Party Brands, Elections, and Presidential-Congressional Relations

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Often, the behavior of Congress on issues of concern to the White House can be easily explained by a simple but elegant theory: that each member of Congress acts in ways that help strengthen their personal reputation within their constituency. Such behaviors include demonstrating attentiveness to the issue concerns and issue positions of their particular constituents. This theory makes sense, because actions consistent with it are the most likely to guarantee a member’s own reelection, while actions that deviate from it in any way run the risk of electoral defeat.

In recent years, however, we see instances of congressional actions that do not seem to be so easily explained. Consider the following three examples of puzzling congressional behavior during the second term of Barack Obama’s presidency:

• Why did Republicans, after insisting that Obamacare be defunded as a condition for funding the rest of the government, completely reverse course shortly afterward?

• Why, at a time when the Obama Administration’s handling of the Ebola virus was a major public concern among both Democratic and Republican constituents,1 were congressional Democrats significantly more reluctant than Republicans to publicly discuss this issue?

• Why did Republicans, who openly advocated for tougher executive actions against ISIS, refuse to ever schedule a vote to authorize the President’s bombing campaign against ISIS in Syria?

While there are certainly many unique factors that help to explain each of these disparate events, it is also true that there is one factor common to them all. In each of these cases, key

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1 According to a YouGov Poll from October 11-13, 2014, 70 percent of all Americans expressed concern about an Ebola epidemic in the United States, including 63 percent of Democrats.
members of Congress were considering not only how best to burnish their personal reputations; they were also considering how their actions would affect the public reputation of their entire party, or the public reputation of the opposing party. In sum, they were concerned with managing party brands.

This chapter explores the idea that interactions between Congress and the president are often affected by strategies that members of Congress use to boost the favorability of their own party’s brand and tarnish the opposing party’s brand. The reason that members care about party reputations in addition to their own personal ones is because they recognize that the public’s images of the two parties can have important partisan effects in elections. This impacts members directly in their own races, and also indirectly by affecting the chances of their party controlling Congress and the White House. Understanding this dynamic helps explain key interbranch relations in Washington over the past four years pertaining to both domestic and foreign policy issues. It also helps explain the outcomes of the momentous 2014 congressional elections, in which Republicans gained control of the U.S. Senate, and the historic 2016 presidential election, in which Republicans recaptured the White House.

The remainder of this chapter fleshes out these arguments. First, I discuss why party brands affect American elections, and the multiple reasons members have to care about these effects. I also present evidence regarding the electoral effects of party brands, including their impact on the 2014 and 2016 elections. Next, I discuss the major components of party brand reputations, and illustrate how congressional behavior in regard to the executive branch can affect them, using examples from Barack Obama’s presidency. Finally, I discuss how the reestablishment of unified party control of government following the 2016 elections is likely to alter how partisan brand management impacts relations between Congress and President Trump.
How Party Brands Affect Members

*The Republican Party brand sucks and so people don’t want to be a Republican.*

---Republican U.S. Senator Rand Paul, October 2014

In seeking to explain congressional behavior, it is important to understand the central goals that motivate members. Congressional scholars generally focus on three such goals that, to varying degrees, each member holds: reelection, influence within Congress, and public policy. If the relative status of the parties’ brands had no impact on achievement of these goals, we would have little reason to expect that members of Congress would go out of their way to try to affect these brands. In this section, however, I show that the relative favorability of the public towards the two major party brands does indeed affect the ability of members to achieve these goals. As a result, members have multiple incentives to structure their interactions with the executive branch with an eye to how their actions affect party brand reputations.

I begin with a focus on the reelection goal. The case that parties’ overall brand reputations affect individual members’ reelection starts with the observation that these elections are not independent of one another. Rather, the electoral fortunes of members of the same party appear to be inexorably linked. In certain election years, for example, Democratic candidates for the House will experience a similar common increase in their vote shares across most districts, and in other years they will experience a common decrease in their vote shares across most

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districts. The 2014 midterm election was a good example of this phenomenon. Out of all the House seats in which both parties competed in 2012 and 2014, the share of the vote won by the Democratic candidate in 2014 decreased in 84 percent of these districts. This pattern is not unique to 2014. Rather, research suggests it is a regular occurrence.4

A main reason that electoral fortunes are significantly shared within a party is that all its candidates share the same party brand label. Political psychologists have found that the image a voter has of a party in turn affects the image that the voter has of any candidate running under that party label, even in the presence of contradictory information about that candidate.5 This occurs because a party’s brand label serves as an “information shortcut” that voters use when assessing candidates.6 When voters feel more positively about the party generally, this positive feeling transfers to each of that party’s candidates. Conversely, when voters feel more negatively about the party, this negativity weighs upon each of that party’s candidates. From the perspective of the reelection-oriented member of Congress, the most important scholarly finding is that citizens are more likely to vote to reelect a member of Congress when they are feeling more positively towards that member’s party and/or when they are feeling more negatively towards the


challenger’s party, all else being equal. This finding holds equally true in both House and Senate contests.\(^7\)

The dynamics of the 2014 election illustrate that even over a short period of time, when party brands shift, the vote in the average congressional district shifts in tandem. Specifically, the Associated Press sponsored two election polls during the fall of 2014, one in the last week of September and one three weeks later in October. Between these two polls, the percentage of Americans with a favorable rating of the Democratic Party dropped from 47 percent to 42 percent. Over the course of these same two surveys, the average reported vote intention in the House race shifted from an even split between the two parties to a six point Republican advantage.

