Branding in legislative parties: A political communication perspective

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Abstract: Recent work in legislative studies has emphasized the role that the party brand plays in organizing legislatures and conveying information to voters (Cox and McCubbins 2005, 2007; Grynaviski 2010; Neiheisel and Niebler 2013). These works often use the concepts party label, party reputation and party brand interchangeably. In this paper, I seek to provide some theoretical clarity regarding the term “party brand” and I ask legislative studies scholars to consider that the party brand is something conceptually different from a label or a reputation. The party brand is the result of branding, which is a form of strategic communication that aims to increase brand equity through enhancing the brand’s attractiveness to voters (Groeling 2010). Understanding branding in this way puts communication goals at the center of party organization and provides additional insight into how party leaders successfully organize collective action. A *political communication view* of legislative action brings Downsian influenced spacial models of voter choice and candidate positioning and models of congressional responsible party government more in line with real world legislative politics.

**Introduction**

Recent work involving the concept of the party brand represents a substantial, developing research path in legislative studies. Some of these studies build on well-known theories of the role political parties play in organizing legislatures (Aldrich 1995; Aldrich and Rohde 1997, 2000; Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005) while others examine the influence of the party label as information for voters in their decision making (Downs 1957; Popkin 1991; Rahn 1993; Snyder and Ting 2002; Tomz and Sniderman 2005 ).[[1]](#footnote-1) Both types of work often rely on the structure and assumptions of public choice theory, especially Downs’ (1957) spacial model of party positioning in elections, and tend to conflate the terms party label, party reputation and party brand.[[2]](#footnote-2) In this paper, I seek to provide some theoretical clarity regarding the term “party brand” and I ask legislative studies scholars to consider that the party brand is something conceptually different from a label or a reputation. The party brand is the result of branding, which is a form of strategic communication that aims to increase brand equity through enhancing the brand’s attractiveness to voters (Groeling 2010). Understanding branding in this way puts communication goals at the center of party organization and provides additional insight into how party leaders successfully organize collective action. A *political communication view* of legislative action brings models more in line with real world legislative politics.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the following sections, I offer what I describe as a political communication view of legislative action and explore the findings of the current literature on congressional communication regarding coordinated strategic communication among parties. I introduce the concept of branding as it has been developed in the political communication and political marketing literature. I then apply the concept of party branding to help illuminate issues within two major theories frequently used by legislative studies scholars: Downsian influenced spacial models of candidate positioning and voter choice and Cox and McCubbins’ (2005) theory of agenda setting and responsible party government.

**A political communication view of legislative action**

In theories of legislators’ positioning on roll call votes and in the ongoing debate over whether party matters in Congress (Aldrich and Rohde 1997, Aldrich, Rohde and Tofias 2007; Cox and McCubbins 2005, 2007; Krehbiel 2000; Smith 2007; Snyder and Groseclose 2000) legislators’ communication is often treated as epiphenomenal; that is, it is seen as entirely derived from legislators’ actions such as voting on bills or agenda setting at the party level. Communication is theorized as what legislators must do to explain the decisions that they have already made, for example by “credit-claiming” or “advertising” (Mayhew 1974). Legislators’ decisions are assumed to be made rationally based on their goals of re-election, good public policy, power in the chamber and retaining or regaining majority control over the chamber (Fenno 1973;Aldrich and Rohde 1997**;** Sinclair 1995; 2008; 2012). As Cox and McCubbins’ (2005, 11) explain in elaborating their procedural cartel theory

In our view, U.S. legislators seek not just reelection but also advancement in the internal hierarchy of posts within the House, good public policy and majority status for their parties. Their parties compete in mass markets, by developing brand names. These brand names are public goods to the members of the party, and the value of the brand depends on the party’s legislative record of accomplishment. Thus, a key problem for legislative parties is to manage the legislative process, securing the best possible record, hence the best possible brand name or reputation.

In this formulation, the party reputation is seen as reflective of the party “record of legislative accomplishment” (the collection of bills the party has passed and has prevented from being passed) and is equated with the brand. It is asserted that this brand affects voters’ actions, and thus the “members’ personal probability of reelection and the party’s probability of securing a majority” (2005, 21). Cox and McCubbins sidestep the mechanisms of how communication matters in choosing bills to pursue to enhance the party record, how the record forms the reputation that is communicated to voters, and how meaning for the brand is established by voters. Consistent with spacial theories of choice, they assume that the legislative record speaks for itself and that ideological, not communication, strategies drive the legislative record and voter choices.

