

Minority Opposition and Asymmetric Parties? Senators' Partisan Rhetoric on Twitter

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Annelise Russell¹ 

Abstract

Hyper-partisanship in Congress extends from the legislative process into lawmakers' strategic communications, but some partisans are leaning into the political rhetoric. Previous research offers competing explanations for this partisan rhetoric—one ascribed to Republicans' asymmetric record of heightened partisan politics and another to minority party status within Congress. I investigate these different explanations in the context of congressional social media activity to examine how these competing theories of partisan rhetoric work when explicitly considering the use of partisan labels. I examine senators' tweets over three Congresses and find support for an asymmetric model of partisan rhetoric; however, minority status relative to the White House and leadership roles bolster this effect. In addition, ideological extremism may explain senators' willingness to use partisan communication to attack political opponents on social media. These findings expand the scope of existing theories of partisan communication and broadly speak to the intersection of power and party.

Keywords

Congress, Twitter, polarization, asymmetry, partisanship

The U.S. Senate was once thought to be above majority party politics, but senators' increased messaging suggests party signals and political rhetoric are the norm (Gelman 2019; Lee 2009; Russell 2018a; Theriault 2013). But not all senators are playing the same political game. Some elected officials are partisan warriors, chastising, and attacking partisan opponents (Lee 2009; Theriault 2013), others are party loyalists who champion the party brand in light of constituent or electoral pressures (Aldrich 1995; Carson, Crespin, and Madonna 2014), and some lawmakers avoid the costs of party politics as much as politically feasible (Carson et al. 2010). The choices that senators make about the role of party politics in their political brand have implications for electability (Carson et al. 2010), negotiation and compromise (Binder and Lee 2015), and political power within the institution (Fenno 1978). These choices now play out in senators' public communication, as the normalization of social media platforms, like Twitter, offers a new and useful tool for explaining partisan priorities in Congress.

Previous studies of congressional communication and partisanship offer two explanations for why some senators are more likely to communicate partisan cues, both targeting the other party and bolstering their own party's success on Twitter. One line of research offers an institutional explanation that lawmakers in the minority are

better positioned to use strategic communication (Groeling 2010; Kousser 2019; Maltzman and Sigelman 1996; Morris 2001). And not only do minority members communicate more frequently (Maltzman and Sigelman 1996), they use those communications for partisan rhetoric—relying on partisan messaging strategies to tarnish the majority party's reputation (Lee 2009; Morris 2001). A second explanation stems from the asymmetric patterns of polarization in Congress, suggesting that Republicans have moved further to the right and thus their communication reflects this hyper-partisan shift (Hacker and Pierson 2006; Russell 2018a).

Tweets have changed business in Congress to incentivize rapid responses, limiting time for detail-oriented policies, and, most importantly, enabling connections to voters (Tromble 2018). Lawmakers are making an important connection to the public on social media, and that relationship is framed by lawmakers' political rhetoric. Senators' choices about how and when to make partisan appeals to a digital constituency will shape not only a

¹University of Kentucky, Lexington, USA

Corresponding Author:

Annelise Russell, University of Kentucky, Patterson Office Tower
417, Lexington, KY 40503, USA.
Email: Arussell@uky.edu

lawmaker's style of representation but also the information that citizens have to make informed judgments.

The normalization of Twitter as a platform for lawmakers' public agendas offers an opportunity to assess institutional influences on senators' partisan appeals. This research examines explicit references to political parties and partisan leaders in senators' tweets over three years to better estimate what affects senators' likelihood to integrate party politics into their public relations activities. Using a novel data set of more than 165,000 hand-coded tweets from 2013 to 2017, this research finds support for an asymmetric model of partisan rhetoric; however, minority status relative to the White House and leadership roles bolster this effect. Regardless of a party's status within the chamber, Republican senators and party leaders are more likely to mention party politics on social media (Russell 2018b); however, particularly negative, attacking rhetoric is best explained by minority status relative to the President's party and ideological extremism. Republicans in the majority may become less likely to publicly criticize Democrats, but politics remains a staple when communicating the Republican brand. These findings illuminate how partisan asymmetry and institutional status both shape congressional communication and speak to how Twitter has become a vehicle for projecting partisan communication.

Twitter as a Partisan Platform in Congress

Twitter is just the newest venue for partisan politics as members of Congress have been targeting political opponents and championing party successes in speeches and strategic communication (Morris 2001) long before President Donald Trump expanded the political possibilities of Twitter. Twitter is uniquely positioned to broaden the scope of political rhetoric from the halls of Congress to breaking news on CNN because "DEMOCRATS FAILING" makes for good entertainment and furthers the back-and-forth game between partisans. Twitter is an ideal platform for senators to blame political opponents and send party-specific signals—drawing a wide audience that is low cost in terms of human and fiscal resources. Senators benefit from both discretion over their communications and public access to both elite and constituent audiences. Social media's network of journalists and engaged partisans offers additional appeal because senators can insert party cues into their public-facing agendas where they can communicate as one "of the people" (Tromble 2016, 9). Lawmakers can be less reliant on floor speeches or local journalists to establish a public, partisan record while at the same time reinforcing traditional communication strategies through public promotion. Political jabs at the majority leader or *atta-boys*

for the party's victory in a special election do not require in-depth communication. The ability to reach both a public and elite audience with minimal resources and limited influence has made Twitter a standard communication tool in Congress.

Twitter connects journalists with lawmakers without traditional media norms that often favor high-profile lawmakers or those who wield institutional power, that is, party leaders and committee chairs. Twitter breaks these norms because senators no longer solely rely on invites to cable news because even the lowest ranking senator can contribute to the debate. For example, junior senator Tammy Baldwin from Wisconsin can turn to Twitter to call out the Republicans' actions on health care. She does not need to wait for an invitation to join *Face the Nation* to promote her political agenda.

