies, “That’s how we do it.”

Throughout the storyline, Tom remains a passive character, a puppet that Sam and the White House can control. The ease with which Sam can manipulate Tom suggests that the White House has a great ability to influence who gets elected to Congress and who does not. It implies presidential dominance over Congress. The storyline correlates to the cold open before the opening credits where President Bartlet and Leo McGarry meet with advisors and discuss which congressional districts the White House should be looking at for the Democratic Party in the midterm elections. Sam’s actions are merely the result of decisions made by the president in a strategy meeting.

“Lame Duck Congress” is another episode that falls under the frame “Congress is dominated by the president.” This episode also fell under the frame “Congress and the White House have an oppositional relationship.” Despite the fact that the White House failed in calling a lame duck session and getting the votes it needed to ratify the nuclear test ban treaty, the Bartlet Administration still shows confidence in having power over Congress. This confidence is apparent in the cold open while C.J. takes questions from the White House Press Corp. A reporter mentions that Senator Elect Mitchell said the treaty would be ratified “over his dead body.” C.J. responds: “I think like all freshmen senator elects, Mitchell will discover that he’s one of a 100, and that his power is

considerably more limited than he imagines. That said, the new Senate will ratify the treaty, and we really don't care what condition his body is in when they do it."

Ainsley is equally forceful when she addresses a Republican aide, Peter, who just admitted that all the Republicans want to do is beat the White House. Ainsley says: "You're a schmuck, Peter. Today, tomorrow, next year, next term, these guys will have the treaty ratified, and they'll do it without the reservations he just offered to discuss with you." Even though the White House loses in the end, they can at least talk the talk, which demonstrates dominance and power over Congress. Even after Congress wins in this episode, it is still framed as being dominated by the president and the White House.

"Ways and Means" is another episode that falls under the current frame or least a particular storyline in the episode does. As was mentioned before, C.J. is trying to manipulate the House into prematurely launching an investigation into the president's MS cover up. Her purpose in doing this is to turn the tables and make the House seem like the enemy. Throughout the episode she slowly goads the House and at one point upsets them by praising the man currently leading the investigation. C.J.'s thought is that the last thing the House wants is a White House-approved investigation into the president's actions. C.J.'s plan works, and the House announces its investigation. C.J.'s successful manipulation suggests a dominance and power over the House. The White House has the ability to manipulate Congress to do something that favors the president.

The frame "Congress is dominated by the president" can also be found in the episode "On the Day Before." The episode focuses on the ramifications of the president vetoing the estate tax bill. On the night of President Bartlet's veto, seven Republicans

don't show up to a White House social event. The staffers quickly realize that the House is organizing a vote that night to override the veto. Everyone gets to work.

The president's use of his veto power immediately frames him as being dominant over Congress because the veto power essentially overrules what Congress has decided. The power is used sparingly because its effects can be strong. This episode deals with what happens after the president vetoes the bill. Toby negotiates with congresspeople to get their votes. The White House has lost a Democrat, so Toby turns to the Republican Congressman Royce. Royce agrees not to vote for the override if the White House agrees to certain terms, including making sure a weak Democrat runs against him in the next election, so he'll win. Toby agrees and gets Royce's vote. Again, the White House is seen as having a hand in congressional elections. It cannot outright control an election, but they are shown as being able to manipulate an election enough to have some say over whether a candidate wins or loses. This election influence supports the frame that Congress is dominated by the president.

The episode contains a smaller storyline of Donna interrupting a meeting between Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman and a governor to ask him how Sam can stall the House vote. The first time, Josh says to get Democratic members to stage an exhibition. He says: "There's a rule against exhibitions on the House floor. He'll have one of our members bring a poster on the floor. Another one of our members will object, and the chair has to rule followed by a vote of the full house, and that'll buy 20 minutes." The second time, Josh suggests calling a journal vote. He says:

All right. Tell him to have a Democrat call for a journal vote. If a member calls for a journal vote, the full House has to approve the previous day's floor activity...After that, he can have a member try to attach an amendment to the override vote.

Donna asks what kind of amendment. Josh says it doesn't matter, and Donna says, "And still it's hard to figure why Congress can't get anything done." These interferences are examples of the White House meddling in the House floor's activities. They are able to get their Democratic allies in Congress to act on their behalf to stall the vote, so the White House has more time to get votes for their side. Josh and Sam are manipulating the floor's activities and showing power over the proceedings.

Prominent Additional Frames

The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch

This frame is not to be confused with the frame "Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch." The one deals with Congress as a whole, but this section's frame deals only with the party not in the presidency. In the case of *The West Wing*, that party is the Republican Party. This frame was just as prominent in the results as the frames "Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch" and "Congress is dominated by the president."

The episode "The Portland Trip" falls under the frame "The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch." The congressional storyline in this episode focuses on Josh and a gay Republican congressman who is voting against gay rights legislation. Josh calls the congressman,

Matt, in for a friendly meeting. They drink beers in Josh's office and in the mess hall. They are on friendly and casual terms; they just do not agree on the same policies. Josh is trying to understand how Matt can be gay but still vote against gay rights legislation. He says: "He compared homosexuality to kleptomania and sex addiction, Matt. The majority leader, the leader of your own party." Josh eventually asks the question he has been wanting to ask: "How can you be a member of this party?"

At this point, the two are back in Josh's office. Josh sits down, but as Matt begins listing the reasons why he is a Republican, he walks over to Josh's side of the desk and leans forward, towering over him. He says: "My life doesn't have to be about being homosexual. It doesn't have to be entirely about that." Matt has the upper hand at this point. They are friends, but the opposition is apparent as Matt towers over Josh. Matt has proved his point, and Josh knows the legislation will not pass.