In addition to reelection, members also desire influence within Congress. There are two main factors that determine how much influence a member has in Congress. One is longevity. While the seniority principle is no longer sacrosanct, in general it is the case that longer-serving members are more likely to ascend to leadership positions within the committee system and within their own party. Of course, the key to longevity in Congress is making sure you continue to get reelected. In this regard, members concerned with influence have the same incentive as reelection-minded members do to care about the status of party brands.

Perhaps more important in determining one’s influence in Congress is whether or not one’s party is the majority in the chamber. The House of Representatives is so dominated by the majority party that when the Republicans control the House, even the lowliest member of that party probably has more influence over legislation than does the most powerful Democrat. This

\(^7\) David R. Jones, "Party Brands and Partisan Tides" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 22-25, 2010).
general pattern of outsized influence for members of the majority party is replicated within the committee system as well. For a significant number of members, a change in which party controls the chamber means the difference between being either the powerful Chair of a committee or subcommittee, or the comparatively toothless Ranking Minority Member.

Majority status also affects a member’s influence in the Senate, though perhaps to a lesser extent than in the House. A dramatic illustration of this fact took place in May of 2001, when Republican Senator Jim Jeffords announced that he would caucus with the Democrats, thereby flipping control of the narrowly divided chamber. Upon hearing the news, Republican Senator Charles Grassley openly wept, because he knew he would lose his chairmanship of the Senate Finance Committee.\(^8\)

These facts demonstrate why members of Congress who care about influence are concerned not only about their own electoral fortunes, but also those of their fellow partisans running for seats in the same chamber. Since each individual member’s chances for reelection are influenced by party brands, it is not surprising to find that party brands also affect the overall number of seats a party can expect to win in an election. A study of thirty postwar elections in the House of Representatives finds that a one-point increase in the percentage of Americans with a favorable rating of the Democratic Party produces a gain of about three and a half Democratic seats, and a one-point increase in favorability towards the Republican Party produces a loss of about two Democratic seats.\(^9\) Put simply, parties win more seats in Congress when their party brand is rated more favorably, and when the opposing party’s brand is rated less favorably.


In an era of closely divided chambers, the loss of even a handful of seats can mean the difference between majority and minority status.  

Senate Democrats learned this lesson the hard way during the 2014 election cycle. In early September, survey–based projections of every individual Senate race by HuffPost Pollster showed that Democrats were favored in enough races to retain narrow control of the chamber. But as September turned to October, the poll numbers for many Democratic candidates for Senate around the country began to sink almost in tandem. Within the span of less than two weeks, Democratic leads in Arkansas, Alaska, and Colorado all shifted to tied races, then to Republican leads. Eventually, all three of these key races were won by Republican candidates, flipping control of the chamber from Democrats to Republicans.

Many other Democrats in less competitive races saw their poll numbers decline as well. While it is impossible to be certain what the common element in these races was that turned the tide against each Democrat, the timing coincides nearly precisely with a similar decline in overall favorability ratings for the Democratic Party. Polls from the Associated Press, Gallup, Fox News, and ABC/Washington Post all showed a drop in public favorability towards Democrats during this election period. In theory, if the Democratic Party had been able to maintain the higher level of favorability that it held in early September, Democrats might have retained control of the Senate majority—and their committee and subcommittee chair positions.

The third goal that members of Congress hold is for government policy to reflect their own views. Members are, of course, more able to shape public policy when they win reelection—thus securing at least a vote on legislation. In addition to this, members who are interested in public policy outcomes also need to be concerned with whether their own party

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11 Polling data and race projections can be found at elections.huffingtonpost.com.
holds a majority in in each chamber of Congress. House Speaker Paul Ryan, made this point during the 2016 election when he warned of the different reception that budget bills from the House would get in the Senate depending on which party won control of that chamber:

*If we keep control of the Senate in the Republican hands...a nice guy named Mike Enzi from Wyoming is the Senate budget chair and he helps us get these budgets to the president’s desk, gets these tax bills through. ...If we lose the Senate, do you know who becomes chair of the Senate Budget Committee? A guy named Bernie Sanders.*

Academic studies support this same point about the policy importance of chamber control. In both the House and the Senate, when Democrats have a majority, a greater percentage of the bills that pass would move policy to the left ideologically, and when Republicans have the majority, a greater percentage of bills that pass would move policy to the right. Therefore, anything that affects party control of Congress will also affect the policy output of Congress.

But government policies are not determined by Congress alone. At least equally important is the occupant of the White House. In 2015, congressional Republicans were able to use their majority status to pass bills to approve the Keystone XL pipeline and to repeal Obamacare in both the House and Senate. However, President Obama was able to prevent achievement of these policy goals through the use of his veto power. Furthermore, President

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Obama was able to use executive actions and orders to implement other policy changes supported by Democrats and opposed by Republicans, including protecting certain undocumented immigrants from being deported, and raising the minimum wage for federal contractors. As these examples show, members of Congress are much more likely to achieve their policy goals when they have a president from their own party.

