

The Arc of Anti*-Obama Sentiment in the 111th-114th Congresses

Lindsey Cormack

College of Arts and Letters
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030

lcormack@stevens.edu

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***Disclaimer:**

This is an incomplete study; all results are preliminary. I look forward to the opportunity for feedback and consideration at the 2016 SPSA.

Abstract:

Utilizing the new archival database, DCinbox.com, this study reports and discusses the most common topics and tropes regarding President Obama in official communications sent by members of the US Congress to constituents during the 111th-114th Congresses. This research establishes an empirical basis for a historical situating of the Obama presidency and reports which Obama-centric issues are most discussed by members of Congress in constituent communications. I find that Obama's announcement of executive changes to immigration policy results in the greatest number of messages. Collectively Republicans argued that Obama acted against the "will of the American people" and did "not have the authority" to "grant amnesty to millions" of "illegal immigrants". Democrats described his action as first step in addressing a "broken immigration system" to bring people "out of the shadows" and necessary in the absence of "bipartisan comprehensive immigration reform".

Introduction

The contentious presidential election of 2008, won by Barack Obama, and the subsequent 2010 Republican takeover of the House in the midterm elections set a political stage pitting the Democratic President against reinvigorated congressional Republicans. This election resulted not only in split government, but also in a government newly full of Tea Party legislators who won midterm elections campaigning explicitly on anti-Obama rhetoric and obstructionist goals (Fasenfest, 2012).

Successive elections continued this partisan split and the Congress - specifically members of the House - have expended lots of energy on political position taking, perhaps at the cost of producing legislative outcomes. These strategic communication efforts are the subject of this study. How do members of Congress communicate to constituents? When considering the President, what do they say? What are the meaningful differences between Republican and Democratic approaches? I approach these questions with a series of text analyses and find that there are significant differences between the parties both in terms of their foci and their approaches to Obama.

Members of Congress increasingly rely on online political communications such as e-newsletters to reach constituents. Every day roughly 30 members of Congress send such a message out, the content and the consequences of such actions merit academic study. Legislator to constituent communications allow legislators to craft an unmediated self-image and relate to constituents in virtually any way they like. A survey question placed on the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) finds that 14-19% of all people subscribe to the e-newsletters at some point in their adult lives.¹ Scholars have warned about the greater likelihood that online

¹ 4The CCES draws from a nationally representative survey population. The specific question posed was, "Have you ever subscribed to e-mail updates such as an e-newsletter or Real Simple Syndication (RSS) feed from any of the following elected

communications may play in manipulating the public (Ayres, 1999) – but none have focused on official Congress-to-constituent communications. In addition to readership and potential impacts, these e-newsletters provide direct evidence of the purposeful behaviors of sitting members of Congress and offer insights for scholars of political communications, political strategy, and history.

While scholars are in nearly universal agreement that political elites are polarized, a substantial body of research argues that the average American citizen is not (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2008). This difference is likely attributable to differences in interests and measurements. As opposed to dedicated policy makers – average citizens are not given hundreds of repeated yes or no voting opportunities to establish a sense of party or ideological unity. Despite these differences between voters and elected officials – when asked if American politics *feels* polarized a majority of respondents indicate that it is, and increasingly report dislike for members of the other political party (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012).

An important yet understudied component of polarized politics centers on how members of Congress communicate to constituents. As representatives, members of Congress serve as the conduits of information relating the complicated processes of D.C. to the concerns of everyday folk. The ways individual Congresspeople discuss the political process, policy debates, and pivotal actors such as the President, sets the tone for further coverage and in turn citizen perceptions. In this study, I focus on Congressional to constituent communications that center on President Obama. As the only elected official with a national constituency, he is a reasonable target for both praise and blame in these communications and is therefore a good subject for an analysis of the whole Congress.

officials?" followed by the name of their Representative, junior Senator, and senior Senator.

