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***When Politicians Attack! Party Cohesion in the Media*, by Tim Groeling**

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When Politicians Attack! Party Cohesion in the Media, by Tim Groeling. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 242 pp. \$28.99 paper.

Reviewed by C. DANIELLE VINSON

Partisanship is inescapable in news coverage of American politics today, whether it is party leaders in Congress holding dueling press conferences or the president chiding members of the opposing party for not working with the White House to solve pressing problems. With his book *When Politicians Attack! Party Cohesion in the Media*, Tim Groeling goes a long way toward providing a roadmap to understand partisan talk and parties' efforts to create a brand name for themselves, and he identifies a somewhat surprising challenge for party unity—being the president's party, especially in unified government.

Employing the useful analogy of the party as franchise, Groeling clearly explains the challenge for parties: get the individuals who are elected under the party name (the franchisees) to communicate in ways that will help the collective party (franchise). Of course, the problem as Groeling notes is that parties do not often have the kind of strong controls that a franchise has to enforce the party line, and individual politicians often have good reasons for defecting from the party's preferred messages (attacking the other party or praising one's own party). Given the variety of partisan messages that can be communicated, Groeling creates a theoretical framework to describe, explain, and predict what messages are covered by the media and their impact on the public.

The data for Groeling's research come primarily from two content analyses of network television news. One is a data set he compiled with Matthew Baum on network coverage following rally events involving U.S. military action that codes congressional evaluations of the president. The other is a data set from the Center for Media and Public Affairs that "codes every evaluation of or by a partisan figure" on network evening news during six selected years from 1981 to 2001.

Beginning with what messages are covered, Groeling's theory relies both on what messages partisans are most likely to communicate (praise for their own party or criticism of the other) and on what the media find most newsworthy—authoritative sources, balance (the need for both parties or two sides of an issue), conflict (criticism), and novelty (intraparty criticism or interparty praise). In presidential coverage, Groeling finds that criticism of the president is most prevalent, even within his own party and despite substantial support for the president from his party in legislative votes. The author demonstrates that while criticism of the president by his own party increases when his approval ratings decline, praise by his party does not increase when approval increases, suggesting that the media prefer to cover the intraparty criticism even when intraparty praise is available. There are other potential explanations for the abundance of presidential criticism by the president's party,

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including the possibility that members of Congress may have little incentive to expend the effort to get coverage to praise the president, especially in unified government when they are fairly confident legislation will pass and be signed. Only the members who oppose the president may feel the need to voice their position publicly. But the presence of competing explanations does not undermine Groeling's argument because they result in the same outcome—a disproportionate focus on criticism of the president.

To determine the effect of this partisan talk, Groeling examines the impact of the partisan messages from the content analysis on presidential approval ratings of independents, the president's copartisans, and respondents from the opposing party. While controlling for a number of variables that are associated with approval, he finds that partisan messages matter. More importantly, he demonstrates that the credibility of the source (whether the politician shares the respondent's party) and the cost of the message (whether it is counter to the party's preferred message) influence the effectiveness of the communication. Costly talk (intraparty criticism and interparty praise) has a significant effect on approval. Cheap talk (intraparty praise and interparty criticism) has the opposite effect than it intends on independents and respondents who do not share the source's party. And each party's messages have more of an impact on their own partisans' disapproval of the president than on those of the other party.

Perhaps the most intriguing finding of the book is that unified government poses the greatest challenge to the coherent communications of the president's party. With the president being a focal point for government, his party is often the subject of criticism and is at a disadvantage when communicating because the president himself satisfies the media's need for a spokesperson for that party, making it difficult for congressional members of his party to gain coverage unless it is to criticize their own party. At the same time, the opposing party becomes more newsworthy regardless of its minority status as a balance to the president, and because it has a common enemy and little institutional power during unified government, it tends to be quite united in its criticism of the president's party. In contrast, during divided government, the president's party finds it easier to unite against a common opponent in the form of the opposing majority party in Congress.

Although this book was completed only a year into the Obama administration, I was struck with how well the theory seems to explain and predict the partisan communication patterns that have taken place thus far in the Obama presidency and through the recent shifts from unified to divided government. The book raises important issues about how parties communicate to maintain power and the challenges they face in doing so.

This book has little in the way of weaknesses. There are, however, areas in which scholars could expand the research going forward. First, the data focus exclusively on network television news. One must wonder if the findings would hold up in other types of media—especially more partisan venues like cable television news, talk radio, and Internet communication, including social media. Groeling does consider some of these media in his conclusions and suggests that the partisan media particularly may allow parties to cope with the problems that mainstream media pose for communication. Partisan outlets may be more amenable to intraparty praise, at least from the party the media outlet supports, and online communications and social media may allow partisans to bypass media filters entirely and communicate whatever messages they like directly to citizens. On the other hand, the pundits on these partisan networks are often a source of intraparty criticism, and thus they may also exacerbate the problems of competing messages within a party. This question certainly merits attention as scholars build upon the solid foundation Groeling has provided.

A second area ripe for further research is the range of partisan communications that were not included in the study. The author readily admits that he focuses on a small portion of the available partisan messages, looking only at messages from members of Congress and the president. He does not include messages from interest groups, other political activists, or partisan political commentators. As he notes, the types of partisan messages he examines are the ones that should be most likely to support the party franchise, making these the toughest cases in which to find intraparty discord or cross-party praise. But given what he does find about the prevalence of this costly partisan talk and the potential impact it has on the public, scholars going forward will want to expand their consideration to other types of partisan messages.

When Politicians Attack provides a well-written account and explanation of partisan messages in the news. Groeling has created a clear theoretical framework for analyzing partisan communication and its impact that can be applied well beyond the messages and media he has chosen to study. He presents his theory and findings in a systematic way that scholars will find useful and students and laypeople will find accessible and interesting. The book is an excellent and much needed addition to the field of partisan political communication.