- @SenatorBaldwin: #ACAisWorking, yet GOP is still obsessed with repealing protections for children with pre-existing conditions.

Twitter is not necessarily an equal sounding board, and some politicians have more Twitter followers—Democratic leader Chuck Schumer has more than a million followers compared to Baldwin's hundred thousand. But all politicians are empowered to direct messages and content that best advertises their political brand, and studies show those messages are likely to increase interactions and dialogue with citizens (Tromble 2016, 2018).

The use of social media—including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram—for political campaigning is studied across global political systems, and increasingly research addresses how Twitter is used in governance (Bruns and Highfield 2012; Evans, Ovalle, and Green 2015; Graham et al. 2013; Honeycutt and Herring 2009; Larsson and Moe 2011; Tromble 2016). The spread of information, political support, and media buzz are all reasons why senators use the platform to connect their partisan priorities with a wider political audience.

Congressional studies of Twitter originally focused on politicians' adoption of Twitter. These studies, which focus primarily on U.S. House members, find that adoption is a game of signaling—as politicians use the platform it sends positive cues to fellow partisans (Chi and Yang 2010; Lassen and Brown 2011; Peterson 2012). As Twitter has become a normalized communication tool, additional research has asked why and how. Gainous and Wagner (2013) offer one of the first assessments of social media as political communication, and they argue that social media is not just a technological advancement but a fundamental shift in the way that people communicate with political institutions and political actors (Gainous and Wagner 2013). They also find variation in that shift. Twitter activity across party, race, and seniority varies,

and the authors find asymmetric patterns of Twitter adoption, with Republicans and incumbents capitalizing on the new platform. This article builds and expands on this work by analyzing the U.S. Senate and studying all senators over an extended period of time to understand how they use Twitter to give partisan cues.

Asymmetric Polarizing Rhetoric

One explanation for the patterns of partisan rhetoric on Twitter is the increasing party polarization and the skewed pattern of extreme partisanship by Republicans. Even before Donald Trump's early morning Twitter habits, Republicans in the Senate have been taking partisan rhetoric to new levels, turning to Twitter to express support for their own party, that is, "#GOPsuccess," and chastise their Democratic counterparts, that is, "Obamacare failures" and "Democrats can blame themselves . . ." (Russell 2018a). This pattern mimics the asymmetric patterns of party polarization in the Senate that suggest Republicans have moved further away from the center than the Democrats. Since the 1970s, party polarization in Congress has only escalated (Hetherington 2001; Levendusky 2009; Thomsen 2014). Scholars link this trend to both shifting, homogenous constituencies (Fleisher and Bond 2000; Hetherington 2001; Levendusky 2009) and to institutional and partisan changes within Congress (Aldrich and Rohde 2001; Cox and McCubbins 2007; Rohde 1991; Theriault 2008). While the trend is widespread, research finds its effects are disproportionately excessive from the political right. The rate of partisan escalation by Republicans is greater relative to their Democratic counterparts (Carmines 2011; Hacker and Pierson 2006; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Hacker and Pierson (2006) suggest the extremism is due to Republican power brokers instead of a steadily shifting conservative public. These party leaders angle for more conservative policy positions and maintain their bargaining position through electoral threats and control of the party agenda (Hacker and Pierson 2006).

Alternative explanations of extreme partisanship suggest that the base of the Republican Party and the party's ideological makeup cultivate partisan positions (Grossman and Hopkins 2016). Democrats are defined by their coalition or are constituent-based compared to ideologically driven Republicans, and the asymmetry in party polarization derives from the asymmetry in party support and function. Buchler (2015) presents an elections-centered argument that parties propose different electoral narratives that create a more conservative brand of Republicanism. Those election narratives may be influenced by the fact that moderates, particularly in the Republican party, are discouraged from running for office

(Thomsen 2014). More narrowly, Sean Theriault (2013) finds specific members of the Republican Party, "Gingrich Senators," perpetuate the asymmetry. Republicans who served in the House of Representative before their Senate tenure are even more polarizing than their Republican colleagues (Theriault 2013). The partisan fracturing of the Newt Gingrich House influenced future senators who are more likely to be partisan warriors and more likely than the average Republican senator to use partisan, procedural tactics that bolster the partisan divide.

Minority Party Agenda Setting

Another explanation to the party-tinged rhetoric in Congress is the minority's need to find alternative agenda-setting opportunities to communicate their priorities outside the majority party's control. Majority parties, and party leaders in particular, exert outsized control over the political agenda in Congress (Aldrich and Rohde 2001; Cox and McCubbins 2007), so minority lawmakers are limited in their ability to control the message or frame the political narrative. Minority party officials will turn to nonlegislative means for agenda-setting, particularly unrestricted messaging opportunities (Green-Pedersen 2010; Vliegthart and Walgrave 2011). Speeches are one opportunity for lawmakers to address issues most important to them, outside the legislative agenda. Minority members are more likely to use these opportunities to address the chamber—and have their speech be recorded—because they are one of the few opportunities within Congress to set their own political agenda (Maltzman and Sigelman 1996). One-minute speeches in Congress are popular with the minority party because it allows them to address their concerns that otherwise go unheard (Green 2015). In addition, those speeches by minority members are also more likely to include partisan perspectives (Green 2015; Morris 2001).