The Aims: An Empirical Basis for the Theorized Links Between Strategic Communication and Polarized Politics

The first aim of this study is to examine how members of Congress communicate to their constituents. Negative political communication is one of the possible reasons that politics *feels* polarized to average citizens despite that, on average, people tend to hold sometimes conflicting, and oftentimes ambivalent views on many issues (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2010).

Voters may interpret anti-Obama sentiment as an indicator of inter-branch and inter-party animosity. If it is the case that nearly every time a Republican member of Congress communicates about Obama to his constituents it is with a negative message – and by and large this is empirically the case - then people may rightfully understand politics to be polarized as an us-versus-them battle between Republicans and Democrats, and subsequently Congress versus the President.

A second aim of this study is to illustrate the differences in narratives produced by the Republican and Democratic parties on key issues. By tracing the arc of anti-Obama sentiment in the communications of individual Congressmembers I isolate the most divisive policy issues and analyze rhetorical differences between Republicans and Democrats to contextualize how members of Congress communicate positions to constituents. In this exercise, I do not focus solely on anti-Obama sentiments but instead situate anti-Obama sentiment by considering the corresponding Democratic proclivities to engage in pro-Obama communications.

While key to the overall point, the claim that anti-Obama sentiment in Congressional communications leads to increased citizen perceptions of polarization is not the central focus of this study. Thoughtful research establishing the causal link between polarizing media and perceptions of polarization within the public already exists (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2015). This interrogation of anti-Obama sentiment in the Congress is intended to historically contextualize what issue areas tend to be the most polarizing and most discussed in constituent communications.

The Empirical Case: Official Congress to Constituent Communications

In this paper I trace the arc of Obama sentiment over the 211-214th Congresses. In order to do so, I use the DC inbox database of every official e-newsletter every member of Congress sends to his or her constituents (Cormack, 2016). This database contains over 60,000 such communications all of which are archived and searchable at www.dcinbox.com.

Research Design

In order to identify which issues are most associated with Obama I work backwards from a big picture assessment of overall Obama interest to time-specific assessment of the resultant issues. The universe of data includes every e-newsletter sent from members of the House and Senate to constituents from August 2008-today.

The first step in narrowing the focus is to identify every message that mentions “Obama” or “the President”.² For every day (n=2,293) I create a measure of “Obama-centricity” that represents the number of messages on a given day that refer to Obama. The range for Obama-centricity is 0-51 with 9 Obama referencing messages per day on average.

Over the entire time span of the database, 42% of all messages sent by members of Congress to their constituents mention Obama; 30% of all messages mention him by name, and 12% reference “the President” in absence of his proper name. In terms of day-to-day coverage, 95% of all days include at least 1 reference to the President. To contextualize the frequency of Obama as a topic, the words “economy”, “health”, and, “tax” occur in 45%, 38%, and 30% of all email respectively.

² It is possible that “the President” incorrectly captures a reference to a president of a company, student government, agency, etc. and not President Obama but this does not seem to be a large problem. Out of a review of 100 randomly selected e-newsletters only 1 used the phrase “the President” and was not in reference to President Obama. “**The president** of Honduras told the delegation that witnessing his people leave their country for opportunities in the U.S. was a 'slap in the face.' “.

The second step is to create a percentage of Republican and Democrat authored e-newsletters for each day. For each day there is a measure for the percentage of emails that come from a Republican author discussing Obama. We should not expect this number to be 50%, as Republicans have enjoyed a numerical advantage over Democrats in the Congress for most of Obama's term. In December 2015, there are 300 Republicans to 234 Democrats in the House and Senate for a base expectation of 56% of all emails to come from Republicans.³ Over the course of this study, the average Republican share of Congressional seats is 51%.

The third step is to identify the most Obama centric days. This is done in three ways. First, I use a simple count comparing all days and the rank the day that has the most Obama mentioning e-newsletters as number 1, the second most as number 2, and so on. Second, I use a simple partisan ordering by count for days that have the highest numbers of Obama mentions from Republicans and the highest numbers of mentions from Democrats. Third, I use a partisan magnified measure that multiplies the number of mentions by the percentage of all Obama referencing messages on that day that originate from co-partisans.⁴ These three steps are the foundational results and are examined in the next section.