"The Leadership Breakfast" also falls under this frame. The Leadership Breakfast is a bipartisan breakfast that takes place before the new legislative session begins after the New Year. None of the characters in *The West Wing* take the breakfast seriously. Leo and C.J. insist that it is merely a photo opportunity and that "the spirit of bipartisanship" is a joke. The breakfast comes with rules on what can and cannot be discussed. C.J. meets with Ann Stark, the chief of staff to the Senate Majority Leader, to discuss what is going to be said. C.J., the representative of the president, and Ann, the representative of the Senator, are sitting at opposing sides of a long table. Ann is leaning back in her chair and speaking nonchalantly but purposively, like she is in control. Ann wants the post-breakfast press conference to be in front of the Capitol, but C.J. absolutely objects to this. There is great tension and disagreement in the room.

Meanwhile, Toby is fighting to be allowed to say something meaningful at the breakfast, which Leo disagrees with because he says it is not the place. Toby goes to Ann, who he has a friendship with. They talk about the wage hike, and the opposition between the White House and the Republican Party becomes clear. Toby says, “We have the votes, and you know it.” Ann says, “Well having the votes doesn’t matter that much if the leader decides there isn’t going to be a vote.” Toby responds: “There is going to be a vote, straight up or down. And if there isn’t, we’ll add the wage hike as an amendment on everything that moves.” Toby does not realize he just made a mistake. What he said is going to come back to haunt him. In the meantime, Toby overrides C.J. and gives permission for the press conference to take place on the Hill in exchange for being able to talk about the Patients’ Bill of Rights at the breakfast. Ann says: “I want the press conference at the Hill. Our guys are tired of looking like the president’s stupid cousin.”

C.J. is furious at Toby ignoring her decision. She says:

We don’t speak for the president on the steps of the Capitol. We don’t need to be offered their microphone. It makes us look like less than what we are. In fact it makes us look small...I think this is a bad idea. I think the first visual we get is the Congress is the seat of power, and the president is irrelevant.

This quote from C.J. better supports the frame “Congress has an oppositional relationship with the president,” but it is noteworthy because it was the Republicans’ idea to have the press conference on the Hill. It was their decision, so they are the ones trying to make the president look weaker.

Ann uses Toby’s quip about the wage hike in the press conference. The Republican congresspeople at the press conference are now using the quote to attack the White House. The sequence moves between shots of Ann, Toby, C.J., and the televisions

airing the press conference. Ann has a face of steel. She appears cold and calculating. The music is ominous in the background. Toby is in his office, his face in the shadows. This sequence portrays the White House and the Republicans in Congress as enemies.

Toby and Ann have a final confrontation. He knows that the congressional Republicans are after the White House. He asks, “You think I’m going to sit around while you reduce the president to prime minister?” Ann responds, “Stand or sit, we’re in the majority, and things are going to have to look it.” Whatever friendship existed between the two is over. Whatever hope of bipartisanship is also over. The White House and congressional Republicans oppose each other, and they are gearing up for a fight.

The episode “Ways and Means” features dialogue, or rather a sarcastic monologue from Toby that further frames the Democratic White House and the Republican Congress as being in opposition with each other. Toby delivers the following monologue playfully. He is exaggerating as he speaks:

Why do we compromise? Because we are ordered to. Because compromising on the estate tax prevents Republicans from going for an even bigger tax cut, which would help wrest the White House from our compromising little hands. So I go to this meeting. The estate tax, which Republicans have cleverly dubbed “the death tax.” There’s nothing that the Republicans do better than naming things. So I go to this meeting. Because I agree with Republicans and Congress! America is about self-sufficiency, about lifting yourself up by the bootstraps just as long as your children’s children never have to work a day in their lives. So I go to this meeting.

Toby’s longwinded monologue is meant to be a humorous moment in the episode, but it also illustrates the divisions between the president and those members of Congress not in his party. By “agreeing” with the Republicans, Toby is actually pointing out the party’s

flaws and highlighting the opposition that exists between the Republicans in Congress and the White House.

The frame “The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch” is also supported by the episode “Bartlet for America.” This episode is structured around Leo’s testimony in front of the congressional committee charged with investigating President Bartlet’s MS cover up. At the committee hearing, Leo sits with his lawyer at a small table. Opposing him is the congressional committee, elevated on a platform, looking down on him. Physically, they are in the position of power. There is great physical space between Leo and those questioning him. Even without the context of the hearings, it is clear that two sides are being pitted against each other.

Leo doesn’t appear to take the proceedings as seriously as his lawyer wants him to. Each time a congressman addresses him in a tone he doesn’t like, he covers the microphone and turns to flirt with his lawyer. His actions suggest a lack of respect for what is happening, but he feels justified because he doesn’t feel he is getting treated with respect. When the Republican Congressman Gibson begins asking Leo questions about an incident that no one else was prepared for, a recess is called.

Majority Counsel Cliff Cally is furious that Gibson is introducing new questions without consulting anyone first. The questions would force Leo to admit to an incident where he was under the influence of alcohol. Gibson admits that the only purpose of the questions is to embarrass Leo and says that the object of the Majority is to win. Cliff responds: “Not while I’m the Majority Counsel, it’s not. This is bush league. This is why good people hate us. This right here. This thing.” Gibson, a member of the

Republican Party, comes across as a villain who is willing to do anything to bring down the president. His tactics reveal the deep division and animosity that exists between the Bartlet Administration and congressional Republicans. The two are in opposition and are constantly fighting to gain power over the other.