Because party control of the presidency is crucial for accomplishing policy goals, members of Congress have an incentive to try to affect the outcome of presidential elections. Two years before the 2012 presidential election, the Republicans’ Leader in the Senate, Mitch McConnell, was very upfront about this fact, stating,

some have said it was indelicate of me to suggest that [Senate Republicans’] top political priority over the next two years should be to deny President Obama a second term in office. But the fact is, if our primary legislative goals are to repeal and replace the health spending bill; to end the bailouts; cut spending; and shrink the size and scope of government, the only way to do all these things it is to put someone in the White House who won’t veto any of these things.\(^\text{14}\)

In corresponding fashion, Democrats had an equally strong policy motivation to try to help ensure that President Obama remained in office.

Since members of Congress have a policy incentive to care about presidential elections, this also means that they have yet another reason to care about the popularity of the Democratic and Republican Party brands. Research shows that even after accounting for factors such as an individual’s party identification and their evaluation of the nation’s economy, the more favorable

impression people have of the Democratic Party the more likely they are to vote for the Democratic candidate for president, and the more favorable impression they have of the Republican Party the more likely they are to vote for the Republican candidate for president.\textsuperscript{15}

Evidence suggests that a drop in the favorability of the Democratic Party brand may have played a role in Hillary Clinton’s relatively poor performance in the 2016 presidential election. Four years earlier, in 2012, CNN’s final poll before the election showed the Democratic Party with a favorability rating of 52 percent. But in 2016, CNN’s final pre-election measure found the Democratic Party with a favorability rating of only 47 percent—five points lower than in 2012. This decline in the Democratic Party’s favorability rating was reflected in a similar drop in its nominee’s popular vote margin: in 2012 the Democratic nominee outpolled the Republican by four points, but in 2016 this margin was cut in half to only two points. Although two points may not seem like a big difference, in this instance the loss of votes was enough that it probably cost Hillary Clinton a victory in the Electoral College.\textsuperscript{16}

Overall, members of Congress have multiple reasons to care about the public’s impression of each party’s brand. A more favorable brand for one’s own party or a less favorable brand for the opposition party can improve the chances that a member will win reelection, attain more power within the chamber, and achieve cherished policy goals. If there are ways that members can act to affect the parties’ brand reputations, we have good reason to expect that they will attempt to do so.


\textsuperscript{16} If Clinton had performed only one point better in every state, she would have won the Electoral College vote, 278-260. If she had performed two points better in every state, she would have won 307-231.
How Members Affect Party Brands

Our brand’s been battered over the past year and a half ... by a lot of these people [in my party]. ...They're political amateurs. I had some good friends, good friends, who were at the center of this shutdown strategy. I disagreed with them not because of ideology, just because of dumb tactics.17

–Former Republican U.S. Representative Joe Scarborough, November 2013

The image that Americans have of a party are formed, to a significant degree, by impressions they have of the representatives of that party serving in Congress and (if applicable) in the White House. While some of these impressions are shaped by national and world events that are largely out of control of these political actors, others are clearly shaped by their own choices. In turn, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, the choices these actors make are sometimes dominated by narrow calculations about the actor’s own constituency and personal preferences, but at other times may factor in broader considerations about effects on party brands.

In this section, I focus on two general dimensions of party brands that can be shaped by the choices members of Congress make.18 First, a party’s brand is affected by the degree to which that party seems competent in running the branches of government that it controls. Therefore, parties have an incentive to act in ways that protect their own reputation for competence and impugn that of the opposing party. Second, a party’s brand is stronger when the

17 Quoted during his appearance on NBC’s Meet the Press, November 10, 2013.

18 This is not meant to be an exclusive list.
issue positions associated with its representatives in office are more popular among the general public. Therefore, a party has an incentive to promote certain issues and craft specific narratives that give it a relative advantage over the opposing party.

Party Competence

For many Americans, politics is too complicated or uninteresting enough to follow closely. They don’t have a well-defined ideology or even strong positions on many issues. In many respects, these Americans may not be interested in how government decides to address the nation’s problems so much as in whether it does so. They want to know: is government effective at its job—in other words, is government competent? Not coincidentally, two variables that best explain variation in party brand favorability are the degree to which Americans approve of the job the president is doing and the job Congress is doing. The president is the most salient representative of his party, and thus plays an outsized role in shaping its brand reputation.19 Stronger presidential approval helps the favorability of the party in the White House and, to a lesser extent, harms the favorability of the nonpresidential party. Reflecting the public’s implicit understanding that the majority party largely controls Congress, stronger congressional approval substantially helps the favorability of majority parties, but provides only a minimal boost to minority parties.20 As such, each party has an incentive to try to maintain a reputation for competence in running the branches of government it controls, and to harm the opposing party’s reputation for competence in running the branches it controls.

19 See Frances E. Lee, Beyond ideology: politics, principles, and partisanship in the US Senate (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

20 Jones, “Partisan Polarization.”
There are two main clues the public uses to assess competence in government. One is the public’s impressions of the functional competence of a government entity: can it successfully perform the basic tasks and responsibilities of its job? The other is the public’s impressions of the outcome effectiveness of government: is society better off or worse off? While these two indicators sometimes go hand in hand, this does not necessarily have to be the case: government can be humming along smoothly, but outcomes nevertheless turn sour; government can be at a standstill, but without serious impact on outcomes.

