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A New Sheriff in Town?

In 2010, Michele Bachmann was reelected to a second term as the representative for Minnesota's 6th Congressional District. The Fox News Network played a crucial role in raising the conservative firebrand's status from an obscure first-term representative to a regular face on television. A partisan pugilist with a penchant for over-the-top rhetoric and seething criticism for her political opponents, she provided a combative and passionate spark to interviews. In short, she made for good television. Along with Michele Bachmann, dozens of other media-savvy conservative provocateurs were elected to the House of Representatives in 2010, helping flip control of the chamber from the Democratic to the Republican Party and making Ohio Representative John Boehner the Speaker of the House.

In many ways, Boehner was the stylistic opposite of Bachmann. He, too, was committed to the conservative cause, but he chose a less brazen approach. He preferred the proverbial smoke-filled room of the politics of yore to the brash, in-your-face politics of cable news networks. In 2021, Boehner published a memoir in which he recounts a revealing story of Bachmann demanding to be placed on the coveted Ways and Means Committee as a second-term representative. Despite its benign and arcane title, members serving on the Ways and Means Committee are among the most powerful in the U.S. House of Representatives. The members on this committee get to make decisions about any legislation that deals with taxes and several important government programs. Their fingerprints are on the kinds of blockbuster bills that make the headlines, whether they are about raising or cutting taxes, expanding or shrinking Medicare and Social Security – the Ways and Means Committee can stand in the way or

clear the path for a bill to become law. It's the kind of committee on which a representative must earn her place. Members cannot reasonably expect, much less demand, to be appointed to the Ways and Means Committee in their second term.

Or at least those were the old rules. In Boehner's telling of the story, he politely explained to Bachmann that "[t]here was no way she was going to get on Ways and Means, the most prestigious committee in Congress, and jump ahead of everyone else in line." Under the old rules, Bachmann would have slinked back to her office, having learned a lesson about the pecking order. Instead, she fired back, "Well, then I'll just have to go talk to Sean Hannity and everybody at Fox [News]..." The threat worked. Boehner appointed her to the Ways and Means Committee, in front of all the other Republicans who had loyally bided their time. There was a new sheriff in town, and in Boehner's telling, it was he who learned a lesson about the new pecking order: Even though he was the Speaker of the House, he wasn't the one with the power; Fox News was (Boehner, 2021).

As far as anecdotes go, this one is powerful. As the sitting Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Boehner had a front-row seat to policy making. If he saw Fox News as a potent force to be reckoned with on Capitol Hill, it must have been, right? As social scientists, our response is, "Not so fast." Even if it is a powerful anecdote, it is still just an anecdote. It offers a hypothesis about the ascendance of Fox News as a major power player on Capitol Hill, but it is not sufficient evidence for the claim that it was the new sheriff in town. At best, it offers evidence that Fox News influenced John Boehner's behavior, but it cannot tell us anything about whether the news channel influenced the behavior of other representatives. In order to evaluate the hypothesis that the entrance of Fox News on the national scene influenced the behavior of elected representatives, we need to systematically collect data on the behavior of representatives as well as measure Fox News' potential to influence them. And this is exactly what we did, with a little help from chance.

The biggest obstacle to studying the effects of a national television news channel on the behavior of elected representatives is the lack of variation in availability. National news channels – being national – are usually available everywhere in the country and representatives are the kinds of people who voraciously consume news. For this reason, it is difficult to know how much of an effect the news shows on national broadcast news channels, such as ABC or NBC, have on elected representatives. These news shows are equally available to every representative's constituents, and every representative (or at least their staff) keeps tabs on what is airing on these channels. Lucky for us, the Fox News channel was not

equally available everywhere when it debuted on the scene in the autumn of 1996. Its news programming was national in nature, but its reach was limited. This is a stroke of luck because it gives us the needed variation in whether representatives' constituents and possibly the representatives themselves were exposed to the news channel. More importantly, this variation was exogenous to politics itself, because Fox News was no more likely to appear in conservative areas than liberal ones. As a result, the way in which Fox News rolled out across the United States in the late 1990s and early 2000s created a natural experiment to study its effects.

In this book, we conduct what to our knowledge is the most comprehensive examination of Fox News' effects on political elites to date. We do so through a series of studies utilizing several methodological approaches, which we describe in more detail in the sections that follow. In those sections we will also describe our findings in more detail. For now, we offer only a brief summary preview of what we find. The advent of Fox News shaped American politics, not simply through effects on regular, everyday viewers but through its effects on elected politicians. These effects were not as uniform or as large as one might expect from John Boehner's anecdote or from reading popular press books that touch on the influence of Fox News on the legislative process (e.g., Brock and Rabin-Havt, 2012; Hacker and Pierson, 2006). These accounts would lead us to believe that we would find that Fox News pulled Republicans, and potentially even some Democrats, in a more conservative direction as well as evidence that Fox News pushed policy outputs in a conservative direction more generally. Yet this is not what we find. Instead, we find that Fox News had more limited effects on the behavior of legislators and public policy, at least in the first 15 years of its existence. The entry of Fox News encouraged strong Republican candidates living in Republican-leaning congressional districts that were represented by Democrats to run for office. Perhaps because of this, Democratic members of Congress representing Republican-leaning districts were slightly more likely to buck their party and side with Republicans on party-line votes if Fox News moved into their district. Nonetheless, we do not find that Fox News gave Republicans an electoral edge over Democrats, nor do we find evidence that Fox News substantially pushed policy in a conservative direction.