In contrast, from a political communication point of view of legislative action (hereafter “a political communication view”) a party’s legislative record never speaks for itself; rather, the party brand reflects a set of intentional communication choices *before and after* agendas are set and legislators decide on their positions regarding a specific policy. A political communication view is concerned with how communication considerations shape the choice of bills that are prioritized by parties in the agenda, how parties and individual legislators construct messages to support their work, how news and other media sources publicize congressional communication and what effects this communication has on individual and collective public opinion (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Mathes 2012; Sellers 2010). This view assumes that when members of Congress (MC’s) engage with the public directly (such as in email updates or telephone town halls) or indirectly (in floor debate or on news programs) they have strategic communication goals (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Mathes 2012; Sellers 2010). Individual MC’s and parties not only explain their actions post-hoc, but parties also decide on which actions to take collectively by weighing potential communications effects. Thus, congressional communication is both proactive and reactive, and positioning and promoting the party brand is an essential part of legislative action (Groeling 2010; O’Cass and Voola 2011)**.**

As much as legislators would like to control how their message is conveyed to the public, a political communication view recognizes that governing elites must use the media as a means to communicate their message to their desired publics, and if they want to be successful they must consider media values in crafting their messages (Cook 1998; Gregorio 2011; Groeling 2010; Sellers 2010). Sellers (2010, 205) maintains that congressional communication and media content is so intertwined that “politicians and journalists jointly shape the policy agenda and legislative outcomes”. Political communication scholar Timothy Cook (1998, 165) argues that in the congressional context “Making news… is not merely a way to get elected or re-elected, to boost one’s own ego or to be a show horse instead of a work horse; instead it is a way to govern”. Regarding congressional communication there is a “negotiation of newsworthiness” (Cook 1989; 1998; Groeling 2010; Sellers 2010) in which MC’s attempt to create news that reporters will report and in turn, those reporters take information given to them by MC’s and impose their professional values on the content before reporting. The news values that reporters use to shape congressional content include novelty and sensationalism, negativity and conflict, balance between opposing sides, authority (especially in using attributed quotes) and narrative (Cook 1998; Groeling 2010, ch. 2). We can expect, then, that MC’s will anticipate these values and craft press releases, speeches and press conferences (among the various forms of congressional communication meant for the press) in ways that will attract maximum positive coverage (Grimmer 2013).[[4]](#footnote-4)

A political communication view also assumes that members of the public are susceptible to forms of media effects, such as framing.[[5]](#footnote-5) A debate in the political communication literature exists over how “minimal” these effects are on public opinion (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Graber 2004). Congressional communicators hold the view that at least some members of the public can be influenced by frames and “words that work” (Luntz 2007) and employ consultants to help craft effective messages that will further their agendas and make their party, party members, and/or party record more appealing than the opposing party’s.[[6]](#footnote-6) Given journalistic norms, party leaders know that their message will likely be competing with an opposing party’s message in the media and that opposing frames might mute the effect of their preferred frame (Chong and Druckman 2007b). Party elites attempt to hit the mark with their audience by commissioning polls and focus groups to test language for its ability to persuade groups of voters.[[7]](#footnote-7) This is not to say that such messages always work; how messages are perceived by the targeted audience and beyond is not as predictable as elites would like, not least because they are mostly filtered through the media. Further, messages are voiced by a plethora of sources (party leaders, elected officials, candidates, pundits), across a variety of media and can be more or less crafted with persuasion values in mind (for example a tweet might be less carefully crafted than a speech on the floor of the legislature).

Finally, a political communication view posits that incentives for political actors change as the structure of communication changes (Blumler and Kavanaugh 1999). With new communication technologies and increased focus on media in society, political actors face incentives to become more media-conscious and strategic in their communication[[8]](#footnote-8). For example, MC’s are aware that in the current media environment, any communication act (a tweet, a speech on the floor, or radio interview back in the district) is capturable and thus potentially usable by opponents in the next campaign. Collective party reputations may be more important to promote through media as parties become more polarized within Congress, thus, MC’s of the majority party may be less inclined to “run against Congress” in order to promote their party’s successes (Fenno 1978; Jones 2010; Lipinski 2004). Political journalists report that MC’s promote their party’s brand in addition to their own personal brand, and attempt to minimize conflicts between the two.[[9]](#footnote-9) Congressional party leaders use the legislative process to support their message; for example, they stage votes on bills related to issues that benefit their party’s brand in anticipation of upcoming campaigns. Currently, as Senate Democrats are facing a tough campaign season in which they might lose control of the chamber; even though they have not chance of passing these bills in this session, they are scheduling votes on issues, such as increases in minimum wage, eliminating sex-based pay gaps, and closing tax loopholes for corporations, that facilitate their message of being the party of the middle-class in opposition to Republicans which they claim is the party of the wealthy.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Though legislative studies scholars may ask what a political communication view might add to well-established theories, a key paradox routinely unaddressed in the theoretical literature is that in the contemporary Congress, individual MCs and parties, who are assumed to be rational, spend substantial amounts of organizational resources on developing and disseminating messages (Cook 1989; Harris 1998, 2005; Sinclair 2006). This holds true for majority and minority parties and in times when within parties, legislator preferences are relatively homogenous and when they are less so (as might be said now about the Tea Party effect within the Republican party) (Evans and Oleszek, M., 2001). Research by those legislative studies scholars investigating congressional communication have found that parties regularly develop and coordinate messages in an effort to shape public opinion about their governing strategies, policy priorities and issue positions (Burkhalter 2007, 2012; Evans 2001; Harris 2010; Sellers 2000, 2010; Malecha and Reagan 2012). Indeed, as the parties have become more polarized ideologically, communications operations have become more entwined with legislative strategy. Evans, one of the few legislative studies scholars to privilege the role that communication plays in the legislative process, describes the “the interconnected set of electoral, communications, and legislative strategies that congressional parties employ to advance their respective messages” as “message politics” (2001, 219).