Research is consistent with the idea that functional competence in government is an important component of party brand reputations. When the president is successful in achieving his legislative goals, public approval of the president increases. Approval of Congress may also increase when a larger portion of the legislative agenda passes. In turn, the functional competence of each branch is likely to affect the brand of the party controlling that branch. For example, when Americans give Congress a low grade for “tackling key issues” they are significantly less favorable towards the majority party in Congress. However, favorability towards the minority party does not decline, indicating that the public does not view the minority as responsible for congressional shortcomings in this regard.

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22 Sarah A. Binder, *Stalemate: Causes and consequences of legislative gridlock* (Brookings Institution Press, 2004); but see David R. Jones, "Do major policy enactments affect public evaluations of Congress? The case of health care reform." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2013): 185-204. For a theory of congressional parties that is based on this notion, see Cox and McCubbins, *Setting the Agenda*.

One crucial test of a party’s functional competence in office is its ability to pass key legislation to keep the government running. In particular, Congress is responsible for appropriating funds to pay for government operations, and increasing the debt ceiling (when necessary) to allow such payments to be made. These are minimum requirements for governance, because if they are not done, the government shuts down. Whenever a party that has control over one branch or chamber is viewed as refusing to live up to its responsibility in this area, this has the potential to affect its reputation for competent governance.

A good example of the importance of functional competence for party brands occurred during the government shutdown and debt limit crises of October 2013. Congress faced a deadline of October 1 to either pass regular appropriations bills or a stopgap continuing resolution to fund government operations. It also faced a second deadline of October 17 to raise or suspend the federal debt ceiling; otherwise the government would begin to default on its debt obligations. As the first deadline approached in late September without a regular budget, the Republican-controlled House passed a bill on September 20 to continue spending at current levels, but with an added provision defunding the president’s health care law, the Affordable Care Act (ACA, or “Obamacare”). This House bill was supported by all but one Republican and opposed by all but two Democrats. Immediately, Senate Democrats and President Obama made clear that they would support only a “clean” continuing resolution without any special provisions rolling back Obamacare. On September 27, the Democratic-controlled Senate passed a clean continuing resolution, stripped of the anti-Obamacare amendment. This Senate bill was supported by every Democrat and opposed by every voting Republican. The Republican leadership in the House refused to bring the Senate bill to the floor for an up or down vote.
Without any new funding authority, the government entered a shutdown on October 1. All but the most critical federal government operations were forced to stop.

The failure to avert a government shutdown had a dramatic effect on party brands—particularly for the Republican Party. A Gallup poll conducted during the first week of the shutdown found favorable views of the Republican Party had fallen ten points since the month before the shutdown, to 28 percent—the lowest level for either party since Gallup began measuring party favorability in 1992. The Democratic Party’s favorable rating also fell during the same period, but only by four points, to 43 percent. The larger impact on Republicans can be attributed to the fact that the Democratic-controlled Senate and White House appeared willing to continue the status quo to keep government operating, while the Republican-controlled House appeared more concerned with its anti-Obamacare position. Accordingly, polling during this period shows that a majority of Americans blamed the shutdown specifically on congressional Republicans.

This negative effect of the 2013 shutdown on the Republican Party brand helps explain why the Republican leadership ultimately reversed course on this issue, despite opposition from its own rank and file membership. On October 16, House Speaker John Boehner brought to the floor a bill to fund the government at current levels into early 2014 without any substantial concessions on Obamacare, and to temporarily suspend the debt limit—almost exactly what

President Obama had been requesting from the beginning. News coverage of this event made clear that the overriding reason the Republican leadership changed its tune was that it viewed its responsibility not simply as supporting its members’ immediate policy positions, but also as protecting the party’s overall reputation from further damage.²⁶ Passing this bill served to minimize the damage by removing the issue from the agenda, allowing Congress to move on to topics that were more favorable for Republicans. Indeed, by early December 2013, Republicans had already gained back half of the drop in favorability that they experienced in the Gallup poll during the shutdown.

So searing was the lesson learned from the shutdown, the Republican leadership was determined to avoid a similar scenario occurring in proximity to a national election. In late October 2015, Speaker Boehner sent to a floor a two-year budget bill that increased spending limits and suspended the debt limit until after the 2016 election. A key Boehner ally, Representative Tom Cole, explained the logic: “The most important thing we can do for the Republican presidential nominee is to…make sure we're not talking about government shutdowns and cliffs and crises while the American people are making their final decision on who ought to be the next president.”²⁷ It is impossible to know for certain what effect this strategic decision had on the election. But given how close the results were—and how damaging the 2013 shutdown was to the Republican brand—it seems entirely possible that it did help clear a path for Donald Trump to capture the White House.