1.1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF FOX NEWS

In order to understand why Fox News found a lucrative niche as a conservative national news network, we start our story in the 1950s, well before Fox News was born. From the standpoint of the news media's place in

American politics, the 1950s to the 1970s was an anomaly. Before this period, most Americans got their news from local newspapers, many of which shaded their coverage of politics to fit the ideological predispositions of their readers (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2010; Song, 2021).[1] By the 1950s, more and more Americans were getting news from broadcast television, which offered more balanced, nonpartisan coverage of politics (Prior, 2007; Song, 2021). At the same time, the two main political parties were less polarized along ideological lines (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2006) and politicians were more likely to accept press coverage as factual and impartial (Ladd, 2012). By the mid-1970s, this short-lived era of the national news media as trusted arbiters of facts began to unravel. Democratic and Republican politicians were moving further apart from each other on policy and becoming more ideologically sorted (Levendusky, 2009). In this polarized context, politicians began attacking press coverage as biased (Ladd, 2012).

It may seem ironic that at the height of nonpartisan "objective" journalism, the press would increasingly come under attack for being biased, but ideologically motivated politicians regularly have both strategic and sincere reasons for doing so. The objective-style of reporting attempts to get the facts right. Even if the press was not always successful at doing this, they nonetheless created coverage that cast a negative light on the ideological assumptions and goals of both parties. From a strategic standpoint, if political elites accept this kind of coverage as factually accurate, it would create pressure to admit wrongdoing or error. To avoid facing this dilemma, a shoot-the-messenger strategy allowed politicians to run away from negative press coverage by simply denying it as factually accurate. What's more, for many politicians it was not just a strategy but a sincere belief. As Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985, 584) explain, "opposing partisans believe, respectively, that the truth is largely 'black' or largely 'white,' each complain about the fairness and objectivity of mediated accounts that suggest that the truth might be at some particular hue of gray." Because they believe that their particular view of the world (be it black or white) is obviously correct, they attribute malicious intent to mainstream media for reporting both sides equally.

[1] American journalism shifted toward norms of objectivity following the invention of the mass printing press. With its arrival and the ability to serve much larger audiences, newspapers realized the financial benefits to be gained by appealing to the entire market (Hamilton, 2004).

As growing partisan polarization increased the demand for partisan news coverage, a confluence of shifts in the legal framework governing television news and the technology of delivering television into people's homes created opportunities for supply to meet this increased demand for partisan messaging. First, the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 paved the way for news media outlets to offer news coverage that fit viewers' preconceived biases. The doctrine, which was established in 1949, required television and radio broadcasters to offer diverse viewpoints on controversial issues. With its repeal, radio talk shows with a particular political agenda proliferated, and conservative talk shows dominated (Ladd, 2012). Rush Limbaugh was the most popular and successful, using his platform to redefine political issues in ways that fit with a free-market, socially conservative perspective. In doing so, he often used the mainstream media, which he called the "liberal media," as a foil (Carter and Signorino, 2000; Ladd, 2012). Fully consistent with Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985), Limbaugh presented the world as black and white and accused the mainstream media of being biased against and prejudiced toward conservatives.

Second, the 1992 Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act created an opening for ideologically slanted television channels as well. The law required cable companies to compensate the broadcast networks – ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox – for the rights to rebroadcast these extremely popular broadcast channels on their lineups. The broadcast networks saw a golden opportunity. Rather than asking for money, they negotiated a win-win exchange. The cable companies had the capacity to transmit dozens (and then later hundreds) of channels, but they did not have content to put on these possible channels. In contrast, the broadcast networks had lots of potential content – they were in the business of producing it – but only one channel on which to showcase it. The solution was simple and elegant. In return for rebroadcasting the major networks' feed, the cable companies gave them channels on which to showcase niche content, such as cooking shows, sports, old movies, and, yes, slanted news (Arceneaux and Johnson, 2013; Lubinski, 1996). Rupert Murdock's Fox network led the way by creating the conservative-leaning Fox News that promised to be "fair and balanced." Again, consistent with Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985), Fox News offered conservatives an alternative to the gray colors available on "liberal" mainstream news shows (Groseclose and Milyo, 2005; Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017). Fox News showed them the world as they thought it to be, and in doing so, one that was fair and balanced.