A central element of message politics is the increasing investment members of House and Senate have made in routinely publicizing their actions and coordinating the preferred words, themes and symbols that they wish to establish as the dominant frames that the public uses to understand their issue priorities and positions. Political communication scholar Timothy Cook (1989) examined the expansion of House members’ media activities in the 1980s, concluding that courting public opinion through the media relations had become “important activities, not only to get re-elected but increasingly to accomplish policy-related goals in Washington” (12). Based on direct observation, Kedrowski (1996) explained that congressional parties seek to reduce costs and coordinate message by providing representatives with issue briefings and talking points to use when members communicate with the media and their constituents back in their districts. Harris (1998) documents, beginning with Speaker Tip O’Neill, the rise of the “public speakership,” in which the Speaker concentrates substantially more resources than in the textbook era of the 1960’s and 1970’s to spreading his party’s message through media appearances. Harris (1998, 2005) also finds that the House Democrats used polling and other activities borrowed from presidential communications operations to develop their messages prior to the ascension of the famously message-conscious Speaker, Newt Gingrich. Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro (2000) describe a “cycle of crafted talk” that exploded in the 104th Congress, when Gingrich took over as Speaker. They argue that by using sophisticated public relations tools, such as crafting polls to test party messages (rather than using polls to respond directly to public opinion on issues) and coordinating persuasive messages in the media, Republicans attempted to move public opinion towards their preferred policy position on health care rather than respond to established voter preferences.

One of the key tools that congressional parties use to strengthen the party-developed message and encourage their message to be covered in the media is coordination of floor speech (Sellers 2000, 2010). Party organizations attempt to coordinate floor speeches on party priority bills, presumably with an eye towards the media to pick up the message if it is repeated consistently (Evans and Oleszek, M. 2001; Harris 2005; Burkhalter 2007, 2012). Harris (1998, 12) observes in the late 1980s an “increased integration of press/communications activities as communications staff from the Speaker’s office, the majority leader’s office, the whip operation, and the caucus or conference have regularized meetings with one another”. Republican and Democratic Party organizations such as the Democratic Message Group and Republican Theme Team were established not just to promote media activities, but to coordinate members’ speeches in the chamber to reflect the party’s preferred messages (Harris 2010; Kedrowski 1996; Malecha and Reagan 2012).

Many members seem to be agreeable to such coordination; for example, in the 101st House, Harris (2005) examined seven different issues in one- minute speeches and found that on average 36.4% of Democratic one-minute speeches were coordinated on points given to them by the Democratic Party Message Group. Burkhalter (2007, 2012) and Sellers (2010) have found high levels of message discipline among party members in floor speeches on issues important to the majority party’s overall message.[[11]](#footnote-11) After observing the parties’ coordination on one-minute speeches, Larry Evans (2001; Evans and Oleszek 2001) used them to identify “message priority” bills—bills that were in the process of being legislated and were important to the party’s overall message. On these bills he found that leadership intervention was amplified, with leaders adjusting the legislative process in order to enhance the message (for example, by breaking up bills into smaller pieces as a way to market each component). In the 107th Congress, DeGregorio (2011) found strategic framing displayed by both parties over three major issues during “one minute” speeches, but found that news reporters on some issues reported partisan frames while at other times tended to privilege a description of the process and/or provisions of the bill.

Harris (1998, 2005) and Sinclair (1995; 2006; 2008) stress that contemporary members of the House expect their leadership to participate in message activities; for example, beyond being a public face of the party, they expect the Speaker to create and maintain party institutions that help craft and market a successful party message. Being effective at messaging and publicity is one criterion that members use to choose their leaders, and being the Republican conference chair, currently charged with overseeing the party’s message operation and making sure it is publicized, is a platform from which to launch a bid for Majority Leader or Speaker.[[12]](#footnote-12) Current Speaker John Boehner, who was Republican Conference Chair in the 104th Congress, famously observed that "Communications is where it's all at. It's not what you're doing but the perceptions that are so important."[[13]](#footnote-13) Malecha and Reagan (2012, 75) explain that Speaker Nancy Pelosi centralized Democrats’ message operations in her office choosing to selectively delegate responsibility to the Democratic Policy Committee and to the Democratic Caucus.[[14]](#footnote-14) In the early 2000’s, as minority leader, she was instrumental in developing the message strategy that helped Democrats regain control of the House in the 2006 elections (Cosgrove 2012; Sinclair 2008).