Just as functional competence is an important component of party brands, so is outcome effectiveness. This component is particularly important for the president’s party. Rightly or wrongly, the American public views the president as the person in government who is most responsible for the nation’s wellbeing, particularly regarding economic prosperity and physical security. When outcomes in these areas are viewed as unacceptable, the president’s approval rating suffers, especially on topics that are salient to Americans.\(^\text{28}\) Since the president’s ratings affect his party’s overall brand, members of Congress from the party that does not control the White House have an incentive to raise the public profile of national problems that the president has not been effective in “solving”—regardless of whether or not the president is really responsible for these problems.

The issue of the Ebola virus provides a good example of members of Congress emphasizing problematic outcomes in order to depress the presidential party’s brand. On September 30, 2014, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) announced the first human Ebola case in the United States. Congressional Republicans and Republicans running for Congress quickly seized on this news and began to mention the issue prominently in their public statements, emphasizing President Obama’s failure to keep Americans safe.\(^\text{29}\) In turn, research shows that “media coverage increased as candidates commented about Ebola.”\(^\text{30}\) In contrast, congressional Democrats seemed to hope the issue would go away if they just ignored it.


According to a study of congressional newsletters in this period, 82 percent of the newsletters mentioning Ebola came from Republican members of Congress while only 18 percent came from Democrats. The study concluded that “recent Ebola anxiety was driven by partisan politics.”³¹ A similar partisan pattern emerged in terms of congressional hearing activity. Despite being in the middle of the campaign season—when members typically prefer to be in their districts—the Republican-controlled House of Representatives convened two separate congressional hearings in October to investigate the Obama administration’s handling of Ebola. No Ebola hearings were held in the Democratic-controlled Senate until after the election.

Polling data suggest that Republican efforts to promote the idea that Ebola was a grave failure of the Obama administration were effective in damaging Democrats’ brand image. Before the deluge of Republican rhetoric and activity on Ebola in October, a September Gallup poll found the Democratic Party with a slight edge in favorability over the Republican Party, 42 to 40 percent. By early November, Gallup reported that favorability towards the Democratic Party had dropped six points to 36 percent—its lowest level ever in Gallup polling. Over the same period, in contrast, the Republican Party’s brand favorability edged up two points to 42 percent—the first time in over three years it rated more highly than the Democratic Party’s brand. In its analysis, Gallup explicitly cited public perceptions of the Obama administration’s handling of the Ebola issue as one clear cause of Democrats’ relative decline.³²


As each of these examples demonstrates, members of Congress strategically adjust their behavior vis-à-vis the president in an effort to try to lower the salience of issues that could damage their party’s reputation for competent governance, and raise the salience of issues that could damage the opposing party’s reputation for competent governance.

*Party Issue Alignment*

While it is often easier for Americans to evaluate parties on the basis of functional competence and outcome effectiveness, the public also cares about the actual policy positions advocated by each party. Research shows that the greater the distance between a citizen’s ideological position and that of congressional Republicans, the less favorable that citizen is towards them. Similarly, the further a citizen is from congressional Democrats, the less favorable she is towards them.33 Because most Americans are relatively moderate ideologically, parties that care about the popularity of their brand need to avoid a reputation for ideologically extreme positions. Historical data on party brands demonstrates that since the 1950s, the more conservative the average congressional Republican is, the lower the favorability of the Republican Party; and the more liberal the average congressional Democrat is, the lower the favorability of the Democratic Party.34 As a result, whenever a policy problem gets onto the public agenda, members of Congress have an incentive to try to ensure that their policy response appears mainstream, at least relative to the opposing party’s position.

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34 Jones, “Party Brand Images”. 
There are a couple of different ways that parties can affect how reasonable their policy positions, and those of the opposing party, appear to the public. Each of these techniques takes into account the fact that most Americans are not policy experts. The public possesses a limited capacity and desire for learning about and processing nuanced policy arguments. Instead, Americans are more likely to make up their minds about the wisdom of a particular policy option based on simple cues they receive from the parties. Party leaders understand this, and their brand-management strategies account for it. When the parties do battle over policy, they are not simply choosing policy positions, they are also defining for the public what the central issue at stake is, and what each position means in a publicly digestible way.

One way parties can send easily interpretable cues to citizens about the reasonableness of a policy option is to shoehorn the current policy problem into an existing narrative or stereotype that the public already identifies with a party. Each party prefers a narrative that taps into something that the public already likes or trusts about it, or dislikes or distrusts about the opposition. It is possible to illustrate such techniques by returning to the Ebola case discussed earlier.

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36 On this point, see Lee, Beyond Ideology.

37 This is similar to the theory of “issue ownership”, which argues that the public trusts the Republican Party to handle certain issues, like national defense, and the Democratic Party to handle other issues, such as education policy, and therefore elections are largely about each party trying to force the conversation onto grounds that it already knows are more favorable to it; John R. Petrocik, "Issue ownership in presidential elections, with a 1980 case study." American journal of political science (1996): 825-850.
Once the Ebola issue was firmly on the public agenda in October 2014, each party tried to define the terms of the debate in a way to make its own position seen reasonable and the opposing party’s position seem extreme. As their proposed policy solution, Republicans in Congress called on president Obama to impose a ban on all travel between the US and the West African countries affected by Ebola. This proposal was useful politically because it shifted the focus of the debate to the topic of border security. If the solution to the Ebola problem was securing the border, this would advantage Republicans because the public traditionally views Republicans as more “tough” than Democrats on border security. Indeed, the travel ban’s focus on borders put congressional Democrats in the awkward position of either agreeing with the proposal (thus implicitly agreeing that the Democratic President had been too weak), or trying to explain why they were still opposed to stricter border controls even during a possible public health crisis (therefore confirming the existing partisan stereotype). Republican rhetoric explicitly played on this stereotype of Democratic weakness on border security. For example, Representative Louie Gohmert suggested that Democrats opposed the ban because it wasn’t “politically correct,” stating, “some of my Democratic friends, including this president, they want everyone to feel included. So [they say], ‘let's don't quarantine, let's don't close our borders.’”