The relationship between the White House and a congressional party can also lead to increased partisan rhetoric. Members from a minority party will give a higher proportion of partisan speeches and are more likely to criticize the president (Green 2015; Morris 2001). That presidential criticism is also common outside the institution in press statements that elected officials give to the media. In presidential news coverage, Tim Groeling (2010) finds that presidential criticism is common, particularly when the president and minority party differ and those in Congress need to voice their opposition to the president. Under unified government, the majority party faces numerous communication challenges, including the allure of in-party disagreement and discord (Groeling 2010). The normalization of social media as a tool for political debate and discussion lends itself to the needs of those minority voices, both relative to their place in

Congress and vis-a-vis the White House. Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook allow politicians greater discretion over the message and give them unique opportunities to engage in party politics with or without coordination by the party. These messages are then seen not only by constituents, but by the media and special interests who then use them as talking points and quotes that shape the political debate.

Partisan Priorities on Twitter

Partisan communication is common, but not constant. I expect systematic differences in how senators use Twitter to advertise their partisan allegiances and explore whether partisan patterns are best explained by theories of political power in Washington or asymmetric patterns of polarization. The first set of hypotheses suggests that senators' use of party labels on Twitter is driven by the partisan patterns of asymmetric polarization in Congress (Hacker and Pierson 2006; Russell 2018a). Senate Republicans' greater ideological distance from the center furthers the partisan divide, and influences patterns of partisan rhetoric to reflect this divide. If tweets mimic the asymmetric patterns in Congress, I would expect Republicans to more often attack Democrats or bolster the Republican brand relative to their Democratic counterparts regardless of their position in Congress or the type of partisan rhetoric used.

- **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Republican senators are more likely than members of the Democratic Party to invoke either party or partisan representatives in their Twitter messages.
- **Hypothesis 2 (H2):** Republican senators are more likely than Democrats to use negative, attacking rhetoric on Twitter that mentions the opposing party.
- **Hypothesis 3 (H3):** Republican senators are more likely than Democrats to signal support for their own party by mentioning the GOP and its successes on Twitter.

Given some Republicans' "party warrior" activity in the Senate (Theriault 2013), I expect similar party patterns on Twitter. Social media are valuable attention-seeking tools, and I expect Republican senators will use them to communicate their partisan interests, especially given the tense relationship with the 2013 Democratic majority in the Senate and the Democratic president in 2015. Even under President Trump, Republicans may not shy away from partisan squabbles over hot-button issues like health care, immigration, and civil liberties.

Alternatively, political actors who are dissatisfied with the status quo will strategically act to expand the

scope of conflict (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Kingdon 1984; Schattschneider 1960), and Twitter is an ideal platform to grow controversy and spur debate. In a December 2012 tweet, Republican Sen. John Cornyn plainly noted on Twitter that "Harry Reid controls the Senate agenda." Members dissatisfied with the status quo—primarily minority members—may have less recourse when they do not control the legislative agenda, but by seeking out nonlegislative tools, such as Twitter, senators can direct attention to their desired issues and control the flow of information (Gainous and Wagner 2013; Lassen and Brown 2011). Twitter offers minority party senators unlimited opportunities to attack their opponents while bolstering their own party brand. I would expect senators from the minority party in the Senate to more often use partisan rhetoric relative to their majority counterparts.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Senators whose party does not control the Senate are more likely to invoke both party and partisan representatives in their Twitter messages.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Senators whose party does not control the Senate are more likely to signal support for their own party and copartisans by referencing them on Twitter.

Hypothesis 6 (H6): Senators whose party does not control the Senate are more likely to use negative, attacking rhetoric on Twitter that mentions the other party.

Minority status is not only important within Congress, but the relationship with the White House also drives the conversation in Washington. A senator's role as the vocal minority opposition is also defined by the president and his political agenda. In 2013 and 2015, Republicans often attacked President Obama for his health care policies and the Senate Democrats who furthered that policy agenda. In 2017, Democrats returned the favor, issuing a harsh rebuke of President Trump's immigration policies and travel ban. The president becomes an easy target for political attacks, and as the out-party in the White House, senators from that party are more likely to draw political lines in the sand with their daily communications.

Hypothesis 7 (H7): Senators whose party does not control the White House are more likely to invoke both party and partisan representatives in their Twitter messages.

Hypothesis 8 (H8): Senators whose party does not control the White House are more likely to use negative, attacking rhetoric on Twitter that mentions the other party.

Political Agendas on Twitter

The lion share of congressional party research focuses on the House, limiting our conception of how party politics influences and inserts itself into lawmakers' political communication. By focusing on the Senate, this research adds complexity to the legislative literature that has traditionally focused on House majority politics. Recent research shows that the Senate is steadily becoming more partisan—mirroring its House counterpart (Brady, Han, and Pope 2007; Theriault 2008). And given the chamber's historical emphasis on individual autonomy, evidence of partisan effects only furthers such conclusions. The quick and widespread adoption of Twitter in the Senate also makes it an appealing venue for research. Beginning in 2013, every member of the Senate had a Twitter account, compared to the House where only 90 percent were on Twitter (Sharp, Twitter blog). The data include all senators' tweets during the first six months of the 113th, 114th, and 115th Congresses (2013-2017).¹ I select the first six months of each Congress, given that my interest is senators' rhetoric as lawmakers rather than candidates, and elections have just ended so senators should be comparably less concerned with upcoming campaigns than they would closer to election season. Obvious patterns of partisan rhetoric during the first six months of a session suggests strategic choices rather than just an inherent or necessary part of the lead-up to re-election. By distancing the analysis from upcoming elections, this research provides a test of political communication when lawmakers' attention is least likely to be consumed by campaign activities. In addition, the Senate spends more days in session during the first part of the year, contributing to a higher volume of in-office, public tweets available for analysis.²

The shifts in political power during this time makes this period of notable interest. In 2013, Democrats controlled both the Senate and the White House but lost the Senate to Republicans who controlled both the House and Senate in 2015. In 2017, Republicans maintained their majority status in Congress, but also won the White House with the election of Donald Trump. By assessing partisan rhetoric across these three time periods, I can better tease out the effect of minority status in the Senate in addition to the relationships between senators and the president's party.