Leaders are careful to include a range of members’ views in developing the message agenda—the group of policies that will signify the programmatic priorities of the party during the session. For example, all party members are invited to participate in brainstorming legislative strategy and message at annual party retreats in January; what is decided in January is usually refined through regular Democratic caucus and Republican conference meetings during the session.[[15]](#footnote-15) The names of priority bills are often crafted to form catchy phrases that describe a policy view such as HR 2, “Repealing the Job-Killing Health Care Law Act” in the 112th Congress (Cook 1998; Lipinski 2009)[[16]](#footnote-16).

Communications efforts similar to those in used in the House since the 1980s are now also institutionalized in the Senate (Cook 1998; Evans and Oleszek, W. 2001; Malecha and Reagan 2012; Sellers and Schaffner 2007; Sellers 2010; Sinclair 2008, 2012). In Sellers’ (2010) description of the “cycle of spin,” party leaders in the Senate in the mid-1990s developed “promotional campaigns” around message priority issues, including developing party messages with media values in mind, asking individual senators to publicize the messages and then measuring how successful they were in getting the message reported in accurate and positive ways. One incentive that senators have to adopt the party message is that the more consistent party members are in their messaging the more likely the message is to be reported in the press (Sellers 2000, 2010). To facilitate such messaging in 2005, Majority leader Harry Reid centralized Senate Democratic party communications in the Democratic Communications Center, which according to Malecha and Reagan has close to 30 people working on message and media (2012, 83). Minority leader McConnell also is known as being effective at guiding his party’s message and Republican message operations in the Senate have long been coordinated through the Republican conference (Malecha and Reagan 2012; Sinclair 2008). Burkhalter and Bytel (2012) found significant coordination on message by Republican senators during consideration of Dodd-Frank Financial Regulatory reform in 2009-2010.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Significant coordination of party-developed speech by MC’s can be seen as the congressional party attempting to further its brand. Evans’ (2001) “message politics,” is a term that like Jacobs and Shapiro’s (2000) “crafted talk” or Sinclair’s (2006) “PR Wars” has not taken off in the literature as a way to describe the complexity of coordination that successfully putting forth a programmatic message requires by congressional parties. *Branding* captures the ongoing nature of strategic crafting and repeating of key points that define the values of the party and describe their policy offerings (Hennenberg and O’ Shaughnessy 2007). Branding is the term familiar in Western democracies such as Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Germany, to describe how parties market themselves to voters (O’Cass and Voola 2011; Smith and French 2009; Schneider 2004). As Cosgrove (2012, 107) explains, “[political] branding ensures that values, benefits and specific attributes all tie together…[it] requires a wholesale commitment to building a complete offering, ideally over time.” Because in the U.S. parties do not market their platforms through manifestos, and individual candidates have an incentive to develop their own personal style (or brand) in campaigning and representing their constituents, it is more difficult than in parliamentary democracies to establish a consistent party brand (Fenno 1978, Groeling 2010; Grimmer 2013; Neiheisel and Neibler 2013). Consistency in party branding is further complicated by the differences in incentives of the president and members of his party in Congress in constructing and publicizing the brand (Groeling 2010).

Although “party brand” is a term used across disciplines such as political marketing, political communication, and legislative studies as well as by MC’s themselves and the political press, there is no agreement on what constitutes a party brand (Cosgrove 2012; Smith and French 2009). In general, the policies of the party and elected officials’ representation of constituents are thought of as the “tangible” elements of the brand, while the values the brand promotes and the feelings it elicits are the “intangibles” (Schneider 2004). At a minimum, a party participates in branding“…to be perceived to be offering greater value than its rivals offer” (O’Cass and Voola, 631); thus, even in a two-party candidate-centered system, there is an incentive for party members to cooperate on establishing and promoting a brand. The purpose of brands is to distinguish products from each other by focusing on their distinctiveness in comparison with other products; in the political context this means establishing uniqueness in values and policy offerings by each party (Groeling 2010; Needham 2005; O’Cass and Voola 2011). In addition, party brands must be credible in that what is promised is delivered, at least in part. They should be simple in that they are easy to understand by the targeted audience. In terms of their intangible benefits, they should appeal to the voters’ values, reassure the voter of outcomes and provide the voter with a sense of belonging and aspiration (Cosgrove 2012; Keller and Lehmann 2006; Schneider 2004). It is an axiom of branding that to be successful brands must be established and promoted though consistent messaging (Cosgrove 2012; Knox and Bickerton 2003).