1.2 A "NATURAL" EXPERIMENT

When the Fox News Network was launched in the waning months of 1996, it did not appear simultaneously in all media markets or congressional districts. The 1992 Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act stimulated the broadcast networks, such as Fox, to negotiate with cable providers to provide channels in return for rebroadcasting rights. At the time of writing this book, there are only a handful of large cable providers, but back in the mid-1990s, there were thousands of local and mostly mom-and-pop cable providers that the broadcast networks needed to negotiate with separately. As we explain in greater detail in Chapter 2, this created variation in the availability of Fox News across congressional districts, and this variance, more importantly, was exogenous to political considerations. For our purposes, this variance in access to partisan news coverage created a so-called "natural" experiment where members of Congress and their constituents experienced different levels of Fox News availability. This variation allows us to compare similar districts with different levels of Fox News availability and isolate its effects on the behavior of members.

We are not the first scholars to take advantage of the haphazard roll out of Fox News to study its effects. DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) studied the roll out of Fox News across the largest media markets in the United States and found that the introduction of Fox News into a media market slightly increased support for the Republican candidate in presidential and Senate elections held between 1996 and 2000. Combining DellaVigna and Kaplan's data on the availability of Fox News with survey data collected in the same subset of media markets, Hopkins and Ladd (2014) found that much of Fox News' effect on voting behavior is explained by the news channel reinforcing viewers' preexisting partisan loyalties and mobilizing some of these individuals to vote. Drawing on a canvass of Fox News' availability in every media market that was compiled by the Nielsen Company, Martin and Yurukoglu (2017) offered evidence that the easy availability of Fox News in a media market, which they measured via the position of the channel in each cable company's lineup, also increased the ideological distance between Democratic and Republican voters.

In other words, much of the work on the roll out of Fox News has been on the effects of Fox News on ordinary voters and shows that the emergence of Fox News influenced, albeit in a limited way, election outcomes and public opinion. Because the Fox News audience is made up almost entirely of ordinary citizens, it makes sense that researchers would

focus here. Yet elected representatives are also potentially members of the Fox News audience and, at the very least, interact with constituents who are. As we elaborate later, there are a number of reasons why elected officials may be influenced by news media, and the emergence of Fox News makes it possible to study whether it did. A handful of researchers have used the haphazard roll out of Fox News to study its effects on members of Congress (Arceneaux et al., 2016, 2019; Clinton and Enamorado, 2014). Their research also shows that Fox News has some, albeit limited, impact on the behavior of members of Congress and this book builds upon and extends this research.

1.3 WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW ABOUT THE INFLUENCE OF NEWS MEDIA ON ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

Before we offer our explanation for why Fox News – or any national news media coverage for that matter – might influence the behavior of members of Congress, it is necessary to set the stage as it was before we entered the scene. It would be more accurate to speak of two separate stages in different theaters. On one stage is a rich research tradition studying the effects of news media on the mass public. This research tradition largely ignores media influence on politicians. While this scholarship certainly does not exclude the possibility that the national news media may also influence the attitudes and behaviors of elites (e.g., see Zaller, 1992, last chapter), it either places that question outside of the scope of its study or it makes the implicit assumption that the news media influence politicians via its direct effects on the mass public. For instance, research on persuasion starts with the premise that political elites shape media content as they craft messages to convince the public to support their particular policy goals (e.g., Chong and Druckman, 2007; Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000; Ladd and Lenz, 2009) or to vote for them in an upcoming election (e.g., Coppock, Hill, and Vavreck, 2020; Farnsworth, 2015; Vavreck, 2009).

In this research stream, politicians are conceptualized as being causally prior to the question of media effects. They use (or try to use) the news media as a tool to inform and influence the mass public as opposed to being subject to the influence of news media themselves (e.g., Arceneaux and Johnson, 2013; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Zaller, 1996). By contrast, much of research on *partisan* news media in the United States makes the implicit assumption that the causal chain starts with partisan news media, which polarize the public, which in turn polarizes partisan elites (e.g., Cassino, 2016; Levendusky, 2013; Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017; Stroud, 2011).

On the other stage is an equally rich research tradition that treats members of Congress as self-interested, rational actors who are interested in one, and pretty much only one, thing: getting and then keeping their jobs (e.g., Cox and McCubbins, 1993; Fiorina, 1974; Mayhew, 1974; Shepsle and Weingast, 1981; Weingast and Marshall, 1988). The news media play a minor role on this stage. They are either a tool of potential influence – something to groom in an effort to control – or a nuisance on which members must keep their eyes (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1981; Arnold, 2004). A significant amount of the work following in this tradition has been dedicated to understanding how legislators arrive at the decisions they do, and much of this work understandably considers constituents (or a subset thereof) to be the central driving force in shaping member behavior. After all, they hold the electoral keys to the kingdom.