Lastly, after identifying which days focus the most on Obama I perform a series of text analyses on all messages for each day by the party of the message sender. This results in a variety of comparisons that are then used to draw conclusions on the different tropes employed by each party. Specific methods are described in the secondary results section preceding a discussion of what types of Obama sentiment each party sends to constituents.

³ This assumes Republicans and Democrats send emails at equal rates. Republicans and Democrats have e-newsletters set up at similar rates, but Republicans tend to send slightly more emails than Democrats.

⁴ At this step – I only report results from the simpler count measure.

Results: Most Obama-Centric Days

Tables 1-5 display the results for the 3 different methods of determining the most Obama-centric days. I denote each entry that initially occurs in the first raw count method, this happens in every successive table, most extensively when looking at Republican senders. The first apparent result is that Republicans dominate Democrats when it comes to discussing the President. Each day, on average, there are 7 e-newsletters sent from Republicans to constituents regarding the President, and only 2 from Democrats. Second, the topics most related to Obama are immigration, health care, the budget, and Obama's State of the Union addresses.

Table 1
Top Obama Mentioned days – raw counts

Rank	Day	Topic	Number Rep-Dem
1	11/21/2014	Day after executive Immigration Reform announcement	42-9
2	6/29/2012	Day after 5-4 SC ruling upheld President Obama's healthcare law on the constitutionality of individual mandate	36-11
3	4/15/11	Budget Showdown	36-9
4	1/27/12	Days After tax reform State of the Union	34-12
5	4/8/11	Budget Showdown	30-13
6	9/9/11	The Friday before 9/11 weekend, day after President Obama addressed a joint session of Congress to discuss jobs in America.	28-17
7	3/23/12	Two-year anniversary of the President's health care law	36-9
8	2/15/13	President Obama's first State of the Union address of his second term.	36-9
9	1/31/14	President Obama State of the Union address	33-12
10	3/30/12	Two-year anniversary of Obamacare – week of Supreme Court oral arguments challenging the constitutionality of the law	37-7

Immigration

Tables 1, 2, and 4 show that the day after Obama announced a series of executive reforms aimed at overhauling immigration laws in the U.S. resulted in the most communications invoking his name. This issue and action, more than any thing else drives Congressional to constituent communications – especially for Republicans.

Here is an excerpt from a Republican message on the topic sent on 11/21/2014,

“This week, the [sic] President Obama continued a disturbing trend. Once again, he has refused to work with the Legislative Branch of government, instead announcing his plan to unilaterally grant protection from deportation for up to 5 million individuals who are in the country illegally.” – Representative Mike Coffman (R-CO)

And from a Democrat,

“While Congress has refused to act, millions of families across our country and in California have lived under the threat of deportation. I have repeatedly urged the President to use his authority and protect families until Congress passes immigration reform. In doing so, the President would be using his power consistent with his authority and in line with many of his predecessors, both Republican and Democrat.

I am pleased that the President announced his plan this week to shield 5 million people from deportation.” – Representative Alan Lowenthal (D-CA)

Obamacare

Obama’s signature health care reform is the second most popular topic, and appears on both Republican and Democratic tables – though far more often in GOP communications. Pivotal days include the two year anniversary of the original passage which coincided with oral arguments at the Supreme Court challenging the law (for Republicans), the day the Supreme Court upheld Obamacare (for both Republicans and Democrats) and the day the “Patient’s Bill of Rights” mandating that insurance companies no longer deny coverage to those with pre-existing conditions, charge similar rates for men and women, and many other provisions went into effect (for Democrats).

Budget Disagreements

Each year the President proposes a budget to the Congress. This process leads to a back and forth and eventually a hard compromise of some sort. March 8-11, 2011 was a particularly contentious time complete with nearly realized threats of a government shut down. Both sides sought to blame each other in communications. Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) writes,

“As your representative in Washington, I am committed to avoiding a government shutdown. President Obama has said that a shutdown would affect millions of Americans, threaten vital services they have already paid for, and jeopardize our nation’s economic recovery.