Though brands are markers of distinctive party positions, the party brand can be distinguished from the party label in that “the brand is more than a name (or ‘mark’)” (Keller and Lehmann 2006). A label is an identifier but does not necessarily convey the information of the brand. For example, a label identifies a candidate on a ballot as belonging to a party, which may provide basic information as to where a candidate is generally located on a left-right spectrum or that the candidate identifies with the same party with which the voter identifies. A party reputation is closer to what a brand is, but conceptually does not include the strategic nature of brand positioning by parties. For example, a

party reputation might be the understanding of a voter at one point in time of what a party has accomplished in its most recent actions or it might be a loosely-based conception of issues that each party governs best on. The party brand conveys much more information than either the label or the reputation because it is the reflection of calculated positioning on values and issues—past and present— and strategic messaging by the party members. It has value to the voter above and beyond the label and the reputation because it conveys consistent, holistic information about the party and it contributes a “feeling” about it (Smith and French 2009). The brand is valuable to the party because it reflects the work the party has done to shape public perception of it, which could include stressing value congruence with the voter, developing attractive positions on issues, or deploying persuasive criticisms of the opposing party.

**Downsian influenced spacial models of voter choice and candidate positioning**

A political communication view of legislative action sees branding as a strategic communication act to shape voter perception of a party. That a party brand contains strategic rational *and* emotional information challenges the assumptions of the Downsian model of voter choice and candidate positioning. Studies using Downsian-influenced spacial modeling form a canon within the study of American politics, but the model is not without critics (Ansolabehre, Snyder, and Stewart III 2001; Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012; Grofman 2004). Downs theorized parties as competing firms offering ideological products (a package of positions on issues) that voters, as rational utility maximizers, choose from in a way that maximizes their individual utility. Since parties, like firms, are assumed to be responsive to consumers’ needs, in a two-party system the theory predicts that parties’ positions will converge on the view of the median voter and parties’ ideological offerings are thus predicted to be similar. Since elections in the U.S. are less party-based than in other Western Democracies, typically what is modeled in spacial accounts is the positions of candidates, A and B (Butler and Powell, forthcoming; Neiheisel and Neibler 2013). The respective party brand of candidates A and B is sometimes theorized to be additional information in that it informs the voter in a relatively straightforward (non-strategic) way what the candidate is offering in his/her product (set of policy positions).[[18]](#footnote-18)

Despite its popularity in legislative studies, the Downsian model is vulnerable to criticism that it abstracts away some key realities of voter choice and politician behavior. Stokes (1963) highlighted that the Downsian assumption of unidimensionality is unreasonable in the real world; anticipating framing as a means of strategic candidate communication, he argues that politicians use different “frames of reference” to describe reality and that so-called valence issues regarding trustworthiness and competence can be raised by competing parties so that a voter is less likely to vote solely based on ideology (Butler and Powell, forthcoming). Recent evidence demonstrates that raising valence issues can shift election dynamics. Goble and Holm (2009) show President Bush’s poor performance in handling the war in Iraq led the Republican party to lose a 25+ point advantage in national security issue ownership, which may have given Democrats an overall advantage in the 2006 elections. In their study of shifts in party reputations over time, Woon and Pope (2009, 647) maintain that “ownership of handling peace and prosperity is temporary—more like leasing than owning” (Petrocik 1996). Parties raise performance based-issues in an attempt to increase their advantage on those non-ideological issues, thus contributing another dimension to a voter’s choice. With concentrated effort, parties can even gain reputational advantages on ideological issues typically associated with distinct party constituencies, such as Republicans making inroads on the traditional Democratic issues of education, health care and social security. These changes in reputations may not last over the long-run, but may be critical to winning proximate elections.

Party reputations and overall voter preferences are relatively stable, yet there is also evidence that voters at specific points in time can be influenced by party framing or a change in a party’s position on an issue (Grynaviski 2010; Stimson 2004). Slothus (2010) found in a natural experiment that in Denmark when the Social Democratic party shifted its position on welfare benefits for the elderly to a more conservative position than what it previously embraced (because of a macro-level party positioning decision) that voters who identified with the party shifted their issue preference to match the party’s new position. This suggests an emotional connection with party that can make individual preferences somewhat malleable.[[19]](#footnote-19) Another scenario of fixed voter preferences not trumping party positioning in candidate choice is described by Sniderman and Stiglitz (2012). They show through experiments that “programmatic partisans” are more likely to choose their party’s candidate even when the opposing party’s candidate is their “spacial favorite” based on the match between the candidate’s position and the voter’s preferences.

According to Sniderman and Stiglitz’s “reputational theory of spacial reasoning” voter party identification is emotional *and* rational, party-based and ideological. Voters have different reasons for identifying with a party; the most committed are “programmatic partisans” whom they describe as knowing the positions of the candidates in a specific race *and* understanding the ideological basis for the distinct reputations of the parties. They have a “commitment to what the party stands for and emotional attachments” to the party such that “When the party wins they win” (2012, 33). Unlike “traditional” partisans,” who choose to identify with a party for reasons other than that the party represents their ideological preferences, among programmatic partisans, the party represents their overall view of politics and their party’s candidates who line up on the correct side of the liberal-conservative continuum vis-à-vis the other party’s candidate gain a “reputational premium” (Converse, et. al 1960; Miller and Shanks 1996). This means that a candidate need not line up her positions with her party’s median because so long as she stays on the correct side spatially from the other party’s candidate she will get the reputational benefit from programmatic partisans. Sniderman and Stigliz (2012) explain that this allows candidates to take more extreme ideological positions within their own party and without being punished by party supporters for not being closer to them in preferences.