Importantly, most models of legislative decision-making assume either explicitly or implicitly that members operate with complete information regarding the preferences of their constituents (e.g., Brandice Canes-Wrone and Cogan, 2002; Carson et al., 2010; Jones and McDermott, 2010; Lindstädt and Vander Wielen, 2014; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson, 1995). However, we know that this assumption is not an accurate description. Legislators are often uninformed or ill-informed about what their constituents want (Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger, and Stokes, 2019). So, how do members go about knowing constituent preferences? This is an important question because even the most well-intentioned member cannot carry out the wishes of her constituents if her information is faulty or biased. Here, the literature on legislative decision-making offers little guidance regarding how members acquire the information needed to be responsive to their constituents. While much of this research goes to great pains to account for public opinion and policy outputs, only a small subset of this work touches on what role the news media play in informing politicians about what their constituents want (e.g., Kingdon, 1989; Herbst, 1998).

This book attempts to combine these two stages into one. Even though a few early and important works on congressional behavior suggested the relevance of media attention for the ability of members of Congress to faithfully and effectively serve their constituents, it remains rare to see legislative studies directly theorize about (much less measure) media influence of any kind. Moreover, important changes to the media landscape have occurred in recent decades that have resulted in the steady erosion of local coverage and concurrent rise in national coverage, warranting further investigation.

Of the congressional literature that more seriously engages the role of the media, much of it looks at how members (strategically) interact with the media (e.g., how they want to be portrayed). This work demonstrates, for example, that local newspapers serve members as a valuable conduit for credit claiming. For House members, in particular, reelection time is always near, and therefore so is the need to draw public attention to the casework and other good deeds they have performed for their district (Fenno, 1978). The public scrutiny (for both good deeds and bad) afforded by news media is critical for holding members of Congress accountable to their constituents. Local newspapers typically provide a significant majority of the coverage of House races (Hayes and Lawless, 2018; Vinson, 2003), and chronicle the most day-to-day information about House member behavior while in office (Arnold, 2004). All in all, we know that House members pay attention to when and how they are covered in the news (Cook, 1989, 75). Whether for good or for ill (from the district's perception), members of Congress attempt to behave in ways that will attract favorable media attention.

While much of this work centers on local newspapers as the media outlets with the most sway over House members' behavior (e.g., Hayes and Lawless, 2018; Vinson, 2003), these studies tell us little about what we might expect when it comes to influence from a national outlet like Fox News. However, some of the more recent research on legislative behavior is addressing this gap. Anderson, Butler, and Harbridge-Yong (2020) demonstrate the influence of major partisan media outlets, like Fox News, over members' willingness to engage in partisan behaviors. Because they perceive these outlets to be the main news sources for primary voters, in particular, members are more inclined to avoid bipartisan compromise for fear that it will be portrayed by these networks in a negative light. Moreover, other recent work suggests that mediated forms of congressional accountability may have started to shift away from local to national media with the gradual expansion of the media environment (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway, 2018; Trussler, 2022). These studies essentially argue that as the public's focus on politics shifts to the national level via national media, so too will that of legislators. Instead of looking to local newspapers to infer (or shape) public opinion, legislators will now turn to major national news outlets. In line with these works, a contribution of this book is to provide a counterpoint to the thesis that all congressional politics is local.

We suggest that a more comprehensive understanding of legislative behavior requires us to bring the (national) news media into the story.

There are two routes through which news media attention may influence legislative behavior. First, the news media inform members about constituency preferences. Monitoring and informing leaders about public opinion is one of the major functions of the press (Dunaway and Graber, 2022). Higher levels of media attention can yield more accurate perceptions about constituents' preferences on high-salience issues. Second, they invite public scrutiny. As part of their so-called watchdog function, the news media bring visibility to the actions of elected officials, in turn raising the public's awareness about those actions. It is, therefore, no surprise that members endeavor to have a better sense of constituency preferences – and to follow them – in issue areas to which media are paying attention, because those are the issues that are most likely to affect their electoral fortunes (Arnold, 2004; Hutchings, 2001). According to R. Douglas Arnold (2004, 1), "a regular flow of information about governmental decision-making helps keep officials on their toes when they first make decisions. Officials who expect their actions to be featured on the evening news and on the front pages of newspapers may make decisions different from officials who expect their decisions to remain forever hidden from public scrutiny." We say more about why we think national news media may shape the behavior of members of Congress next.

1.4 NOT ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL: THE CONTINGENT EFFECTS OF THE NATIONAL NEWS MEDIA ON MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

Tip O'Neill served as the Speaker of the House of Representatives from 1977–1987. In trying to understand his one and only electoral defeat early in his career, he became well known for the dictum, "all politics is local." It became a guiding principle in his political career as he kept local political interests in mind, including the need to cultivate ties and pay attention to local media (O'Neill and Hymel, 1994). Pundits and scholars of elections have, for generations, used this bit of folksy wisdom to explain why successful members of Congress approach politics by carefully curating their representational styles and heeding the local dynamics of their constituency (e.g., Fenno, 1978; Parker and Goodman, 2009). If this dictum is true, then why would we expect the introduction of a national news channel into congressional districts to affect the behavior of elected representatives?