Yesterday, my Democratic colleagues and I offered three opportunities to keep the government open. Republicans voted no each time. And Speaker Boehner and the Republican leadership refuse to allow us to pass a very short term bill to keep government services operating. They are insisting not just on deep budget cuts, but on policy changes that would severely restrict women’s access to health services.”

And on the same day Congressman Paul Broun (R-GA) sends,

“Last year, Democrat leadership failed to fulfill one of Congress’ most basic responsibilities by not passing a budget for 2011. As a result, Congress has been scrambling to pass a plan that funds government operations for the rest of this fiscal year. The clock is ticking, and unfortunately, we are less than 12 hours away from a government shutdown.

As Congress continues to work on negotiations, Congressman Paul Broun remains committed to cutting spending and helping to remove uncertainty for workers and private-sector job creators. While it remains unclear if Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and President Barack Obama will shut down the government, it would be irresponsible not to prepare for that possibility.”

Both appeal to Obama in their messages, yet both want to be able to place blame on the other side if a shutdown occurs. Interestingly on March 8, 2011 3 Republicans include surveys in their e-newsletters asking constituents who they would hold

responsible in the government were to shutdown, no Democrats include such surveys.

State of the Union Addresses

Much like the presentation of the budget, Obama's annual State of the Union is an understandable and instant focal point for Congress members. In table 1, the State of the Union Addresses from 2012, 2013, and 2014 make the top 10. His 2011 address was in the top 10 for Democrats. Each year the responses are somewhat similar with differences depending on what the specific priorities Obama focuses on. In 2012 the focus was tax reform and revitalization of America's middle class. Republican Georgia Senator Johnny Isakson writes,

“On Tuesday, which marked the 1,000th day since President Obama's Democrat majority in the Senate last offered a budget plan, the president delivered the annual State of the Union address to the nation with the theme of "fairness." I took to the floor of the Senate in advance of the speech to discuss this failure to offer a budget and how it is unfair to the American people. Real "fairness" would be government doing what American families have had to do: sit around the kitchen table, prioritize spending, cut spending and stop borrowing money we can't pay back.

When it comes to tax reform, we need a comprehensive approach. The president's own commission, Simpson-Bowles, recommended that we do away with many of the current tax expenditures and tax deductions, lower the tax rate on our taxpayers and produce more income. That would bring capital off the sidelines and investment back to small business. We need a comprehensive approach, not a winners-and-losers approach to tax reform.”

Isakson calls Obama's tax reform unfair and instead urges a different approach. On the other hand, Democrat Congresswoman Betty McCollum from Minnesota argues that Obama's approach is correct and powerful,

“On Tuesday, President Obama gave the annual State of the Union address, which emphasized the importance of investing in America's middle class and getting the economy back on track. Congresswoman McCollum joined the President's call for Congress to stop obstructionism and work together for the American people.

‘The President delivered a powerful plan for action,’ said Congresswoman McCollum. ‘Congress and the American people were given a clear blueprint for rebuilding our economy, strengthening the middle class, and restoring tax fairness for hard-working Americans who are not millionaires.’”

Obama’s 2013 address focused on education, infrastructure, and innovation. This address found somewhat more positive responses within the Republican Party. Representative Todd Rokita (R-IN) writes,

“Tuesday night, President Obama delivered the annual State of the Union address to Congress. His speech touched on wide array of topics. While some segments left me optimistic, other parts were more of the same rhetoric we have heard in the past.

What I did find promising, was the mention of proposals to reform early, elementary, and secondary education. As the Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education, I share the President's interest in improving elementary and secondary education.

I am eager to work with the President in reforming our system to allow all students and families access to a high quality education of their choosing and end the days where only privileged children, like those of the President and most Members of Congress, have that opportunity.

Of particular interest, the President said his education proposals would not add one more cent to our debt. I am a willing partner in reforms that spend no additional money or even save money. I am skeptical about this claim, as the President made the false claim that we are more than half-way to balancing our budget. Any economist or high school economics student can see that our debt has only increased and the President has failed to submit a balanced budget to date.”