The benefit candidates get from the reputational premium speaks to the “Downsian dilemma” that in contemporary politics positions of candidates from different parties most often diverge rather than converge around the median voter (Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012).[[20]](#footnote-20) Ansolabehere, Snyder and Stewart (2001) found that in House elections across time, the 1960s and 1970s were the only periods somewhat consistent with Downs’ prediction of ideological responsiveness and moderation in individual races. They argue that Downs’ assumption that each race is separate and not influenced by other contests should be relaxed because there seems to be a national-local connection that links “party organizations in Congress and the policies that the candidates promise” (2001, 154). Indeed, Sniderman and Stiglitz maintain that the national-local connection of the party’s reputation and its candidates is linked through the party’s advertising:

A successful advertiser gets people to think what he wants them to think by getting them to feel what will encourage them to think it…Who, provided they are of an appropriate age, fails to automatically associate Cadillac cars with luxury?” (2012, 101)…On the supply-side, parties have strong incentives to be information broadcasters and stand out as a focal point of attention for voters who identify with them…party identifiers who are emotionally attached to their party and know and share its outlook have the motivation to pay the costs of acquiring party-relevant information on a continuing basis…[parties] help organize the choice space: they delimit, bundle and brand the number of alternatives on offer…[through their reputations they] provide a causal mechanism allowing voters to recognize programmatic coordination across diverse policy domains (2012, 102-103).

It seems that they are describing party branding without elaborating on the process of communication that parties use to shape voters’ beliefs about their reputations.

In their examination of the Speaker Gingrich-President Clinton period, Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) raised the prospect that through “crafted talk” politicians can shape voters’ preferences to serve the politicians’ rather than the voters’ interests. In their account, parties have distinctive policy goals based on their respective ideologies, and their candidates would prefer not to cater to the median voter in order to successfully enact the party’s policies. Thus, rather than responding to the median voter’s preferred alternatives, by using poll and focus-group tested language legislators attempt to enact their partisan policy preferences while minimizing electoral repercussions. From a political communication point of view, then, a party brand may aid voters by providing them with additional information nicely packaged about a party’s policies and may increase the loyalty of those who share its ideological outlook, but it may also obscure how far the party-in-government has strayed from the median party voter in the electorate or how far a party’s candidate’s policy preferences are from the those of the voters in the district.[[21]](#footnote-21) Parties can focus on performance-based issues (“reducing the deficit”) to add multidimensionality to the party brand, which may lead voters away from basing their judgments about a candidate on her ideological positions and towards weighing the candidate’s party’s purported competence in governing.

**Congressional responsible party government**

Cox and McCubbins (2005, 2007) maintain that parties matter in Congress because they use incentives to organize legislators with diverse preferences to create a party record that forms the basis of the party reputation in the electorate. That voters have a positive image of the party is important because the reputation is theorized to affect individual legislators’ chances of re-election and the prospects for the party’s control of the chamber. Through their collective reputation, parties can act responsibly in that voters can hold them collectively accountable for their policies (American Political Science Association 1950; Ranney 1954)**.** Building on this work, Grynaviski (2010) posits that through its brand a party acts as a “third-party guarantor” of its candidates’ positions, therefore reducing risk by helping voters to feel reasonably safe that their candidate choice will not be successful in enacting extreme policies. In this way the party brand helps to solve the “adverse selection problem” and furthers the cooperation necessary for responsible parties (Snyder and Ting 2002).

Responsible party government theories that highlight legislative coordination on the party brand adhere to a naïve view of communication as straightforward and sincere; from a political communication point of view, legislators of the same party have an incentive to collectively brand, but not necessarily for purposes of being accountable as the case would be with a so-called responsible party. Rather, the incentive to brand is to effectively market the most appealing aspects of their party’s positions for upcoming elections, which, as the branding literature indicates, requires coordination to achieve consistency in the brand. The party reputation that forms the basis of the brand is relatively stable because it is based on the ideological views of the party and the major groups that form the constituency for the party, but parties for a variety of reasons do change positions on certain issues in order to make electoral gains (Pope and Woon 2009; Karol 2009).