Richard Fenno's path-breaking book *Homestyle* offers some of the most compelling evidence that members of Congress fashion electoral

strategies with the notion that local politics matter most. Yet in an incisive passage at the end of the book's introduction, he explains why Tip O'Neill's dictum might be time bound, "... this book is about the early to mid-1970s only. These years were characterized by the steady decline of strong national party attachments and strong local party organizations. ... Had these conditions been different, House members might have behaved differently in their constituencies" (Fenno, 1978, xv). As it turns out, by the mid-1990s, when Fox News entered the scene, the times were a changin'. Democrats and Republicans in Congress had been steadily becoming more ideologically polarized. The era of liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats was becoming a memory (Hetherington, 2001). Ideological consistency among party elites stimulated ideological "sorting" in the electorate and Democratic voters became more likely to espouse consistently liberal policy attitudes and Republicans consistently conservative ones (Levendusky, 2009). In addition, voters were becoming more emotionally attached to the national political party brands (Iyengar and Lelkes, 2012). The expansion of cable/satellite television and increased access to the Internet hastened the decline of local newspapers (Martin and McCrain, 2019; Hayes and Lawless, 2018) and reconfigured American's news diets to lean more heavily on national news (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway, 2018, 2021). This "nationlization" of the news media landscape caused national-level partisan debates to reach into and color local political debates (Hopkins, 2018) and led to a decline in split-ticket voting (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway, 2018, 2021). More importantly, it caused members of Congress to prioritize national interests over local ones (Trussler, 2022). In short, mounting partisan polarization and nationalization made the politics from the mid-1990s forward much less local than before and gave members of Congress a powerful incentive to pay attention to national news.

It is one thing to pay attention to news, and another thing to be influenced by it. Why would politicians – who are presumably savvy news consumers with strong convictions – be influenced by the introduction of Fox News in their district? Our answer is that we should expect a national news channel like Fox News to influence members of Congress to the extent that members believe it's content has electoral implications. Research using the degree of geographical overlap between congressional districts and media markets shows that members of Congress are more responsive to their constituents when local news is more likely to cover their behavior (Besley and Burgess, 2001; Campbell, Alford, and Henry,

1984; Cohen, Noel, and Zaller, 2004; Snyder and Strömberg, 2010). In other words, if representatives believe that failure to pay attention to the news media will have electoral consequences, they will pay attention.

We theorize that there are two routes through which news coverage could affect the behavior of politicians: a direct one and an indirect one. The direct route starts with politicians as members of the news audience. The simplest explanation is that watching Fox News causes members of its audience, including politicians, to change their sincere beliefs and preferences. While this is certainly possible, politicians do not always act on their sincere preferences. They tend to be strategic actors, carefully choosing when to run for office (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981) and how to vote once they get there (Kingdon, 1989). They are also quite concerned with keeping tabs on and, if possible, shaping media coverage (Cook, 1989; Linsky, 1986). Consequently, the most likely possibility is that politicians view news as credible information about the state of the political environment in which they operate.

Susan Herbst's (1998) study of state legislators offers the clearest case for this possibility. In her telling, legislators view the news media as an indication of public opinion (see also Linsky, 1986). Elected politicians rarely have the means to scientifically poll their constituents and they often rely on information shortcuts to construct an educated guess about what their constituents want. As a result, they are often uninformed about what the average voter in their district thinks (e.g., Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Butler and Nickerson, 2011; Miller and Stokes, 1963). Politicians, like so many other people, are likely subject to the "third person effect" (Davison, 1983, 3), which is a commonsense but naive view of one's fellow citizens: "Because I am savvy and informed, the news media has little effect on me, but because others are not as savvy as me, it has a big effect on what everyone else thinks." If this were the case, a strategic and media-savvy politician would make inferences about how their constituents react to news coverage and adjust their behavior accordingly (see also, Cohen, Tsfati, and Sheafer, 2008). The introduction of Fox News may have caused politicians to simply believe that their constituents would be persuaded to become more conservative.

The indirect route starts with the constituents being influenced by Fox News coverage and then choosing to contact their elected representatives. The old adage that the squeaky wheel gets the grease has some truth among elected representatives. If someone is moved to call their member of Congress or state legislator, they are also likely to be moved to tell their family and friends about how their representative handled the interaction.

Attending to constituents who contact the legislative office is part and parcel to cultivating a "personal vote" in which members forge a reputation among their constituents as being accessible and effective legislators who care about them (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina, 2013). Consequently, if the introduction of Fox News in a congressional district increased the number of calls and letters received by members to adopt conservative stances on issues, it may have led elected politicians to believe that their constituents had become more conservative *even if the members themselves never watched Fox News*.