The data are drawn from each senator's Twitter account, primarily his or her office accounts or individual accounts. The tweets were collected via a Python-based web scraper that used the Twitter API to collect approximately 165,000 tweets over the three-year period. For this analysis, I do not include campaign accounts because I expect those communications to have a very different agenda and purpose than their office accounts.

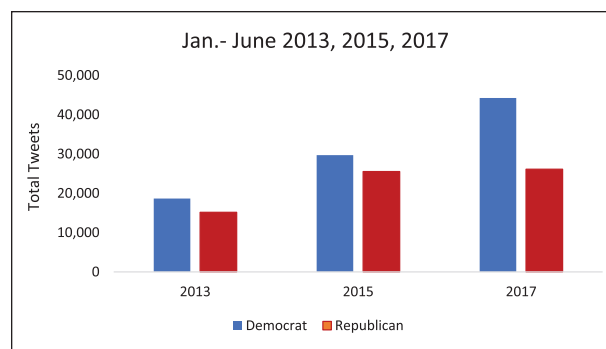


Figure 1. Number of tweets by U.S. senators.

All senators send regular messages from these accounts with some senators sending more than 10 tweets per day, like Republican Sen. John Cornyn from Texas, from while others average just one or two tweets per week, like Democratic Sen. Ben Nelson from Florida. The average senator sends about 1,000 tweets per year—numerous opportunities to wage partisan battles online. By comparison, the average senate office issues less than 250 press releases each year (Grimmer 2010) and introduces fewer than thirty-five new pieces of legislation.³ Both Republicans and Democrats regularly use Twitter; however, in 2015 and 2017, Democrats significantly outpaced their Republican counterparts relative to their numbers within the Senate (Figure 1).⁴

Tweets are first manually coded by student coders in a binary fashion according to whether the tweet uses any partisan rhetoric or lacks an explicit partisanship component.⁵ Tweets with partisan rhetoric are defined as those that include explicit mentions of either party, such as, “Senate Republicans seek rule change that could undermine . . .,” “Dems block the GOP,” or “@GOPHELP . . . bill to overturn Obamacare,” or representatives of the party, that is, “Democratic Leadership escorting President,” “Majority Leader . . . shuts down request.”⁶ Tweets mentioning a party leader are coded as partisan if a lawmaker makes explicit mention of the leader (McConnell, Pelosi) or mentions the position/title (Madam Speaker). Policy issues, like health care, often provide the context for these attacks, while senators simultaneously mention a party or party representative. For example, during the debate over the Affordable Care Act, Sen. John McCain called out Democrats on their push for health care: “Democrats about to pass health care bill that no one’s read—where is the transparency? What a disgrace!” While all tweets may serve political goals, my analysis considers only those tweets with explicit mentions of parties and party leaders.⁷ Attacks directed at a policy issue, such as Republicans’ expressing general frustration with the Affordable Care Act, are not considered partisan unless they explicitly

reference a party or leader's connection to that issue (i.e., Democrats' failures on health care).

Nonpartisan tweets are those messages that have no identifiable mentions of either a political party or representatives of a political party, such as nonpartisan policy, constituent communication, or holiday messages. Tweets that single out a specific senator, without noting his or her partisan affiliation or leadership status, are not considered partisan tweets. Direct elite-to-elite communication on Twitter is minimal, but when it does occur, I treat those instances as personal rather than partisan. Examples of this type of communication include announcing bill cosponsorships (regularly bipartisan), birthday messages, and signals of collegiality. Senators rarely used Twitter to attack rank-and-file members during this time period.

Each tweet is coded for the presence of partisan rhetoric—ranging from 8.4 percent of all tweets over six months in 2013 to 20 percent of all senate tweets in the first six months of 2017. While the research analyzes partisan rhetoric overall, I break up the analysis according to positive and negative tone, given the different motivations between attacking a political opponent for their missteps, “#DemFailure,” and supporting one's own party, such as Republicans lauding “GOP gains” in the Senate. Trained student coders read each tweet and categorize it according to whether the tweet positively promoted a party or negatively referenced the opposing party. Negative partisan rhetoric encompasses language associated with “ugly politics” or “party warriors” that often shirks blame and criticizes the other party (Sinclair 2006; Theriault 2013). Negative messages are critical in their mention of the other party or its representatives.

- @JerryMoran: April 29,2009—The last time Senate Democrats passed a budget. It's unfair to hardworking Americans and they deserve better. #NoBudgetNoPay
- @SenTedCruz: Obamacare and Chicago politics, what could go wrong?
- @SenatorBaldwin: Republicans won't close a tax loophole & cap student loan interest rates=Rates double -TB.

Supportive, positive rhetoric includes tweets that include messages of party loyalty, including promoting party candidates in elections, advertising party-specific legislation, or celebrating partisan policy successes. Messages in this category are most often direct messages of rallying support for individual officials or championing the party's legislative.

- @McConnellPress—McConnell: What about Republicans? Well, Republicans lead the House,

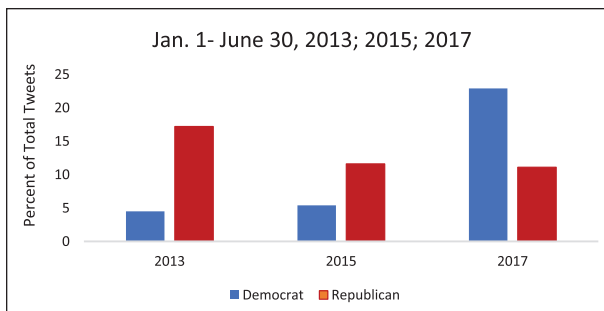


Figure 2. Senators' partisan rhetoric as a percent of total tweets.

and they've proposed #budgets every year, right on schedule.