Congress is influenced by outside actors

This frame was not as common as the previous three, but it was still prominent. In the episode “18th and Potomac” Congress is framed as being influenced by outside actors. In this case it is the tobacco industry. White House staffers are trying to gather support for an appropriations bill that the Justice Department has had in a congressional committee for a few months. The bill would provide money to fund the Justice Department’s case against the tobacco industry. Senator Andy Ritter tips off Josh that the bill won’t make it out of subcommittee because the chair of the committee won’t even schedule a vote. Andy says, “[He’s] gonna dance with the girl that brung him.” Josh understands what he means and asks, “How much tobacco money is he taking?” This conversation suggests that the chair received campaign money from people in the tobacco industry, which means he wouldn’t turn on them once he got to office.

The episodes “We Killed Yamamoto” and “Posse Comitatus” feature a storyline that focuses on Josh and his girlfriend, women’s rights activist Amy Gardner. In order to get \$1 billion more for childcare in the welfare bill, the White House has to agree to the inclusion of marriage incentives, which would reward mothers for marrying the fathers of their children, something Amy strongly opposes. Amy is determined not to let the bill pass. After Josh tells her the news in “We Killed Yamamoto,” she immediately gets on

her cell phone and prevents Josh from calling anyone by dropping his phone in a pot of stew and cutting the cord on the landline. The following is what Amy says on the phone:

It's me, Scott. Everyone who's in the office should stay there. I need Legislative Affairs to put together a meeting with Regina King. And I want to start shooting calls tonight to the Congressional Women's Caucus, the CRA, and all of Matty's people. The marriage incentives are in the welfare reauthorization, and it's committee. Can you call Robison? Tell him I'm calling in the I.O.U. on prenatal healthcare... Let's get Kate Feldon with the Society of Business Women. She's spinning right now, so keep trying. I'm on my way. Let's get to work. Put Janeane on the phone. I'll hold. Janeane, it's me. Let's suit up.

Amy's phone conversation demonstrates just some of the forces that go into influencing Congress. Amy is convinced that she will be able to influence enough members of the committee and stop the bill.

The storyline concludes in "Posse Comitatus." By this episode, Josh is also confident that the White House is going to win the vote. Amy's determination hasn't wavered, and she is still carrying on her campaign to make sure the bill doesn't make it out of committee. In a meeting with three congresspeople who are "no" votes, Josh says that by siding with the White House, "We can help you raise money." One of the congresspeople responds, "So can Amy Gardner." The same congressman says, "I can't run without women." He is siding with Amy because he's afraid of losing the women's vote when he runs for re-election. Amy, a member of an outside group, has influenced him enough to change his mind. Eventually, Josh does win the vote but only because he made a deal with Amy's boss, which gets Amy fired. Before that, Amy had the vote. Despite Amy's failure, the storyline still demonstrates how much influence outside groups can have on Congress.

Summary

In summary, the only two identified frames present in the *West Wing* sample were “Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch” and “Congress is dominated by the president.” The frames not found in the *West Wing* sample were “Congress is internally divided by partisanship,” “Congress is impeded by the division of powers between the executive and legislative branches,” and “Congress is uninvolved in foreign affairs.” Two additional dominant frames found were “The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch” and “Congress is influenced by outside actors.” These additional frames were also found to be dominant in the newspaper sample. Because *The West Wing* is a television show, it was able to use visual and acoustic codes in addition to verbal codes to frame congressional power. *The West Wing* relied on slightly fewer frames than the newspaper sample, and it also adhered to fewer of the identified frames than the newspaper sample did.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conflict in Portrayals of Congressional Power

Summary of Findings

This study set out to answer the following research question: What frames are used to portray congressional power in both traditional journalism and in *The West Wing*, a fictional entertainment program? Using textual analysis and guided by framing theory, 108 articles from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Washington Times* and 15 episodes from *The West Wing* were analyzed for this study.

The most dominant frames in the newspaper sample were: “Congress is internally divided by partisanship,” “The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch,” and “Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch.” The following three frames were less dominant but still occurred frequently: “Congress is influenced by outside actors,” “The House and Senate have an oppositional relationship,” and “Congress is dominated by the president.”

The most dominant frames in the *West Wing* sample were: “Congress is dominated by the president,” “Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch,” and “The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch.” “Congress is influenced by outside actors” was not as dominant as the first three frames, but it was still noteworthy. Therefore, the most dominant overlapping frames from both the newspaper and *West Wing* samples were: “The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch” and “Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch.”

Framing Trends: Newspaper Articles

Partisanship was overwhelmingly dominant in the newspaper article results. Both the frame “Congress is internally divided by partisanship” and the frame “The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch” dealt with partisanship between Republicans and Democrats. These were the two most dominant frames within the results. Partisanship relates to congressional power because a partisan Congress has more difficulty uniting to pass legislation than a bipartisan Congress cooperatively working together.

The articles in which these partisanship frames were present often employed an argument-rebuttal structure. The use of this structure allowed for one side to present its case, the other side to argue, and so on back and forth. Including both sides of an issue falls under journalism’s goal to achieve fairness. Brooks, et al. (2008) write about the importance of fairness in reporting. They say that fairness requires reporters to “try to find every viewpoint on a story” (Brooks, et al., 2008, p. 13). Even though fairness is a journalistic standard, its use to structure the story amplified the division between the two sides. The result was a sense of bitterness between Democrats and Republicans in Congress, Republicans and President Clinton, and Democrats and President Bush. Compromise is necessary to end partisan debates, but in many of these articles, neither side appeared willing to compromise. Partisanship was so deep that one side would attack just for the sake of attacking, which was the case in “President submits \$2 trillion budget that raises deficit.”