For example, Senate Republicans recently took up the issue of income inequality—an issue they have rarely discussed before--in an effort to undercut Democrats’ campaign to highlight the issues related to income inequality before the 2014 Senate elections.[[22]](#footnote-22) With party control of the Senate chamber at stake, Republicans are shifting their issue priorities and message to appear to be more moderate than their governing issue positions suggest. Democrats’ choice to legislatively highlight issues of income inequality in American society, coordinated with President Obama’s current agenda, is no accident; as Larry Evans and Mark Oleszek (2001, 1) have argued, “Public opinion can provide incentives for partisan behavior in Congress. But as the ‘name brand’ analogy implies, the legislative agenda may also shape mass attitudes in important ways”. If through the legislative process Democrats can raise issues associated with income inequality in the public’s mind and maintain their party’s public opinion advantage on those issues, they may be able to stave off the predicted Republican victories in some states.

Maintaining a brand is more difficult for a party than for a corporation because party branding depends on significant organization and discipline for the necessary cooperation on message across diverse spokespeople (Smith 2009). Legislative parties facilitate consistency in messaging across MC’s through internal organizations and agenda setting. As Cox and McCubbins assert, then, parties solve collective action issues associated with establishing a brand; however, the party brand should not be assumed to facilitate accountability. Branding is a strategic communication act that aims to elicit a favorable response and minimize negative feelings associated with the brand. This means that parties’ messages incorporate values and language that highlight what they determine voters will respond to positively while they attempt to mask or neutralize any positions or actions that voters may respond to negatively.

**Conclusion**

From a political communication point of view of legislative action, communication is a concern at every stage of the legislative process. Parties establish institutions to help facilitate message-driven agenda-setting, coordinated congressional communication, and media outreach. MC’s have incentives to cooperate in these efforts because consistency in messaging is necessary to establish a strong party brand. The concept *branding* captures the ongoing work that political parties in Congress do to strategically shape the public’s understanding of the party. Through the images and language associated with their brand, parties attempt to establish concurrently a rational-ideological and emotional connection with voters. Committed partisans may be more likely to respond to the brand because it represents a “political identity” for them, but low information voters benefit from the brand as well because it provides a simple, holistic sense of a party’s intangible characteristics and tangible offerings (Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012; Smith 2009). However, a brand can obfuscate as much as clarify what a party stands for in that the issues, ideas, frames, arguments and images used to facilitate it are informed by tools of public relations and play to targeted voters’ established biases. This obfuscation might make it more difficult for voters to accurately evaluate branded parties, contrary to the predictions of Downsian spacial models and responsible party government theory. Branding also might contribute to polarization in parties’ positions in that strong brands require distinctiveness in values and products from those of competing brands. Polarization in the party in government and the “reputational premium” accorded to candidates who remain consistent with the brand may free up candidates to take more extreme positions than they otherwise would in a more responsive system (Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012, 109).