For their part, Democrats—when they felt compelled to comment at all on this issue—sought to shift the debate away from border security and towards a focus on the importance of federal funding for programs to control and prevent diseases. If the solution to the Ebola problem was funding social programs, this would advantage Democrats because Democrats have a

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reputation for supporting social spending programs while Republicans have a reputation for cutting them. Accordingly, Democrats in Congress tried to feed into this partisan stereotype by reminding Americans that Republicans were responsible for budgets which reduced funding for the both CDC and the National Institutes of Health (NIH). For example, during a hearing on Ebola, Democratic Representative Henry Waxman cast blame on Republicans by noting that recent cuts to the CDC and NIH were a result of budget sequestration, “and those who allowed that sequestration to happen by closing the government have to answer to the American people.”  

Ultimately, the parties’ political strategies regarding brand-management probably had an impact on the actual policies put in place by Congress and the White House. Despite Obama’s arguments that travel restrictions were counterproductive, under increasing political pressure from Republicans he eventually imposed some restrictions—for example, requiring passengers originating from affected countries to fly into specific US airports with screening facilities. And, contrary to Republicans’ traditional desire to limit spending on foreign aid, after being attacked by Democrats for not putting their money where their mouth was, Republicans eventually approved more than 3.7 billion dollars in funding for the international response to Ebola.

Besides playing to partisan stereotypes, a second way that parties can send easily interpretable cues to citizens about the reasonableness of a policy option is by affecting the level of bipartisan support for that option. Because most Americans do not follow the details of policy debates, it is not always a policy’s content that they use to judge how well it represents their

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preferences. Instead, particularly for more confusing issues, Americans will often form their judgements about a policy based in part on how their elected officials—who presumably know more about these things—line up for or against it. If a policy proposal produces rancor and disagreement between the two parties in Congress, then the public will view it to be controversial, and therefore likely too extreme or unreasonable. On the other hand, if a policy proposal garners the support of members of both parties, the public will assume that it must be a reasonable, moderate, policy compromise. Members of Congress understand that this is a cognitive shortcut citizens use. Senator Mitch McConnell himself has noted that “when you hang the ‘bipartisan’ tag on something, the perception is that differences have been worked out.”

Not surprisingly then, partisan support or opposition to the president’s policy proposals affects how favorably the public views the president. When the opposition party signals bipartisan support for the president, the public assumes his positions are reasonable and so his favorability ratings tend to rise. When the opposition party signals strong partisan disagreement with the president, the public assumes his policies are unreasonable, and so his favorability ratings tend to fall. (Interestingly, the opposition party in Congress does not appear to suffer any overall decrease in its favorability rating when it disagrees with the president.) Finally, when some members of the president’s own party join the other party in their criticism of the president, signaling bipartisan opposition to the president’s position, the public assumes the policy is even more extreme, and his ratings decline even further. In turn, as discussed earlier, since the


president is the most salient representative of his party, presidential approval ratings are the most important factor determining his party’s brand reputation.

From the perspective of the opposition party, regardless of whether or not they have sincere ideological disagreements with the president or whether they have the numerical strength to defeat his policies, they have an incentive to avoid supporting him so they don’t inadvertently improve his party’s reputation for having reasonable policies. In cases where the opposition party has difficulty disputing the president’s position on its policy merits, it has an incentive to find other non-policy reasons for opposing it (e.g., “now is not the time…”), or to otherwise suppress that issue from the agenda. From the perspective of the president and his party, every effort should be made to coax the opposition into supporting the president, or, absent an explicit vote to the contrary, claim that bipartisan support exists behind closed doors.

One example of this dynamic took place over the issue of an authorization for use of military force (AUMF) against ISIS. In September 2014, Obama announced that he intended to use airstrikes against ISIS in Syria. Significant questions were raised about whether or not the president had the constitutional power to do this based on an old AUMF that pre-dated ISIS. When pressed by reporters about whether new authority was needed, Speaker Boehner originally did not claim otherwise, stating that having Congress vote on a new AUMF “would be in the nation’s interest.” Obama said he would “welcome congressional support”. The question, then, was whether the Republican-controlled House would actually go forward with a vote to explicitly grant him that authority. Based purely on policy considerations, one would expect Republicans to want to do so. Republicans are historically more hawkish on foreign policy than

43 House Speaker Weekly Briefing, September 11, 2014.
44 Presidential speech to the nation, September 10, 2014.
are Democrats, and many Republicans had been repeatedly criticizing Obama for his timidity regarding ISIS.

