

BOOK REVIEW

Tim Groeling. *When Politicians Attack: Party Cohesion in the Media*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2010. 256 pp. \$89.00 (cloth). \$30.00 (paper).

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The past two decades have seen a lot of creative scholarly thinking about the role of the news media in American politics. What makes this research area so vibrant is that authors have moved beyond earlier studies that explained the behavior of the political press by only emphasizing social norms, the structure of new organizations, or even the personal virtue of journalists. Despite being important advances in their time and interesting to read, this work produced a fairly static understanding of press behavior. Subsequent work, like research on “indexing” (e.g., Bennett 1990; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2007), John Zaller’s “Theory of Media Politics” (1999), James Hamilton’s *All the News That’s Fit to Sell* (2004), Baum and Groeling’s *War Stories* (2010), and Groeling’s *When Politicians Attack*, has moved into exciting new territory.

In different ways and to different degrees, this new research takes an approach that, for lack of a better term, we could label soft rational choice. Although these authors do not present formal game theoretic models of the interaction between journalists, politicians, and the public,¹ they do consider how these actors struggle with one another to achieve their goals. Because these goals often conflict, each actor is constrained in ways that can produce predictable patterns. *When Politicians Attack* is one of the most important of these new works.

Like most of this wave of research, *When Politicians Attack* integrates scholarship in multiple areas. The book is as much about Congress, political parties, and the separation of powers as it is about the news media. It has much to teach scholars in each of these fields.

After a brief introduction, the first chapter explains the incentives that congressional parties face when executing their communication strategies. Relying on Cox and McCubbins’s (2007) seminal work, Groeling argues that

1. Other recent work does present game theoretic models of news media behavior (e.g., Baron 2006; Bovitz, Druckman, and Lupia 2002; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006).

congressional parties want to cultivate compelling party brands. A brand's reputation is enhanced when its national officeholders present a unified policy message and avoid criticizing each other. However, a party faces a collective action problem in that some of its officeholders could benefit from differentiating themselves. Groeling explains this with an extended analogy to McDonald's, where individual franchises might benefit from differentiation but all franchises benefit from the brand being uniform, predictable, and associated with positive traits like fast service and clean restaurants.

The next two chapters examine press coverage of congressional rhetoric about the president and his policies. Chapter 2 lays out a theory and several specific predictions. Like Zaller (1999), Groeling presents his theory in a fairly structured way, with a series of axioms followed by the empirical predictions they imply. The axioms posit that the press will give preference to "novelty," "conflict," "balance," and "authority" in making coverage decisions. This leads to the prediction that congressional rhetoric is most likely to be covered when the opposition party criticizes the president and moderately likely to be covered when the president is criticized by his own party or praised by the opposition. Rhetoric in which the president's party praises him provides neither "novelty," "conflict," "balance," nor "authority," and thus should get little attention.

Chapter 3 tests these predictions with two data sets: one for which the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) coded partisan rhetoric on every network newscast in 1981, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, and 2001, and another for which Groeling and Matthew Baum coded every congressional evaluation of the president on the ABC and NBC evening newscasts in the 30 days before and after each deployment of U.S. military forces between 1979 and 2003. Though these data sets have gaps, they are still great resources, among the best ever used in an academic study of this kind. And to the extent that these data sets have limitations, they generally work against Groeling's predictions, producing a "hard test," which his theory generally passes. The data reveal far more coverage of congressional comments by the opposition than by the president's party. Among both parties, criticism of the president receives more coverage than praise, but this is especially true for the opposition. Groeling also uses a variety of strategies to measure the universe of congressional commentary and finds, consistent with his theory, that the patterns found earlier in the chapter are created largely by the news media's coverage decisions.

The next chapter focuses on the communication challenges faced by the president's party in Congress. It opens with several vivid qualitative examples of how congressional parties work as teams on communication strategies to increase their party's popularity. Groeling finds that, in the CMPA data, both congressional parties receive coverage during unified government. But, in divided government, almost all coverage focuses on the opposition party. Following up on this, a content analysis of 1980–2007 ABC evening news transcripts finds that the nonpresidential party is almost always covered more, but the difference

is larger when it is in the majority. The accumulated evidence suggests that journalists make it very difficult for the president's congressional party to mount an effective communication strategy.

Chapter 5 examines the effect of congressional rhetoric on presidential approval. Groeling predicts, based on a careful review of the existing literature, that the public will be persuaded by congressional comments when the speaker either goes against his or her political interests or shares the news consumer's predispositions. Thus, people will be relatively more influenced by their own party, as well as whenever the opposition party praises the president or the president's party criticizes him. Using the CMPA and Baum and Groeling data sets first introduced in Chapter 3, aggregate time-series models testing the relationship between different types of congressional rhetoric and presidential approval support these predictions. Groeling follows this up with two laboratory experiments, where students were randomly assigned to read different congressional rhetoric embedding in news reports. As with the observational data, the experimental results support the importance of common predispositions and speaking against one's interest in enhancing persuasion.

Chapter 6 discusses the implications of Groeling's argument for the "party government" literature and the related debate over the consequences of divided-versus-unified government. Groeling emphasizes the disadvantages for the president and his party of holding majorities in Congress. Because of journalists' behavior, divided government allows the president's party a better chance to execute an effective communication strategy. In support of this conclusion, the chapter presents a detailed qualitative description of the 1995–96 congressional term as a case study, and presents evidence from the CMPA data set indicating that the types of rhetoric that are most harmful to the president are more prevalent during united government.

In Chapter 7, Groeling considers whether there is any solution to the dilemma that "[i]nstitutional power often begets communication weakness" (p. 95). He suggests three ways to possibly change this dynamic: by each party becoming more ideologically unified, by returning to a 19th-century-style partisan media, or by parties communicating directly with the public through new media technologies. He indicates that the latter two may be promising routes.

Like most scholarship that tackles interesting questions in creative ways, this book left me hungry for more. Specifically, I look forward to future work that integrates this book's argument with several related political science literatures. First, I wonder how these results can be integrated into the vast voting and elections literature, which tends to emphasize fundamentals such as economic conditions and war casualties, as well as (in congressional elections) the quality of the candidates running for each party, while not giving much attention to partisan congressional communication strategies. Second, I hope future work will integrate these results with models of thermostatic tendencies and mass preferences. The popularity of the president and his party's electoral fortunes tend to degrade as policy moves toward his preferences, creating a cyclical

political dynamic at the macro-level (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Wlezien 1995). Can some portion of these thermostat tendencies be attributed to the communication dynamics documented in this book? Third, I wonder how one's interpretation of these results might change if one's definition of party changed. This book generally treats "the party" as equivalent to the officeholders of that party, following Aldrich (1995). But a recent stream of research instead conceptualizes a party as a coalition of interest groups that have policy demands (Bawn et al. 2011; Cohen et al. 2008; Noel 2011). If one defines a party in this later way, would united government really be bad for "the party" if it lost popularity and unity but still moved policy substantially toward its coalition members' preferences before gridlock returned? (The 1965–66 and 2009–10 congressional terms might be examples of this.) I look forward to Groeling and/or other researchers exploring some of these questions in future work.

Finally, I note that this book should prove quite useful in the classroom. It is clearly written and organized. It contains engaging prose and many vivid examples to illustrate its argument. It would be a good choice for graduate classes or advanced undergraduate classes on political communication, parties, or Congress.

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