Of course, the direct and indirect routes through which Fox News could influence the behavior of politicians are not mutually exclusive. Both mechanisms could account for the influence of Fox News. Our main point here is that there are a number of compelling theoretical reasons to entertain the possibility that the entry of Fox News in the national media landscape could have shaped the behavior of members of Congress as well as those politicians who wanted to be members of Congress.

Whatever the specific mechanism of media influence, our overarching argument is that the effects of Fox News on members of Congress (and would-be members of Congress) should be *contingent* on their strategic interests. We conceptualize the news media, from the viewpoint of politicians, as "policy demanders." We appreciate that this is a bit unorthodox and it is certainly a simplification, but we believe it to be a useful one. Standard theoretical models of elite behavior note that elected politicians and political candidates (who want to become elected politicians) must balance the (often) competing policy demands that they receive from their constituents, party activists, party leaders, donors, friends and family, as well as their own values and principles (e.g., Fenno, 1978; Cox and McCubbins, 1993). How they balance these demands depends on strategic calculations regarding which policy demander is the most important for helping them obtain their overall goal of remaining in (or gaining) office while also achieving their personally preferred policy outcomes. To offer an example, when elections are near, politicians are more likely to behave in ways that they believe their constituents want, whereas when elections are distant, politicians are more likely to behave in ways that are consistent with the preferences of other policy demanders – party leaders if they want to move up the ranks in Congress or donors if they want to raise campaign money, to give some examples (Arnold, 1990; Lindstädt and Vander Wielen, 2011, 2014).

In our theoretical model, politicians act as if they view the news media as policy demanders, too, because they tend to see news reporting as

a window into (and shaper of) public opinion (Herbst, 1998; Linsky, 1986). In our model, politicians need not even believe that the news media have a policy agenda in order to see news coverage as containing specific policy demands simply because the third-person effect leads them to believe that news coverage *will persuade at least some of their constituents to want a specific policy*. Whether those perceived policy demands are worth acting upon depends on whether politicians see it in their strategic interest to do so. Based on this line of reasoning, we anticipate that politicians will be more likely to shift their behavior in response to national news coverage when they believe it is able to persuade enough of their constituents to support a particular policy (or set of policies). Making specific predictions based on this theoretical expectation depends on the context, and thus, we elaborate the hypotheses that we derive from this theoretical framework in each of the empirical chapters (as well as list them in the Appendix for this chapter).

1.5 WE PREREGISTERED OUR HYPOTHESES

This book builds on our previous research on the subject, which studied the effects of Fox New's entry on U.S. House members' voting behavior (Arceneaux et al., 2016) and the decisions of strategic politicians to launch a run for congressional office (Arceneaux et al., 2019). In order to paint a fuller and more complete picture of Fox News' effects on American political elites, we discuss, revise, and extend this work in the chapters that follow, while adding additional analyses. In particular, we consider whether Fox News shaped how members of Congress talked about policy and if so whether it incentivized more extreme position taking. We also consider whether shifts in behavior caused by the entry of Fox News had implications for how responsive members of Congress were to constituents and whether it shifted public policy outcomes to the right.

In the interests of transparency and scientific best practices, we preregistered our expectations regarding the effects of Fox News on the behavior of members of Congress. In a nutshell, preregistration involves writing a *pre-analysis plan* that details one's hypotheses, data collection protocol, and planned analyses, and then placing this pre-analysis plan on a third-party registry that time stamps and saves it for other scholars to see. We preregistered our pre-analysis plan on the Open Science Framework's registry, and the stable URL link to our pre-analysis plan can be found at https://osf.io/yw9vb/. We also reprint it in Section 1.2 of

the Appendix, along with tables that summarize the pre-analysis plan by chapter.[2] In doing so, readers can verify what it is that we expected to find before we observed our data and distinguish it from exploratory analyses that we conducted after seeing the results.

For interested readers, we go into deeper detail in Section A.1.1 of the Appendix for why we chose to preregister our hypotheses. Suffice it to say that the practice, which is championed by the "open science movement" (e.g., Nosek et al., 2018), has become standard among scholars who use the experimental method – as we do – to study political phenomena. As we explain in the Appendix, there are a number of good reasons for scholars to preregister their expectations, but we want to be clear here that none of our motivations for preregistering our pre-analysis plan are about a belief that doing so creates trust. We regret the tendency for some researchers in the open science movement to conflate preregistration with trust, because it implies that researchers who do not preregister their work are untrustworthy. It moralizes scientific protocol by making some research practices more pious than others and, thus, some researchers as more virtuous than others. Doing so ignores the uncomfortable fact that no system is foolproof. There is nothing stopping unscrupulous researchers from conducting (or worse faking) a study, committing every questionable research practice in the book, and then "preregistering" their analyses as if they had developed them before seeing the data. In the end, even when it comes to preregistered research, *we must trust that researchers are telling us the truth*. This is especially the case for our analyses, because they involve preregistering hypotheses and analyses of pre-existing data. Readers must trust that we did not peek at these data as we wrote our pre-analysis plan. We promise that we did not, but readers only have our word to take for it.