Despite an AUMF for ISIS seeming to be a good policy fit for Republicans, the Republican leadership steadfastly refused to bring such a measure to the House floor. The stated reasons for this refusal appeared to be somewhat inconsistent. Initially, Boehner said it was not appropriate to do so until the president submitted a formal request to Congress, although having Congress craft its own AUMF was not without precedent. Senate Democrats quickly wrote their own AUMF and reported it out of the Foreign Relations Committee. In February of 2015, Obama did submit a draft AUMF request to Congress, just as Boehner had suggested. Even though Boehner had previously stated that Congress had no role to play in determining the language of the authorization, he now said that he would not call for a vote because the request was not written broadly enough. Meanwhile, in the new Republican-controlled Senate, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell justified not holding a vote by stating that “The president does not have a strategy in place. So it’d be hard to figure out how to authorize a non-strategy.”

Seeming to contradict both himself and Boehner, McConnell later introduced his own broad authorization proposal, but he never brought this bill up for a vote either.

While there are several reasons Republicans might not have wanted to vote on an AUMF for ISIS, one important reason seemed to be a desire to avoid displaying bipartisan support for Obama’s ISIS policy. During this time, polls showed “obvious public ambivalence” regarding the wisdom of Obama’s course of action. If an AUMF bill came to a vote and received

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significant Republican support, the public might infer that Obama’s ISIS policy was more reasonable than they currently did. Both sides in Washington seemed aware of the importance for Obama and the Democrats to have the appearance of bipartisan support. When Obama began bombing in Syria in September, he tried to gloss over Congress’s inaction on AUMF, stating, “I've spoken to leaders in Congress, and I'm pleased that there's bipartisan support for the actions that we're taking.” Later, after sending his AUMF request to Congress, he said he was committed to “working with the Congress to pass a bipartisan authorization.” On the Republican side, during the same time period in which they were declining to hold a vote on any AUMF, they continued to loudly criticize Obama’s policy in the press. This prompted Democratic Representative Marcia Fudge to opine that “the majority doesn’t want to take a stand. They want to complain, and tear down, and talk about the president’s policy. But they don’t want to put forth a policy.” Many media accounts agreed that Republicans’ desire to maintain the ability to criticize Obama’s policy on ISIS played a significant role in the behavior of the Republican leadership regarding AUMF.

This strategy on AUMF appeared to pay dividends for Republicans during the 2016 presidential campaign. Because congressional Republicans were able to avoid putting their Party

on record with a vote for or against AUMF, most of their candidates vying for the nomination—including three sitting Senators and Donald Trump—were able to continue publicly criticizing Obama’s ISIS policy, despite the fact that they offered very little in terms of new proposals.  

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As they interact with the executive branch, members of Congress have multiple ways in which they can influence public favorability towards each party, which in turn impacts elections. As the examples above make clear, competence and issue alignment are two important dimensions of party brands that the public cares about, and which members try to affect.

I conclude this section with a quote illustrating President Obama’s recognition of the power that congressional actors have to shape party brands. Following the 2016 election, Obama was asked why he thought that Hillary Clinton and the rest of his party performed so poorly at the polls. He responded,

*The very deliberate strategy that Mitch McConnell and the Republican Party generally employed during the course of my presidency was effective. What they understood was that, if you embraced…bipartisan achievement, people feel better. And if people feel better, then they feel better about the president’s party, and the president’s party continues [to govern]. [But] if it feels broken, stuck, and everybody is angry, then that hurts the president or the president’s party.*

In Obama’s view, then, brand management strategies pervaded his dealings with Congress, colored public perceptions of his presidency and his party, and ultimately impacted the electoral fortunes of his presumed successor, Hillary Clinton.

Implications for Trump and the 115th Congress

[F]rom a political standpoint...they own it right now. ... Obamacare is the Democrats’ problem. We are gonna take the problem off the shelves for them. We’re doing them a tremendous service by doing it.51

--President-Elect Donald Trump, January 11, 2017

As of this writing, the winner of the 2016 election, Donald Trump, has not yet been sworn in. Nevertheless, in the remainder of this chapter I speculate how concern over party brand reputations may affect inter-branch relations between Trump and the 115th Congress. In many respects, the fundamentals of party brand management—discussed above—should continue to hold true despite the somewhat new cast of characters. Nevertheless, context also matters. There are several contextual factors that could theoretically affect partisan brand management. These include variables such as how polarized the American public is, how personally popular the president is, and how electorally competitive the two parties are.52 One contextual factor that may have the biggest effect on partisan brand management in the 115th Congress is the change from divided to unified party control of the legislative and executive branches.

How does a shift from divided government to unified government affect inter-branch relations with respect to brand management? One obvious change regards the competence dimension of party brands. Under divided government, the public is more likely to view

responsibility for competent governance as being shared between the two parties. The penalty for perceived functional incompetence within Congress on matters such as passing budgets and raising debt limits probably rests somewhat more on the brand of the majority party in Congress—although the president’s party can also suffer a bit of a hit as well. Perceived incompetence on outcomes probably rests more on the shoulders of the president and his party’s brand, but a president may be able to slough off at least some responsibility for outcomes when his party does not control Congress. In contrast, under unified government, one party controls both the legislative and executive branches. Therefore, any functional or outcome failures are much more likely to be borne by that party alone.