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1. See for example, Daniel M. Butler and Eleanor Neff Powell (forthcoming) “Understanding the Party Brand: Experimental Evidence on the Role of Valence,” *Journal of Politics*; Jeffrey D. Grynaviski, 2010. *Partisan Bonds: Political Reputations and Legislative Accountability*, Cambridge University Press; David R. Jones, 2010, “Partisan Polarization and Congressional Accountability in House Elections,” *American Journal of Political Science* 54, 323-337; Jonathan Woon and Jeremy C. Pope, 2008, “Made in Congress? Testing the Electoral Implications of Party Ideological Brand Names,” *Journal of Politics*, 70, 3: 823-836; and Jacob R Neiheisel and Sarah Neibler. 2013. “The Use of Party Brand Labels in Congressional Election Campaigns,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 38, no 3: 377-404. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example, the first sentence of Butler and Powell (forthcoming) is: “Stokes (1963) outlined two components of a party’s reputation, label, or brand”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Except by a few scholars (Burkhalter 2007, 2012; Cook 1989; Harris 1998; 2005, 2010; Evans 2001; Evans and Oleszek, M. 2001; Grimmer 2013; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Lipinski 2004; Malecha and Reagan 2012; Sellers 2000, 2010; Sellers and Shaffner 2007; Sinclair 2006) political communication in Congress has been relatively ignored in the legislative studies subfield. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Positive coverage could mean negative coverage of the opposing party. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For example, Nelson, Clawson and Oxley (1997) found that when a frame is changed to support free speech instead of public safety, experimental participants were more supportive of their community allowing a KKK rally. Shields and Goidel (1998) show that in experimental conditions how much opposite party voters attribute blame to the president for economic conditions depends on his rhetorical “blame avoidance strategy”. Schaffner and Atkinson (2010) found in a survey experiment that respondents who were exposed to a death tax frame and who felt that Republicans and Democrats owned the tax issue equally were more likely to think that many families paid the tax (as opposed to the reality of only 1% of families). When told that only estates of over $1million were taxed, 34% of the sample changed their minds about their initial support for repeal of the tax. For a review of the framing effects literature, see Chong and Druckman (2007a) and Druckman (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For discussion of a recent attempt by congressional Democrats to re-craft their messages with the help of consultants, see: Perry Bacon, Jr., “Language Lessons for Democrats, from the Political Brain of Drew Westen,” The Washington Post, May 18, 2010 [(http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/17/AR2010051703823.html)](file:///C:\Users\sb82\AppData\Local\Temp\(http:\www.washingtonpost.com\wp-dyn\content\article\2010\05\17\AR2010051703823.html)). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For an in-depth look at such party strategy, see Republican National Committee, March, 2013 “Growth and Opportunity Project” report, which can be accessed in full at the *Washington Post* Website <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2013/03/18/the-full-rnc-growth-and-opportunity-project-report/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This is sometimes called “mediatization” in political communication literature (Blumler and Kavanaugh 1999; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Robert Costa, “Eric Cantor attempts to remake the House GOP Brand, and his own” The Washington Post, March 23, 2014 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/eric-cantor-attempts-to-remake-the-house-gop-brand-and-his-own/2014/03/23/b1a5e430-af9f-11e3-95e8-39bef8e9a48b_story.html>); John Bresnahan, “GOP Leaders Warn of Election Disaster,” *Politico*, May 8, 2008 (<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0508/10138_Page2.html>); [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jeremy W. Peters and Michael D. Shear, “Democrats, as Part of Midterm Strategy, to Schedule Votes on Pocketbook Issues,” The *New York Times*, March 25, 2014. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/26/us/politics/democrats-as-part-of-midterm-strategy-to-schedule-votes-on-pocketbook-issues.html?emc=eta1&_r=0> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sellers (2010) defines these issues as those on which preferences in the party are united but preferences are divided in the opposing party. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The current Republican conference description of duties is: “the House Republican Conference is responsible for electing the House Republican leadership, approving GOP Member committee assignments, managing leadership-driven floor debates, and executing a communications strategy that is executed within the party and is conveyed to constituents through the media. Internally, the Conference provides a wide variety of services to Members and their staff. Such services include [daily legislative materials](http://www.gop.gov/legdigest), visual media production, educational events and briefings, training seminars, issue-specific talking points, and assistance with press events and materials. Externally, the House Republican Conference coordinates media availability for leadership events, schedules GOP Members to participate in TV and radio interviews, and generally communicates the House Republican message to the public.” (<http://www.gop.gov/conference>; accessed 3/28/14). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Quoted in David Maraniss and Michael Weisskopf, 1996, "*Tell Newt to Shut Up*" (New York: Simon & Shuster), 142. I am grateful to Harris (1998) and Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) for reacquainting me with Boehner’s statement. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The relatively new Democratic Caucus Dems.gov Web site, seems to be the main portal for the House Democrats’ communication efforts, as it is very similar to the established Republican conference site, GOP.gov. Given the diversity of factions within the Democrats, however, it may be that message development still takes place mainly in the Democratic leaders’ office and the Democratic Steering and Policy committee, which she chairs. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. These party retreats are regularly covered in the political press. See for example, Jake Sherman and John Bresnahan, “House GOP to Gather for Retreat,” *Politico*, January 27, 2014, <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/01/house-gop-to-gather-for-retreat-102652.html>; Billy House, “Democratic Retreat Features Obama, Biden, Strategy and Wine Tasting (Optional)” *National Journal*, February 12, 2014, <http://www.nationaljournal.com/congress/democrats-retreat-features-obama-biden-strategy-and-wine-tasting-optional-20140212> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Even bipartisan bills can be provided with acronymic names, as legislative studies scholar and Representative for the 3rd district in Illinois, Dan Lipinski, recounts about a bill he sponsored in the 106th Congress: The Bulb Replacement in Government with High Efficiency Technology (BRIGHT) Energy Savings Act (Lipinski 2009) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. As Grimmer (2013) shows, individual senators spend resources courting the press and developing their presentational styles through their communication efforts; not every senator is equally inclined to embrace their party’s message. Because of the culture of individualism in the Senate, individual senators are less likely to adopt and stay on the party message across issues than House members. (Malecha and Regan 2012, 87-88). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The term “party brand” tends to be used in post-Downsian studies as a means of being consistent with the economic metaphors and symbols that Downs used to apply assumptions and axioms of economics to politics. The vast majority of these studies do not recognize branding as distinct marketing practice involving communication. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Sniderman and Stigliz (2012, 23) maintain that in the contemporary American context in which the two major parties are ideologically polarized “whether party identifiers are more likely to stand with their party because they have bought their issue preferences in line with their party attachments or the other way around is a matter of debate.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. A “Downsian dilemma” is a real-world situation in which the assumptions and/or prediction of Downs’ (1957) model do not hold true. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Grimmer (2013) documents how, through a steady stream of press releases, individual U.S. senators shape press coverage of their work and thus the understanding their constituents have of their activities and positions. The information senators share in their press releases, although rarely false, is strategic in that it often omits unpopular positions and uses language and images to increase the *rational and emotional* appeal of senators’ positions. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. David Nather, “GOP’s Confused Inequality Message,” *Politico*, February 7, 2014. <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/02/repulicans-gop-inequality-103239.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)