- @SenGillibrand: Congratulations to #NY's great Dem women Mayors-elect incl 2nd term Mayor @MinerforMayor, @Sheehan4Albany, @LovelyAWarren & @SaratogaYepsen!

Analyzing senators' partisan tweets, from 2013 to 2017, the number of overall partisan tweets sent by Republicans stays relatively stable—ranging from 3,000 to 3,500 tweets regardless of the party's position within the Senate (Figure 2). In 2013 and 2015, Republicans sent more partisan tweets than their Democratic counterparts, but that trend shifted in 2017 when Democrats increased their mentions of party by more than 400 percent, arguably in response to the Trump presidency, unified Republican control of Congress, and contentious votes over health care. Democrats, when in the Senate majority or when controlling the White House, spent little time on partisan priorities on Twitter; however, amid unified Republican control their partisan patterns on Twitter shift. This does not necessarily reflect a trade-off such that Republicans in the majority decrease their use of party labels on Twitter but rather Republican use of overall partisan rhetoric remains consistent.

When I break down the partisan tweets by tone—negative attacking and positive, party loyalty—I find both asymmetric and minority-driven patterns of communication. For positive rhetoric on Twitter, I find that Republicans are consistently more likely to rally behind the party brand and support their intraparty colleagues (Figure 3). The number of tweets positively positioning the Republican party becomes a larger percentage of their total tweets as they gain both the Senate majority in 2015 and the White House in 2017. So not only are Republicans and Democrats framing unique discussions on Twitter, the way in which they invoke party in those discussions differs. This finding appears to both support the theory of asymmetric partisan communication, given

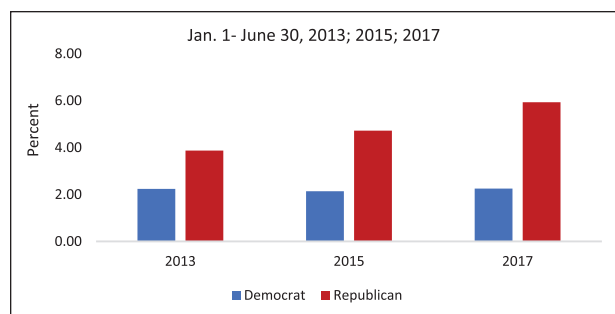


Figure 3. Senators' positive partisan tweets as a percent of total tweets.

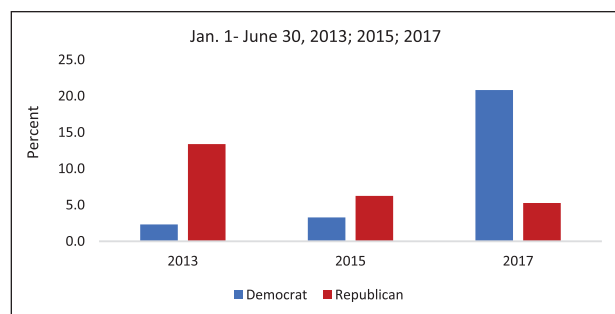


Figure 4. Senators' negative partisan tweets as a percent of total tweets.

that Republicans regardless of majority status are more likely to sing their party's praises, and the minority agenda setting theory, given that Republicans have slowly increased their positive partisan rhetoric as they gained vote share in Washington.

The obvious evidence of asymmetric patterns in partisan rhetoric fades when I isolate senators' negative rhetoric on Twitter (Figure 4). Republicans in 2013 and 2015 sent more tweets chastising Democrats and majority party leaders; however, that trend is reversed in 2017. Overall, there is a decline in the percent of Republican senators' agendas that includes negative or attacking rhetoric—mirroring their party power gains in Congress and the White House. This suggests the asymmetric patterns of polarization in congressional behavior may not cross-over into their communication patterns online or is at least could be contingent on tone and their majority status within the chamber and relative to the White House. A shift in partisan control of the Senate in 2015 results in a moderate shift in communication patterns, but in 2017 that shift is drastic. Democrats in the minority in both Congress and the White House spend more time on “ugly politics” (Lee 2009), questioning the competency and the motivations of Republican lawmakers and the President. Given the dramatic flip-flop in 2017, Senators' negative party appeals require further consideration of majority

status and the party in the White House in addition to party dynamics (Groeling 2010).

Multivariate Analysis on Partisan Tweets

To further test my hypotheses, I estimate a fractional logit model where the unit of analysis is the senator and the dependent variable is the proportion of a senator's tweets that include partisan rhetoric.⁸ Separate coefficients relate individual characteristics of the senators to their probability for communicating with partisan rhetoric. In addition to the three dependent variables—senators' proportion of total, negative, and positive party mentions—the data include a number of variables common to assessments of legislative behavior. The data set includes binary codes for party affiliation, leadership status within the party, majority party, party warriors (Theriault 2013), gender, and upcoming candidacy. Additional legislator-specific variables capture age, electoral security and previous performance, legislative effectiveness, ideological extremism, and total tweets to control for variable rates of social media activity. By including these senator-level control variables, the analysis aims to counter explanations that senators' partisan rhetoric about individual senators' propensities rather than the political context.