Instead of creating trust, preregistration allows honest researchers to hold themselves accountable to the highest standards. Our analogy is that researchers are a bit like Odysseus, the main character from Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*, who wanted to hear the song of the Sirens even though he knew that the Sirens' call would make him insane and drive him to kill himself. To solve this problem, Odysseus ordered his men to place wax in their ears so that they would not hear the Sirens' call and to tie him to the mast of the ship so that he could not follow their call. In our analogy, the Sirens' call is the beauty of a clean narrative where each

[2] Section 1.3 of the Appendix documents the ways in which the analyses appearing in the text deviate from the pre-analysis plan.

hypothesis is supported by an empirical test. But, like the Sirens' call, a tidy narrative is a beautiful illusion. The world is a complicated place and we cannot always be right, so science is more likely to produce messy narratives as opposed to clean ones. Preregistration binds honest researchers to the proverbial mast, helping us resist the Sirens' call.

1.6 PLAN OF THE BOOK

In many, if not most, subfields of political science, the study of elites is central. In fact, when people who are not political scientists think of what scholars of American politics do, our sense is that the image conjured in the minds of most people depicts us as studying what happens in and around the three major branches of government. Of course the field is much more than that and goes far beyond the study of institutions to include rich social scientific literatures in political attitudes and behavior. Some of the earliest behavioral research in political science began with efforts to understand the various drivers of public opinion, with a particular eye toward understanding opinion formation and change as it pertains to citizens' voting behavior. This area of inquiry spurred another subfield, typically referred to as political communication, that begot decades of studies seeking to understand media effects on citizens' attitude formation and change. One reason for the wealth of research on this topic is that understanding media effects is difficult, especially amidst the dramatic changes shaping the information environment in recent years. Nevertheless, we have learned a great deal from studies of media effects on citizens' attitudes and behaviors, even if there's much more to learn. We are sure, too, that our colleagues will continue this important work.

Despite our enthusiasm for existing research in media effects, we advocate in this book for the importance of keeping political elites in our purview in studies of media effects. After all, other elite-focused work has informed us a great deal about important aspects of political attitudes and behavior (e.g., Butler and Broockman, 2011; Butler and Nickerson, 2011). And, perhaps more importantly, a consistent pattern from findings in studies of public opinion and attitude formation is that political position taking and rhetoric among political elites – most notably those holding and running for prominent offices – do much to shape both citizens' understanding of party and candidate issue positions and their preferences for or aversions to them. What's more is that studies of the media reveal that one of its primary functions is to communicate elite

messages to the public. In other words, even if media messages have independent effects on the views of citizens, so to do the political attitudes and behaviors exhibited by political elites. If we truly want to understand the myriad ways in which media ultimately shape public opinion, we also need to understand any indirect effects they have via their influence on the attitudes of political elites. Doing so requires that we study media effects on political elites.

We are also of the mind that recent and dramatic changes to the media environment, especially in light of the media's often presumed contribution to rising polarization and an epidemic of misinformation, point to the importance of incorporating political elites more directly into our studies of these phenomena. While the conventional wisdom tends to associate media fragmentation and exposure to partisan media with rising polarization, there is some empirical evidence demonstrating a top down process by which elite polarization seems to lead mass polarization (Jacobson, 2000; Zingher and Flynn, 2018). And though our primary aim here is not necessarily to speak to or settle debates about whether mass polarization is actually occurring or the media's role in it, understanding whether partisan news is contributing to elite polarization or whether it is creating incentives for elites to engage in more polarizing behavior will shed light on those debates.

Finally, there are good reasons to expect the media, and changes to the media environment, to influence behavior among political elites. Another important function media serve in a democracy is that of the watchdog. The watchdog function is arguably the central mechanism of democratic accountability. As we described above, the electoral connection keeps officeholders attuned to the media, which they must monitor to ensure favorable depictions to their various reelection constituencies. Although a great deal of the work we describe in the sections earlier recounts this kind of media influence descriptively, considers it theoretically, or simply presumes such influence, relatively few studies attempt to empirically assess whether and how media shape the perceptions and behaviors of political elites.

In this book, we present part of our effort to start filling this gap. For both substantive and methodological reasons, we examine whether the arrival and proliferation of Fox News had a discernible impact on political elites in the United States. Specifically, we examine Fox News' effects on a particular subset of political elites: sitting members of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1996 to 2010, and those considering running for a House seat during that time (i.e., potential candidates).