Furthering the partisanship frames was the frequent use of war language. War language was commonly found in articles that fell under the frames “Congress is

internally divided by partisanship” and “The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch.” Words and phrases such as “battle,” “fights,” “wars,” “combat,” “combatants,” “war room,” “give ground,” and “wage” suggested that partisan debates were a type of war. In a war, there are winners, losers, casualties, and high stakes. The use of war language and metaphors to describe partisan debates between Republicans and Democrats in Congress and between the president and the party that opposes him made those debates seem violent and extremely divisive.

Partisanship falls within the even larger framing trend of conflict. After all, partisanship is just another type of conflict. Other frames in the sample that could be categorized as conflict frames are “Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch” and “The House and Senate have an oppositional relationship.” This means the majority of dominant frames in the newspaper sample dealt with some type of conflict, whether that conflict was between parties, between branches, or between chambers.

Morris and Clawson (2005) found conflict to be prevalent in their study on media coverage of Congress in the 1990s. They conducted a content analysis of more than 2,600 news stories and found that the democratic process is often framed as conflict between parties and Congress and the president. Their study relates to the current study because research found conflict frames to be present in portrayals of congressional power as well. The results of Morris and Clawson’s study paired with the results of the current study suggest that conflict frames are overwhelmingly frequent in the media coverage of Congress.

Conflict is an essential element to both news and fictional narratives. Brooks, et al. (2008) call conflict a “recurring theme in all storytelling—whether the stories told are journalism, literature or drama” (p. 6). They categorize conflict as one of the most important elements in journalism and advise reporters to look for the conflict in a story (Brooks, et al., 2008, p. 5-6, p. 202). Because of the position of conflict in storytelling, the frequency of conflict frames in the results of the current study comes as little surprise. Additionally, Morris and Clawson (2005) write that “the conflict and compromise between parties, institutions, and individuals that defines the policymaking process is often interesting and compelling” (p. 310). Conflict is a way to grab the attention of readers and viewers; therefore, it is often employed in the framing process.

The abundance of conflict frames makes it appear that everything in Congress is a fight and nothing comes easily. Those who govern must fight to govern. This harkens back to what Mark Twain said about legislation resembling sausage. Legislating is a messy process that no one really wants to see. The articles in this sample frame the conflicts as tense and tumultuous. The conflicts are power struggles. Republicans are struggling to take power away from the Democrats, Congress is struggling to take power away from the president, and the House is struggling to take power away from the Senate. The results suggest actors in the government are constantly trying to gain leverage or power over their opponents. It appears that partisanship, conflict, and power struggles are inseparable from the legislative process.

Absent Newspaper Frames

Within the newspaper sample, the frames “Congress is impeded by the division of powers between the executive and legislative branches” and “Congress is uninvolved in foreign affairs” were nearly absent. These frames were identified based on research on congressional history outlined in the review of literature. Each frame appeared only once; even the opposite frame of “Congress is uninvolved in foreign affairs” appeared more frequently. These frames were expected to be found because of their presence in congressional history. “Congress is impeded by the division of powers between the executive and legislative branches” refers to Congress’ inability to accomplish its agenda due to the division of powers. In history, this was especially true of Congress and its war-making power. Because Congress had to share its war-making power with the president, it could not fully control military operations.

However, articles in general were framed as Congress hindering the president rather than the president hindering Congress. Furthermore, the war-making power was never an issue in this sample even though the war in Afghanistan began in October 2001. A handful of articles dealing with congressional involvement in Afghanistan did appear in the larger initial sample but were lost in the narrowed sample. These articles mainly dealt with the funding of the conflict. Even though the articles did appear in the larger sample, their presence was minimal considering the initial sample contained 2,672 articles. The miniscule presence of these articles in such a large sample supports the frame that Congress is uninvolved with foreign affairs and aligns with the progression of Congress’ war-making power throughout history. Today, Congress has lost nearly all of its war-making powers to the president.

Framing Trends: *The West Wing*

Two of the most dominant frames in the *West Wing* sample were “Congress is dominated by the president” and “Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch.” Both frames are the result of interaction between the president and Congress. Because *The West Wing* is a series focused on the president and his administration, the show does not feature any congressional storylines independent of the White House. This could explain why the frame “Congress is dominated by the president” occurred at a higher percentage in the *West Wing* sample than in the newspaper sample.

The frequency of the frame could also be explained by the fact that President Bartlet and his staff are the protagonists of *The West Wing*. Viewers are led to identify with and root for the heroes of a television series. In *The West Wing*, President Bartlet is the great hero leading for the good of his country, and the White House staffers are his faithful followers. Anyone who opposes the president is a foe to be conquered; therefore, the series often frames the president as being victorious over Congress. Furthermore, because the protagonists are those in the Bartlet Administration, the series is strictly told from the point of view of the president and his staffers. Some of the articles in the newspaper sample were told from a presidential perspective but not all. Newspapers do not have the same narrowed focus on the presidency that *The West Wing* has.

“Congress has an oppositional relationship with the president” was also dominant in the results. Again, this frame’s dominance could be explained by the fact that there are no congressional storylines independent of the president or his staff in *The West Wing*. This frame could also be explained by the protagonist-antagonist relationship between

President Bartlet and Congress in *The West Wing*. Because the president and his staff are the protagonists, they need to be in conflict with an antagonist. Television episodes thrive on conflict. Conflict, an essential element of storytelling in both fiction and non-fiction, is introduced at the beginning of each episode and is generally resolved by the end of each episode. In *The West Wing*, Congress is used to introduce conflict into the plot of an episode; therefore, Congress is often framed as having an oppositional relationship with the president.

Conflict acts as a larger framing trend in the episodes of *The West Wing* just as it does in the newspaper sample. Like in the newspaper sample, partisanship, a type of conflict, was dominant in the *West Wing* sample. The frame “The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch” occurred frequently. Again, this oppositional relationship between the president and the party that opposes him in Congress introduces conflict into the plot. Just as in the newspaper sample, the dominance of conflict frames suggests that governing is a fight. *The West Wing* portrays power struggles between the president and Congress with most of those struggles balancing in favor of President Bartlet and his staff.