I control for gender because research suggests female congressional candidates are more likely to go negative on Twitter (Evans and Clark 2016), and minorities also make up a higher percentage of social media users (Krogstad 2015).⁹ I also consider a senator's age, given that Twitter participation is highest among young people and older members of the Senate, though likely relying on staff for social media messaging, may be less comfortable with new technology for daily constituent communication. I control for whether a member is running for office in the next election cycle, given that he may shift his communications in light of future campaign fortunes and may need to rely on partisan signals to define the terms of his re-election. The model also contains a measure for a senator's previous electoral performance—the senator's vote share in the recent election. Senators with wide margins of victory may be free to express their political priorities and use party labels without fear of repercussions from likely voters and may have more time to support the party's interests in addition to their own. Evans, Cordova, and Sipole (2014) find that incumbents exhibit distinct behavior in social media during the campaign, and I expect that behavior may influence their partisan rhetoric in office as well. A state's political climate and a senator's seat security are measured by the margin of victory for the presidential candidate representing a senator's political party. In 2013 and 2015, that would be the margin of victory for either Barack Obama

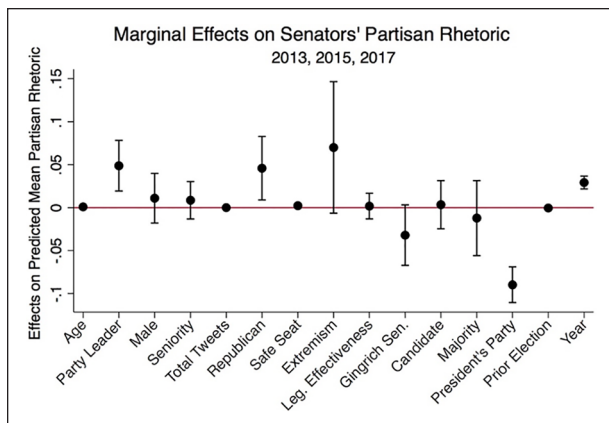


Figure 5. Logit regression coefficient plot of senators' odds for using partisan rhetoric on Twitter.

or Mitt Romney in 2012 and for 2017, for Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump in 2016. The asymmetric nature of partisan rhetoric may not just be a function of party but also the politics of the states that senators represent such that senators from less-secure seats may feel less latitude to wade into political discussions.

Additional legislator characteristics are captured with variables for legislative effectiveness, ideological extremism, and the polarization among partisans. For extremism, I use the DW-Nominate scores for the average ideological distance between a senator and the party median. These senators may be more likely to use party labels to rally support from extreme partisans on Twitter. In addition, I control for partisan warrior-type behavior from those senators Theriault (2013) denotes as “Gingrich Senators.” These are Republican senators previously elected to the House after 1978 whose legislative actions often furthers the partisan divide in the Senate. The legislative effectiveness variable is from Volden and Wiseman (2014) that uses a series of indicators to measure a senator’s ability to move legislation through the process and into law. Effective senators may shy away from using party labels in an effort to build legislative coalitions and seek compromise.

The first model tests for partisan effects on total partisan rhetoric, invoking either positive or negative political cues through party labels (Figure 5).¹⁰ The results of the model suggest positive and statistically significant marginal effects for heightened Republican partisan rhetoric, even when controlling for majority status in Congress. The results of the logit model support the initial hypothesis (H1) of party asymmetry that tweets coming from Republican senators have a higher probability of including partisan rhetoric, echoing findings by Russell (2018b). This finding matches the figures from the bar charts showing a higher total number of partisan tweets from

Republican senators in 2013 and 2015 and suggests party effects remain despite a sharp increase of partisan rhetoric by Democrats in 2017. The increase in Democratic rhetoric may likely be due to majority status, but as it relates to the president rather than in Congress. The expectation for minority status in the Senate to influence partisan rhetoric (H4) is not borne out; however, majority status and partisan asymmetry may be parallel explanations if we consider the relationship between a senator and the party in the White House. For overall partisan rhetoric, I find support for the hypothesis that tweets by senators matching the presidents’ party are less likely to include party labels (H7). Senators from the president’s party will be less partisan on Twitter, potentially due to political cover provided by the president, a contentment with the political status quo, or a willingness to limit media attention in pursuit of a compelling party brand (Groeling 2010). Minority senators are more likely to use political rhetoric on the floor of Congress (Morris 2001), that pattern continues on Twitter but defined by presidential relationships rather than within the chamber. This would explain why Republicans in the minority in 2013, relative to the Presidency, were more likely to target Democrats on Twitter, yet by 2017, with Democrats in the minority were more vocal using party labels to attack political opponents. For example, in 2013 Sen. McConnell was spending more than 30 percent of his tweets on party politics, but by 2017, even as a party leader, that percent had dropped to 22 percent.

Additional explanations for partisan rhetoric include those tweets sent by party leaders and by senators whose seat is politically safe. Party leaders go to great lengths to make sure partisan messages are conveyed to the public (Lipinski 2001, 2004) and to support the party they will use political rhetoric to push their agenda and diminish that of their political opponents. As the “pied-piper” of the party message, these senators must allocate additional attention to the party and its political brand in their Twitter communications. In 2017, Democratic leader Chuck Schumer often mentioned Democrats’ legislative efforts despite being in the minority and GOP tactics that prevented action in about 33 percent of total tweets. Senators from states’ where same-party presidential candidates tallied a higher vote share are more likely to mention the party or political opposition. These senators may have the political capital to spend time promoting the party’s image and have the political cover to use their personal communications on Twitter to take shots at political foes. For instance, Kansas Sen. Pat Roberts, a Republican with a safer seat, uses his Twitter account to promote the GOP brand and Republican efforts on the Agriculture committee.