Having already detailed our broader aims and the rationale underlying our open science approach in this chapter, we now proceed with a description of the chapters that follow. Chapter 2 begins with a description of the arrival and proliferation of Fox News across the United States during its early years and concludes with a description and some analyses of Fox News' content. Both demonstrations are critical to our case. The former is essential because our identification strategy requires that we satisfy the assumption that the Fox News roll-out was as-if random – or haphazard in the sense that it was not related to political factors capable of shaping House members' behavior. The latter is important for both our empirical evidence and theoretical arguments. First, if we expect the arrival and presence of Fox News to have had a unique influence on elite political behavior, it is important to demonstrate whether and to what degree Fox News' content was different from other networks. Second, examining Fox News' content can tell us something about the mechanisms for its effects or the process by which it can shape attitudes and behaviors.

In Chapter 3, we investigate whether Fox News' presence in districts shaped the competitive electoral landscape by influencing potential candidates' perceptions about the partisan make up of the constituency in the district and shaping their perceived chances of winning or losing. Specifically, in this chapter, we test whether the entry of Fox News created the perception of a rightward shift in district party composition among potential Republican candidates considering a run in the district. We find that in districts with more Fox News availability, high quality potential Republican candidates were more likely to challenge Democratic incumbents, especially in closely competitive districts.

Chapter 4 brings us into the House chamber. If the presence of Fox News in a district shaped potential candidates' perceptions about district party composition and the constituency's electoral preferences, then it stands to reason that the same can be said of sitting House members. Here, of course, the expectation is not about how these perceptions affect the decision to run for office; here they affect decisions about how to perform so as to stay in office. Much like potential candidates, sitting members of Congress have to make inferences about what their constituents want. Typically, they make these inferences based on their perceptions of the partisan composition of their district, among other considerations. If sitting members are influenced like potential candidates, Fox News might have shifted their perceptions in the direction of thinking their district was more right leaning. Alternatively, based on our evidence from Chapter 3, they might have felt more vulnerable to challenges from

potential candidates to their right. In either case, a reasonable expectation is that member roll call votes moved in a rightward direction, especially among Democrats representing more competitive districts.

In Chapter 5, we highlight the role media play in political accountability. If Fox News' entry and presence can shape candidate and member perceptions about what districts want (as we will see in Chapters 3 and 4), did Fox News also shape how responsive representatives were to constituents' policy preferences? This responsiveness to the district – also known as *dyadic representation* – is the subject of our examinations in Chapter 5. To test this question, we quantify the degree to which representatives' voting behavior diverged from what it should have been (if they were faithfully following district public opinion). Here we find, once again, that Fox News increased the tendency for Democratic members in marginal districts to "move rightward" in response to rising Fox News availability in the district. In this analysis, our measures reflect the tendency for Democrats in right-leaning districts to err on the conservative side of the median voter in their district, and that tendency worsened as district-level availability of Fox News increased.

Chapter 6 shifts our focus to *collective representation*. In other words, here we ask whether and how Fox News affects how well we, the American public, are represented by the U.S. House. While Chapter 5 revealed a Fox News effect on dyadic representation, it doesn't necessarily imply that we will observe any effects on collective representation. Yet in some ways, the path by which Fox News would exert elite effects on collective representation is more straight forward than for district-level responsiveness. Because Fox News is a national outlet with a wide following, it is possible that it could affect collective representation through its power as an agenda-setter. To the degree that many people in many districts might all regularly be watching the same news and opinion shows on Fox News means it may draw the attention of both legislators and constituents to the same shared set of issues. To test for Fox News effects on collective representation, we examine whether the presence of Fox News produced different policy outcomes than would have occurred in the absence of Fox News. To do this, we simulate a world where Fox News did not exist in any member's district and then compare it to the actual behavior of members of Congress given the observed levels of Fox News. By doing this we can examine the change in support for Republican-favored policies that occurred with movement from a no Fox News, hypothetical world to real-world district levels of Fox News availability. The results from our simulations are suggestive of a boost for Republican policies in four of

the six Congresses we examine. However, the effects are only statistically discernible from zero for one Congress, the 108th (2003–2004). We conclude the chapter with a discussion of a prominent Republican bill from this Congress in which Fox News played a potentially pivotal role in its passage.

In Chapter 7 we review our findings in the context of our initial preanalysis plan and discuss the limitations of our study. We then analyze the implications of our study and findings for their scholarly contributions, and discuss next steps for future research. We conclude with a discussion of the normative implications of our findings. Despite the hubbub about Fox News being a bull-in-the-china-shop, its effects on politicians were contingent on the context of the district they represented. Even if its effects were circumscribed, our evidence shows that the consequences were real. The implications of this finding are twofold. On the one hand, it throws some cold water on the popular notion that Fox News was a right-wing bulldozer that pulled American politics uniformly in a conservative direction. On the other hand, it makes clear that standard theoretical models of congressional behavior are founded on an assumption that, while useful, is most certainly flawed. Namely, politicians are not fully informed rational calculators. Politicians are people.