The West Wing is able to frame conflict not only verbally but visually and acoustically as well. Visually, conflict is most often framed through spatial relations among people. One person towers over the person he or she opposes or two people in conflict sit on opposite sides of a long table. Tension increases when the camera switches to close-ups of characters’ faces. Acoustically, conflict is portrayed through an ominous score or a score including sounds of battle drums. The visual and acoustic elements of

The West Wing work with the verbal elements to support the overall framing trend of conflict.

Absent *West Wing* Frames

Not all of the established congressional frames appeared in the *West Wing* sample. Absent from the sample were the frames “Congress is internally divided by partisanship,” “Congress is impeded by the division of powers between the executive and legislative branches,” and “Congress is uninvolved in foreign affairs.” Unlike the newspaper sample where these frames were at least present in some capacity, none of them were present in the *West Wing* sample.

It is possible that the frame “Congress is internally divided by partisanship” was not present in the sample because none of the storylines focused solely on Congress. Storylines were told from a presidential perspective. If partisan conflict were to exist, it would exist between the president and the party that opposed him in Congress. Episodes did not focus on partisan congressional debates like articles in the newspaper sample did. The focus of *The West Wing* is President Bartlet and his White House staff; therefore, Congress does not get storylines independent of the White House. The frequency of this frame in the newspaper sample suggests that congressional storylines independent of the White House would have more potential to fall under the frame “Congress is internally divided by partisanship.”

The absence of the frame “Congress is impeded by the division of powers between the executive and legislative branches” could also be explained by *The West Wing* being told from a presidential perspective. This same perspective often existed in

the newspaper sample. In *The West Wing*, Congress is framed as impeding the president's agenda but not the other way around. The president and his staff are the protagonists. Congress is not impeded; the president is. Congress' war-making power also never arose in the *West Wing* sample, which could explain the absence of this frame as well. On the other hand, the premise of *The West Wing* could also serve to support the frame. The series focuses on the president and his executive staff, which demonstrates that Congress does not act independently in government. Congress shares its power with two other branches. Therefore, the series' focus on the president could actually support the frame "Congress is impeded by the division of powers between the executive and legislative branches."

The frame "Congress is uninvolved in foreign affairs" did not appear in the sample; however, its absence also suggests that Congress is indeed uninvolved in foreign affairs. President Bartlet dealt with many foreign affairs issues, but these scenes were limited to the president and his staffers in the Oval Office or the president in the War Room. The only time Congress was brought into any foreign affairs storyline was when President Bartlet was contemplating assassinating Abdul Shareef. Law required him to inform the "gang of eight" of his plans. The "gang of eight" is the leadership of both parties and both houses and the chairpeople and ranking members of the two intelligence committees. In "Posse Comitatus" there is a brief scene between Admiral Fitzwallace, Leo and the gang of eight, where Leo and Fitzwallace inform the others of the president's intention to assassinate Shareef. Leo and Fitzwallace do not ask for advice; they simply inform. With the exception of this brief scene, there are no episodes in the sample that show the president or his staff consulting with Congress over foreign affairs matters. The

absence of this frame still supports the current idea that the president is the sole actor in foreign affairs.

Overlapping Frames

Two frames from the results overlapped in dominance in the newspaper sample and *West Wing* sample. The frames “The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch” and “Congress has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch” were both extremely dominant in the two different samples. Each of these frames deals with Congress or a part of Congress being in conflict with the executive branch. Their frequency in both samples suggests that an overall sense of conflict exists between Congress and the president.

The dominance of these frames in both samples supports the conflict framing trend. It appears that the most common way to frame congressional power is through these conflict frames with the president. This could be a partisan conflict or a conflict between the president and Congress as a whole. The conflicts are essentially power struggles. In the case of these frames, Congress as a whole is struggling to gain power over the president and the opposing party in Congress is struggling to gain power over the president. The results suggest that the mass media frames congressional power as dependent on these constant conflicts with the president.

Other frames that appeared in both samples were “Congress is dominated by the president” and “Congress is influenced by outside actors.” The frame “Congress is dominated by the president” was much more prevalent in the sample of *West Wing* episodes, which is most likely due to President Bartlet being the protagonist of the

television series. Presidents Clinton and Bush were not given the same focus and treatment in the newspaper sample as the fictional President Bartlet in the *West Wing* sample.

The frame “Congress is influence by outside actors” is a less dominant frame in each of the samples but still appears frequently enough to be significant. Unlike the newspaper sample, the *West Wing* sample did not feature Congress being influenced by unions, but both samples did frame Congress as being influenced by lobbyists. In *The West Wing*, the executive branch was seen fighting these outside actors for control over Congress, which made Congress appear passive and less autonomous. This battle between the White House and outside actors for influence over Congress was not present in the newspaper sample. The presence in *The West Wing* could be due to the series’ deliberate presidential focus.