When I disaggregate the rhetoric by tone, I find distinct and diverging partisan patterns for both positive and

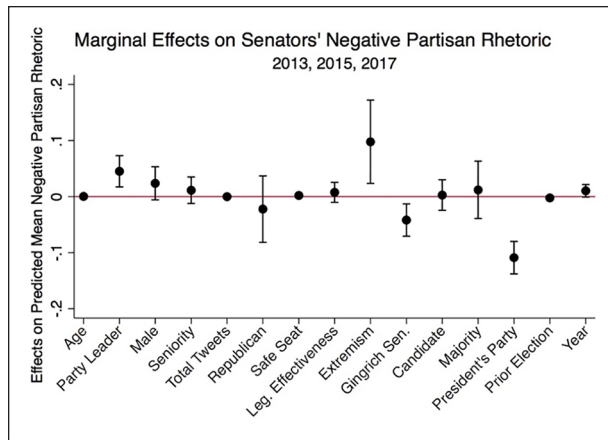


Figure 6. Logit regression coefficient plot of senators' odds for using negative partisan rhetoric on Twitter.

negative rhetoric. For negative rhetoric, I find unique patterns compared to the results for overall partisan rhetoric (Figure 6). First, I find consistent support for a presidential effect on senators' partisan rhetoric, as senators from the President's party are less likely to use party labels to go negative even when controlling for their position within the chamber (H8). Unlike the model for overall rhetoric, the asymmetric patterns found by Hacker and Pierson (2006) and Theriault (2013) in many Republicans' legislative behavior do translate into their style of negative political communication on Twitter (H2). Republicans may be more likely to go negative when they are the out-party in the White House, as shown in Figure 4, but rank-and-file Republicans do not have a higher probability of using party labels to chastise political opposition regardless of institutional context. I find no significant effect for majority status within the chamber (H5). Democrats' increase in negative, attacking rhetoric toward President Trump in 2017 appears to be best explained by their relationship with the President. For instance, Democrat Elizabeth Warren used negative rhetoric in two and eight percent of her tweets in 2013 and 2015, respectively, but in 2017, her use of party labels to chide Republican opposition was 35 percent. As the president serves as a lightning rod for partisan blame, those in the minority are more likely to blame the president and his party for failures and missteps. And media outlets are willing to report this interparty conflict (Groeling 2010). The salience of political conflict is one reason why party leaders are also more likely to use party labels in the context of negative rhetoric. A party leader's role is to promote the party brand relative to competing explanations or characterizations by political adversaries.

Second, I find that senators with a more extreme ideology are more likely to use negative rhetoric with party labels and party representatives. For example, Vermont

Sen. Bernie Sanders' is ideologically further to the left than someone like New Hampshire Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, and Sanders uses negative partisan rhetoric in an additional 10 percent (32 vs. 20 percent) of tweets compared to Shaheen. Congressional partisans with more polarized views have found a home in partisan media outlets (Davis and Dunaway 2016), and it appears Twitter may also be a comfortable space for those most polarized to target the other party. The effect of selective exposure on Twitter (Himmelboim, McCreery, and Smith 2013) may lead some senators to further reinforce party politics with their network of copartisans using rhetoric that reinforces negative images of political opposition.

For positive, party loyalty rhetoric, Republican senators consistently have a higher probability of using party labels on Twitter (H3). Majority status within the chamber and relative to the President is not significant in the positive rhetoric model (H5). This null finding for majority status echoes findings by Groeling (2010) that suggest party support in the majority should be more difficult and arguably less common. Regardless of majority status within Congress, the party of the presidency, or a senator's leadership role, Republicans are more likely to support each other publicly on Twitter. An example of this is Idaho senator Mike Crapo, who in 2015 included positive messages of party support in more than 10 percent of his tweets. Republicans will promote findings from committee hearings and attribute them to the Republican members, that is, @GOPHELP committee. Republican members will reference the @SenGOP_Floor to discuss the policy process and take credit for legislative successes. Senate Republicans have higher odds of using positive partisan rhetoric by advertising and promoting the GOP brand on Twitter (Figure 7). The asymmetry in positive partisan tweets also supports the public expectation that Republicans are better at messaging than Democrats. The asymmetry that stems from the group-interest Democratic party compared to the ideologically driven Republicans (Grossman and Hopkins 2016) may lead Republicans to more easily tow the party line in their communication. Even in 2017 amid concerns about President Donald Trump's leadership and party fracturing in Congress, Republicans are more likely to defend their brand and its successes publicly. When Democrats control both the White House and the Senate, as in 2013, they spend less time bolstering their own brand, spending more time on policy problems where they did not make any reference to party (Russell 2018b).

The asymmetric patterns found in Republicans' legislative behavior still translate to their style of party-supporting communication on Twitter, particularly for those senators from safe seats. The effect of electoral security is in the expected direction—senators from states that have a recent history of supporting the senator's party would

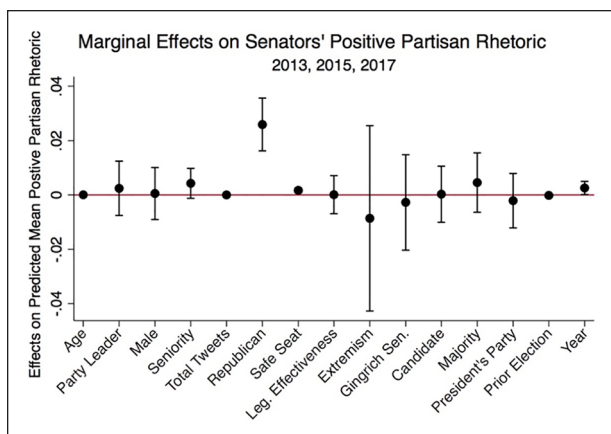


Figure 7. Logit regression coefficient plot of senators' odds for using positive partisan rhetoric on Twitter.

be free to support party initiatives and take time to promote the party brand. For the example of Crapo from above, the Republican senator was elected in a state where Mitt Romney won the state with 64 percent of the vote.