This suggests that in the 115th Congress, the incentives faced by each party will change. In addition to Republicans’ continuing need to be concerned about functional competence within Congress, they will now also have to govern in a manner that they calculate is most likely to produce well-received outcomes. And, rather than using their procedural and communications tools to call attention to outcome failures, as they did under President Obama, they will now have an incentive to try to keep any such problems off the public agenda, or otherwise distract from them. Even though President Trump and his fellow Republicans in Congress may not always see eye to eye, they will have an incentive to work together to make government run more effectively. In contrast, Democrats’ strategic position will in some ways benefit from being out

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of the White House. They will finally be unencumbered by the burden of reacting defensively to national problems that appear in the news every day. Instead, they can use their resources—albeit now more limited—to try to draw attention to issues that can be blamed on the Republican-controlled government. When they do so, they can rest assured that any public frustration in this regard is no longer likely to present dangers to the Democratic brand.

Unified government may also affect inter-branch relations in regard to the policy-alignment dimension of party brands. On the one hand, unified government means that the president’s party largely controls the legislative agenda. As such, it can more easily suppress issues on which the party is at a relative disadvantage. On the other hand, under unified government the president’s party in Congress finds it much more difficult to enforce cohesive support for his policy initiatives. This occurs in part because members can get valuable attention from the news media by criticizing a president from their own party. During divided government, in contrast, the president’s party is more cohesive because they face an important common threat in the majority party.54

This too carries important implications for the behavior of congressional parties in the 115th Congress. Democrats may not have as easy a time as they did during the Obama years raising the salience of issues that advantage their party. This may give them fewer opportunities to draw issue contrasts with Republicans that benefit their own brand or damage that of Republicans. Instead, they will have to hope that events in the news will help get these issues onto the public’s radar. For their part, Republicans will face a much greater challenge sticking together as a party. Over the past eight years, Republicans were largely able to define themselves in opposition to Obama without ever having to articulate their own detailed policy positions.

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54 Groeling, When Politicians Attack.
Now without a partisan foil in the White House, Republicans will face the choice of either being associated with a specific Trump policy that may sometimes offend large segments of the public, or disagreeing with Trump, thus signaling to the public that certain Republican policies may be too extreme. In contrast, Democrats will be in a position to steal a page from the Republican playbook of 2009-2010. They can begin to adopt the posture of the “party of no”—uniformly opposing nearly every Trump policy initiative, without having to specify exactly what they would do differently. Adopting this strategy would aid them in making Trump’s policies appear to the public to be overly extreme, just as Republicans previously did to Obama’s agenda.

One policy area in which many of these changes may manifest themselves is Obamacare. In the past, passing stand-alone bills to repeal Obamacare was essentially cost-free for the Republican brand. When Republican leaders put repeal votes on the agenda, this served to remind Americans that health care problems still existed in the country, thus making the Democratic President seem ineffective. When Republicans voted to repeal Obamacare, this helped make Democrats’ passage of it seem more radical. Forcing Obama to veto such bills reinforced the notion that he and his party must be responsible for national healthcare shortcomings. Further, since Obama’s vetoes blocked the repeal from taking effect, the public was not confronted with any consequences of a Republican repeal. But with unified Republican government in place, the strategic environment is fundamentally changed. As Donald Trump’s quote at the start of this section astutely notes, if the Republican Congress and President Trump actually repeal Obamacare, the Republican Party will begin to “own” healthcare outcomes in the United States. If premiums rise, or health insurance businesses falter, or people lose their healthcare, it will be the Republican Party’s reputation for competence that will suffer, not that of Democrats. From a policy perspective, if Democrats participated constructively in crafting a
replacement, this might benefit many of their core constituencies. But from the perspective of party brands, Democrats have no incentive to help Republicans craft a replacement. Unified Democratic opposition to any new health care replacement proposed by Republicans would hurt only the GOP brand.

Overall, unified government may prove to be a mixed blessing for the GOP. The Party is certainly in an enviable position in terms of its ability to shape public policy. But in terms of brand management, unified government also presents some big challenges for Republicans. If congressional Democrats are strategically savvy, although they will lose many policy battles over the next two years, they could succeed in tarnishing the Republican brand. And by doing so, they may help engineer a Democratic Party resurgence in 2018.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to highlight and illustrate a few important observations about how and why party brands affect presidential-congressional relations. First, members have goals besides their own reelection, and this includes an interest in the electability of fellow partisans in their own chamber, in the opposite chamber, and in the Oval Office. Second, members explicitly view their choices in Congress and their interactions with the president in part through the lens of party brands, perceiving the possible effect of these choices on each party’s collective reputation for competent governance and reasonable policy stances. Third, members believe they can make strategic decisions regarding their choices—sometimes counter to their core ideology—in an effort to help their party achieve its shared goals. Finally, different political contexts can alter how easy or difficult it is for members of a party to shape party brand images to their benefit. In particular, unified government may in certain respects provide more brand-management
problems for the president’s party, and greater opportunities for the out-party. What lies ahead under a Trump presidency with Republican control of both houses of Congress remains to be seen. But while the capture of unified control of government by the GOP may be seen as a huge victory by some, in terms of party brand management it may well be a curse.
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