Summary

The most dominant frames in both the newspaper and *West Wing* samples dealt with conflict. The partisanship frames also fell under the larger framing trend of conflict because partisanship is a type of conflict. The conflicts in the samples were generally between the president and Congress, between the president and the opposing party in Congress, and between the parties in Congress. Newspaper articles verbally employed war language and metaphors to support conflict frames while *The West Wing* used verbal, visual, and acoustic elements to support conflict frames. The most common overlapping frames between the two samples were “The party not in the presidency has an oppositional relationship with the executive branch” and “Congress has an oppositional

relationship with the executive branch.” The dominance of these two frames suggests a prevalence of conflict frames, specifically conflict frames involving the president, that are used to portray congressional power in the mass media.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

Newspaper articles from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Washington Times* and episodes of *The West Wing* reveal that congressional power is framed in terms of conflict and power struggles. Congressional power is affected by conflict. That conflict can be between parties, between chambers, or most often between Congress and the president. Governing is framed as a power struggle. The president struggles for dominance over Congress, Congress struggles for power over the president, and outside actors struggle for influence over Congress. Some frames were more dominant than others, and some established frames were nearly absent from the results, but overall the frames used for congressional power portrayed a Congress in opposition and struggling for power. Congress not only had to contend with the president but also with itself. The newspapers were more focused on partisanship while *The West Wing* was more focused on the relationship between Congress and the president. The results are informed by and shed new light on the literature on framing theory, the social construction of reality, congressional history, and the news values of traditional journalism and fictional entertainment.

Framing Theory

Framing theory guided this study in finding the frames used to portray congressional power in three different newspapers and in *The West Wing*. The study looked for what was salient in the text. Goffman (1974) said to start with the question:

“What is it that’s going on here?” (p. 8). Much like Cappella and Jamieson (1997) likened framing to the process of building a house, this study used the existing literature on framing theory to conclude what elements go in to building a frame. The framing protocol used for the newspaper sample can be seen in Appendix A. The protocol was thorough, and the most helpful framing elements in this study were structure and style and rhetoric.

The way an article was structured, the order of information, and the order of quotes and sources especially helped illuminate the partisanship frames. These articles were set up as debates between Republicans and Democrats in Congress or between the president and the party that opposed him in Congress. Style and rhetoric was also an important element because of what word choices and metaphors revealed. War language was common in the newspaper results and supported the partisanship and conflict frames. Leads were also salient in the text. Most leads were the first sentence or paragraph of an article and immediately set up the story, actors, and conflict.

The framing protocol used for the episodes of *The West Wing* was taken from Vande Berg, Wenner, and Gronbeck’s *Critical Approaches to Television*. The protocol, which can be seen in Appendix B, is ideal for televisual texts because it includes verbal, visual, and acoustic elements. The protocol was thorough and successful because it prompted the study to look beyond verbal codes. The study took *The West Wing* sample and looked at how the verbal, visual and acoustic elements worked together in scenes and episodes. At times, *The West Wing* was able to portray opposition or dominance through visuals or sound alone. However, when all three elements—verbal, visual, and acoustic—were analyzed together, the text became even richer with meaning.

This study primarily took the deductive approach to framing as outlined by de Vreese (2005). Frames were identified through prior research to ensure greater accuracy and more narrowed results. However, additional dominant frames were not ignored. The researcher did not expect every article to fall under the identified frames. In fact, two of the established frames rarely appeared in the results. Certain additional frames were even more dominant than some of the established frames. However, it is believed that identifying frames beforehand did indeed help narrow the study and keep it focused.

Social Construction of Reality

In addition to being guided by framing theory, this study was also guided by the social construction of reality. Framing theory and the social construction of reality complement each other. Entman (1993) says that framing selects important aspects of a “perceived reality” (p. 52). The social construction of reality is a theory that deals with that perceived reality. The theory refers to a shared sense of a subjective reality in society. Johnson-Cartee (2005) argues that reality is created through the social process of communication. What people think to be reality is actually shaped by the communication process (p. 1-2). The mass media is a form of communication that reaches a wide audience; therefore, the content of the mass media can help form shared social realities.

In the field of journalism, Schudson (2001) has argued for the existence of the objectivity standard in the news, but Lichter (1996) has said that subjectivity is inherent in the profession of journalism (p. 33). Framing supports the idea that there is subjectivity in the news because framing is a way to affect social realities. The way a reporter frames an article could ultimately affect the way readers perceive a situation.

The same can be said for fictional entertainment. Television producers portray people and places in certain ways, and those portrayals could affect viewers' perceptions of something.

The social construction of reality is important for this study because the way congressional power is framed in both newspaper articles and *The West Wing* could affect the subjective reality surrounding Congress. According to the combined results, Congress is in constant conflict with itself or the president. Partisanship gets in the way of governing, and bipartisan cooperation with the president is rare. The House and the Senate do not get along, and Congress is dominated by the presidency. Lobbyists and unions exert excessive influence over Congress, and Congress and the president are foes. Rarely is Congress framed in a positive light. Instead Congress is portrayed as engaged in battles on several fronts.

In general, this is how Congress is framed in both newspapers and *The West Wing*. These are the frames these sources in the mass media are communicating. According to the social construction of reality theory, this media communication could contribute to the reality society shares about Congress and congressional power. Johnson-Cartee (2005) argues that people are dependent on the media for information and for help in forming opinions, which can be harmful because media coverage is not objective. Society could be absorbing the way the mass media frames Congress and could be using those portrayals to help them understand the democratic process, whether those frames present an objective reality or not.

Additionally, the similarity in framing in both traditional journalism and fictional entertainment suggests that citizens perceive the same reality regardless of the medium.

This similarity in framing could raise the credibility level of fictional entertainment because the medium is offering similar portrayals to traditional journalism. Furthermore, fictional entertainment reaches a mass amount of people, perhaps even more people than newspapers do. More people might see an episode of *The West Wing* than read a particular article. This suggests that it is important and necessary to consider the role of fictional entertainment when exploring the social construction of reality and not just look at traditional news sources.

Results and Congressional History

The frames identified prior to research were pulled from existing literature on congressional history and a limited number of studies done on Congress and the mass media. When the framers wrote the Constitution, they envisioned three branches of government with a system of checks and balances in place to ensure that no one branch encroached power from another branch. Despite that system of checks and balances, Madison and other framers influenced by the philosopher John Locke believed the legislature to be the superior branch. Throughout time, however, Congress saw its power dwindle as the executive branch gained strength through foreign affairs crises and wars.