Conclusion

Senators' tweets suggest that polarizing party politics is not constrained to the floor of Congress and is a routine part of the daily communications by senators on social media. The magnitude of that polarizing communication depends on the type of rhetoric being used, the political divide in Washington, and party-driven patterns of public messaging. The results suggest that partisan rhetoric and the strategic use of party labels are multidimensional; however, partisan explanations and cross-institutional party dynamics remain consistent over time. The asymmetric model best fits explanations of total partisan rhetoric and positive party rhetoric in the Senate, offering insight into how senators use social media to for partisan signaling via party labels and references to the party's leaders. Republican senators, party leaders, and those lawmakers from electorally safe seats are more likely to invoke party and party leadership in their strategic messaging on Twitter. Republicans exhibit much higher levels of partisan support for their colleagues on Twitter by regularly advertising and promoting the party between 2013 and 2017. Across each year, regardless of status within the Senate or the Presidency, the Republicans are more likely to publicly lend support to leadership and the party brand—an asymmetric pattern of Republican party priorities. Defending the party brand is difficult—messages of intraparty support are less likely to be picked up by the news media (Groeling and Baum 2008)—but Republicans maintain their positive partisan support online.

When measuring negative or attack-oriented partisan rhetoric, the asymmetric model has less explanatory power relative to partisan alignment with the White House and ideological extremism. From 2013 to 2017, Republicans' proportion of attacking, negative rhetoric declined relative to their Democratic counterparts. As Democrats became the minority party in both Congress and the White House, they responded with routine, negative attacks toward the president and the Republican leadership in Congress. Much of that shift to partisan blame may be a result of President Trump, but as the public face of the Republican Party, Democrats attack both the individual and his position as the party leader. Senate Democrats became a vocal minority given their lack of agenda control in Congress and their need for an alternative, public outlet for party politics that quickly garners more attention than floor speeches or press releases.

How we understand partisan communication on Twitter is variable depending on the tone and political environments. This study assesses the explicit use of party labels and party representatives on Twitter during the first six months of a congressional session. By limiting the study to this time period, I am able to limit the influence of re-election and campaigns—which has the added benefit of filtering some of the hyper-partisan rhetoric that dominates during re-election. That choice itself suggests a different type of political environment than the six months prior to an election—the former being an environment that provides a more neutral space for communication. I expect the first months of a session after an election would be the least politically driven period, suggesting that these partisan patterns would only magnify as campaigns draw nearer. Tweets during this time period also speak to the role of party politics in governance as legislation is more routinely introduced early in the session yet partisan patterns still emerge in a lower-salience partisan period. Lawmakers' tweets, even when distanced from an election, reinforce party politics for a digital constituency—shifting political battles and partisan gamesmanship from Congress to the public. The integration of party politics with policymaking may be one contributing factor to the ideological polarization among the public (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008).

Given that senators have competing responsibilities to public policy and constituent service, the time they spend on politics and the role it plays in their public relations efforts is strategic and calculated. Senators campaign communications are arguably driven by partisan messaging, but even outside of the election context, Twitter emboldens politicians to become advocates of their political brand. Each senator makes a choice about how to frame that public persona, and the language they use to connect with constituents is shaped by both asymmetric partisanship, institutional relationships, and individual

lawmaker characteristics. This study sheds light on how social media's partisan patterns of political communication are becoming more prevalent in Congress. Tweets are now a source for political news and policy debates, and different political signals that elected officials use not only affects their political brand but also the information that constituents have to evaluate and judge their elected leaders. As Twitter continues to be the mechanism by which politicians connect with constituents and journalists, the political messages sent on social media became salient because they can shape the parameters of representation and differentiate audiences.

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ORCID iD

Annelise Russell  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8417-1709>

Supplemental Material

Data necessary to replicate the analyses in this paper can be found here: <https://www.anneliserussell.me>

Notes

1. This study includes each senator's Twitter activity between January 3, 2013, and June 30, 2013, and January 3, 2015 and June 30, 2015 and January 3, 2017 and June 30, 2017.
2. I consider all tweets, but research suggests that lawmakers are more active on social media while in office than they are during their time at home or on the road.
3. Brookings Vital Statistics. <https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/vital-statistics-on-congress/>
4. A negative binomial regression analyzing total tweets by senators is included in the Supplemental Appendix, Table A2.
5. All tweets were hand coded by a graduate student coder, and 5 percent of the data set was double coded by experienced student coders for reliability measures. Student double coding yielded the following intercoder reliability statistics for partisanship: percentage agreement = 98, Cohen's kappa = 94%, Krippendorff's alpha = 94%. Supervised coding techniques were tested, but automated models of coding and categorization did not produce reliable results comparable to human-annotated coding. Given the relatively minimal context of tweets and the irregularity of language across tweets, automated methods were not appropriate.
6. Additional information on the partisan coding guidelines and examples are included on page 2 of the Supplemental Appendix.
7. Party leadership includes minority and majority leaders, as well as whips, conference and caucus chairs, policy committee, senatorial committee, and steering committee chairs.
8. The fractional logit model allows for proportions that also include proportions of 0 and 1 and models the means. Variations on a logit model are prevalent with explanatory variables tied to individual attributes—such as U.S. Senators. The structure of the data can prove challenging with clustering around individuals, so I estimate the model with clustered errors by each senator. In addition, I have run the analysis as a negative binomial count model clustered by senator with similar results.
9. Race is not included in the model due to a lack of significance and minimal racial diversity in the Senate.
10. Regression tables of marginal effects plots located in the Supplemental Appendix.

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