The war power is a dominant focus of the history of congressional power because Congress lost the most power during times of conflict and war. However the research conducted in this study contained little mention of Congress' war power or the branch's involvement in foreign affairs. Instead, frames of congressional power mostly arose from articles focused on domestic issues. Congressional power appeared more dependent on partisan debates, outside influences, and conflicts with the president over domestic issues.

Congress has all but lost its war power in the contemporary era, and the results of this study support that notion.

The theory of conditional party government also appeared within the results. A development of the contemporary era, conditional party government says that the more internally homogenous political parties are, the more external polarization there is between parties. Members cede power to the legislative party. The notion of conditional party government especially relates to the partisanship frames in the results. Members of Congress are framed in terms of their parties, and party leadership often speaks on behalf of and represents the congressional political party. Congress is framed as Democrats against Republicans with little room to compromise over differences. Therefore, the partisanship frames coincide with the more recent theory of conditional party government.

Traditional Journalism, Fictional Television, and the News

Under the social construction of reality theory, shared social realities are constructed through the communication process. As a form of communication, the mass media is able to contribute to this construction of a social reality. Various sources in the mass media can combine and work together to portray people, places, and institutions in certain ways. This study focused on newspaper articles, an example of traditional journalism, and episodes of *The West Wing*, an example of fictional entertainment. According to Pompper (2003), traditional journalism and fictional entertainment can complement each other. Fictional entertainment can help fill information gaps and can

pursue the how and the why behind government. Under Pompper's thinking, *The West Wing* is able to complement newspaper articles and vice versa.

Entman (2005) writes about the news value of both traditional journalism and entertainment and acknowledges that entertainment can act as the news. Entertainment is not committed to all five key journalistic standards like traditional journalism is, but it still functions indirectly as the news. Holbert, et al. (2005) even categorize fictional entertainment as a form of political communication. *The West Wing* certainly informs viewers of the political process even if the information is delivered through certain frames. However, political information in newspaper articles is also delivered through frames, as this study explores.

Even though articles in the newspaper sample and episodes in the *West Wing* sample focused on a diverse set of issues and not just one, certain topics did overlap. In these cases, the articles and episodes informed each other. For example, the president's veto power arose in both the article "NAFTA hard sells meet resistance; Mexican truck issue still a roadblock" and the episode "On the Day Before." The newspaper article suggests that President Bush's veto would be a serious threat to congressional power. White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card says the veto would "kill" the legislation, connoting a violent action. The *West Wing* episode focuses on the ramifications of vetoing a bill and demonstrates the tension and intense opposition that results from the president overriding a congressional vote. Together, the article and the episode offer a fuller idea of the seriousness of the veto power and its effects.

Outside actors' influence on Congress is also a common issue between the two samples. The frame "Congress is influenced by outside actors" is seen in both the

newspaper and *West Wing* samples; however, *The West Wing* is able to show lobbyists in action. The newspaper articles in the sample only offer quotes from union leaders and lobbyists about their influence over Congress, but *The West Wing* actually shows outside actors' influence over Congress, especially in the episodes "We Killed Yamamoto" and "Posse Comitatus." In these episodes, Josh's girlfriend, Amy Gardner, is lobbying against marriage incentives being put into welfare reform. Both Josh and Amy are in a battle to be the one who ultimately influences Congress, which is portrayed as a passive third party. By watching episodes of *The West Wing*, a person can know the process behind lobbying.

People can also gain insight into other processes of government through *The West Wing*. Whereas newspaper articles report the results of congressional votes, *The West Wing* shows audiences the negotiating processes behind those votes. Sam and Ainsley take a meeting on the Hill, Toby has lunch with congressional aides, and Josh has beers with a congressman after hours. *The West Wing* shows the personal interaction behind vote getting and demonstrates that a congressperson's vote is the result of several meetings and negotiations. Newspaper articles do not offer readers this same view of politics. *The West Wing* even shows how stories end up in the press through interactions between Press Secretary C.J. Cregg and the White House Press Corp. Newspaper articles are not so transparent as to report how stories are obtained. People simply read the result.

However, the danger here is that *The West Wing* does not have the obligation to portray these processes accurately. Still, these are the portrayals *The West Wing* is sending out to viewers, so these are the portrayals that will affect the social construction of reality. Just as Pompper (2003) argues, *The West Wing* can show the why and how

behind governance, which complements traditional journalism's portrayal of government, especially if traditional journalism does not often focus on the why and how. These two sources of mass media are sources of political communication, and they act as the news even if fictional entertainment does so indirectly.

Limitations

This study has certain limitations. Its intent was to identify frames; therefore, it ignores framing effects and the process of creating frames. The study did not explore what effects these frames have on people's perceptions of Congress and congressional power nor did it explore how reporters and television producers constructed these frames. Furthermore, the study is informed by the social construction of reality, but its purpose was not to seek out what subjective reality is actually being constructed. Polls and interviews would be required to discover society's shared social reality of Congress.

The search terms used for the newspaper sample are also a possible limitation because they could have excluded articles that would have fallen under the less dominant frames in this study. Another limitation to the study is the subjective nature of textual analysis. Because textual analysis is a subjective method, it is possible that another researcher could carry out this study and obtain different results.

Further Research

This study could lead to several paths of further research. Because the study is limited in that it only identifies frames, further research could explore framing effects and the process of constructing frames. The study of framing effects could explore whether

these frames actually have an effect on people's perceptions of Congress. The study of the process of constructing frames could interview reporters and television producers and see what decisions they make deliberately and unconsciously. These lines of research could enhance the current study because the research would reveal how these frames came about and what they actually mean to society.

Further research could also include a quantitative study to complement the current qualitative study. A quantitative study would be able to garner results from a larger sample size and would eliminate subjectivity from the research. Another possibility for future research would be to further explore the concept of fictional entertainment acting as the news. The current study shows that similar frames in both traditional journalism and fictional entertainment are used to portray congressional power and that the two mediums complement each other. A future study could focus more deeply on how the two mediums work together or it could focus on fictional entertainment as an additional source of news and on the effects of becoming informed through fictional entertainment.

Final Remarks

This study is worthwhile because it helps fill a gap in research on portrayals of Congress in the mass media. Much like the mass media is focused on the president, so is academic scholarship. Further research is needed in the area of congressional portrayals, but this study can at least contribute to advancement in that area of scholarship. This study is also worthwhile because it looks at how traditional journalism and fictional entertainment work together to frame congressional power in a particular way. Research into entertainment as news is limited, but the blurring of what is and is not news is

becoming an important issue in the mass media. This study adds to the field of research exploring the ability of entertainment to act as the news.

In summary, this study found that congressional power was framed as a struggle and that both newspapers and *The West Wing* predominantly used conflict frames to portray Congress and congressional power. These conflict frames encompassed partisan debates, opposition between the executive and legislative branches, and opposition between the House and the Senate. Frames involving the president were much more dominant in the *West Wing* episodes than in the newspaper articles, which is most likely a result of the focus and plot of the series. Even though frames could be identified prior to conducting the analysis, not all of those frames were dominant in the results. The most dominant frames showed a Congress in conflict with the president and itself and a Congress engaged in a continuous power struggle for the right to govern. Congressional power was framed as being dependent on conflicts with the president, conflicts between parties, and even conflicts between chambers.

APPENDIX A:
Protocol to Guide Analysis of Newspaper Frames

- I. Content
 - a. What is the story topic?
 - b. What is the headline?
 - c. What page does it appear on?
 - d. What is in the lead?
 - e. What are the main events?
 - f. How much background is provided?
 - g. How many sources are used? Are they named? Are they official or unofficial?
 - h. What quotes are used? How are quotes used?

- II. Theme
 - a. What is the theme?
 - b. How do the headline and lead tie to the theme?

- III. Structure
 - a. In what order is information presented? What is in the top half of the story?
What is in the bottom half of the story?

- IV. Style and Rhetoric
 - a. What do specific word choices reveal?
 - b. What metaphors, exemplars, catch phrases, and depictions are used in the text?

- V. What is not said in the article?

APPENDIX B:
Protocol to Guide Analysis of *The West Wing* Episodes¹

- I. Verbal Codes: Linguistic Units
 - a. Naming: how are people identified?
 - b. Attitudinal language: what words are used to express positive or negative judgments?
 - c. Valuative language: what values are encoded in dialogue?
 - d. Metaphorical language: with what kinds of metaphors are people, events, places, and ideas talked about?
 - e. Ideological language: are examples of ideological language used in arguments and advice-giving talk?

- II. Verbal Codes: Communication Acts
 - a. Grammatical orientation: who asks questions? who gives orders? who asserts something as a fact? do different characters use different kinds of grammar as signs of class, education, or status?
 - b. Verbal orientation (perspective taking): what perspective or viewpoints are assumed in a character's speech?
 - c. Narrative orientation: what stories are told so as to emphasize what sorts of thoughts or actions?
 - d. Argumentative orientation: what kinds of arguments for or against some idea or action are offered?

- III. Visual Codes: Orientation
 - a. Color: do particular colors in a shot carry special meaning?
 - b. Framing: are important people or objects centered or marginalized in key shots?
 - c. Light-dark: how does lighting control visual orientation?
 - d. Simplicity-complexity: are objects or people isolated in some shots (simplicity) or put into a multilayered picture (complexity)?
 - e. Foreground-background relationships: what person or object is made the focus of a shot, and what people, objects, or scenes are made the context for the person or object in the foreground?
 - f. Conventionalized objects (icons): what icons are used to convey particular meanings recognized across a society?

- IV. Visual Codes: Complex Meaning Systems
 - a. Emotionality: how are feelings coded into shots or sequences of shots?

¹ Vande Berg, Wenner & Gronbeck, 2004, p. 70-71

- b. Quotation: what characteristics of a particular shot or sequence evoke memories of similar shots or sequences from other visual artifacts?
- c. Interaction with other codes: how do the verbal and acoustic codes affect the meaning of visualized people, places, things, or actions?

V. Acoustic Codes

- a. Auditory signs: what sounds are used to convey particular meanings understood by members of a society?
- b. Paralinguistic cues: what tones of voice are used to characterize physical or emotional states, relationships between people, and personality types?
- c. Spatial organization: how is sound used to organize space?
- d. Auditory echoes: what uses of sound trigger memories of one's previous experience with media or important life or world experiences?
- e. Interaction with other codes: how is the meaning of sounds affected by what is said or what is shown?

APPENDIX C:
Newspaper Articles Analyzed

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APPENDIX D:
The West Wing Episodes Analyzed

- “The Midterms.” *The West Wing*. NBC. October 18, 2000.
- “The Lame Duck Congress.” *The West Wing*. NBC. November 8, 2000.
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- “On the Day Before.” *The West Wing*. NBC. October 31, 2001.
- “War Crimes.” *The West Wing*. NBC. November 7, 2001.
- “Gone Quiet.” *The West Wing*. NBC. November 14, 2001.
- “Bartlet for America.” *The West Wing*. NBC. December 12, 2001.
- “100,000 Airplanes.” *The West Wing*. NBC. January 16, 2002.
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