So while there are points of nominal agreement, there are obvious digs at the President such as when Rokita indicates Obama’s rhetoric is made up of half-truths. Democrat Steve Cohen from Tennessee is markedly more optimistic,

“On Tuesday President Obama delivered his State of the Union address. The President spoke directly to Americans about what we

need to do as a nation to create jobs and continue to grow our economy. The President realizes that continuing to turn our country around economically requires hard work and persistence and that Democrats and Republicans must work together to build upon the progress we've made to strengthen the Middle Class.

If we want to help our country move forward, it is vital that Republicans join Democrats in our efforts to invest in transportation, infrastructure, manufacturing, clean energy, health care, tax reform and education. We can effectively strengthen our economy and country for future generations through strategic planning and investment. There is nothing America cannot accomplish when we put our minds to it and work together. [Click here to see President Obama's remarks.](#)"

The characterization of the 2014 State of the Union is markedly less generous from Republicans. For example, Kansas Senator Pat Roberts writes,

"Unfortunately, the 2014 State of the Union address seems to have been just recycled ideas from the 2013 State of the Union address, and we simply heard more of the same from the President. More taxes, more spending, more bypassing the Congress to enact his agenda, and more big government.

What I ask myself is, after five years of these policies what do we have? We have millions of Americans who have given up even looking for a job, businesses regulated to death and families burdened by Obamacare.

Now the President tells us he wants to double down and continue to push this agenda through executive order and regulation. The only difference that I see now is that he is finally being upfront about it. You have my assurance that I will continue to fight these orders and regulations and thinly disguised attempts to redistribute your hard earned income."

The characterization as a repeat of early addresses is perhaps not entirely off the mark, Obama did emphasize similar themes. Additionally, his indications that executive action would be necessary are true – but this decision was received widely differently depending on the party of the Congressperson communicating. Republicans tended to argue this was symptomatic of Obama's unending desire to be an overreaching executive, while Democrats blamed obstructionist House

Republicans for forcing the President into this position. Representative Andre Carson (D-IN) explains,

“This Tuesday, President Obama delivered his annual State of the Union address, defining his vision for the future of our country. His address focused on his hope for a year of action and called on Congress to put aside partisan differences in order to do what is right for our country. With the American people still waiting for action on so many critical issues, I stand with the President, ready to roll up my sleeves and get to work.

I was pleased to hear the President’s speech focus on creating opportunity for the middle-class through job creation initiatives, promoting job training and placement programs, and supporting our innovative entrepreneurs. As he rightly pointed out, investment in early childhood education programs can set our children up for a bright and prosperous future. I was grateful that the President announced he would take steps, through Executive Order, to raise the minimum wage for federal contractors. He urged Congress to raise the minimum wage for all workers to ensure that someone who works full-time does not have to struggle to provide for their families. As the President laid out, these vital initiatives serve as engines to improve our economy and create opportunities now and for future generations.”

Beyond this raw count, there are other ways of measuring which days contain the greatest amounts of Obama references Tables 2-5 display the top Obama centric days by party and by party and share of Obama message sent on a given day.

Table 2
Top Obama Mentioned days – Republican Senders

Rank	Day	Topic	Number Sent
1	11/21/14*	Day after executive Immigration Reform announcement	42
2	3/30/12*	Two-year anniversary of Obamacare – week of Supreme Court oral arguments challenging the constitutionality of the law	37
3	6/29/12*	Day after 5-4 SC ruling upheld President Obama’s healthcare law on the constitutionality of individual mandate	36
4	4/15/11*	Budget Showdown	36
5	3/23/12*	Two-year anniversary of the President’s health care law	36
6	2/15/13*	President Obama’s first State of the Union address of his second term.	36
7	2/17/12	Week of Obama’s budget proposal	35
8	2/13/15	President Obama sent a joint resolution draft to Congress titled “Authorization for Use of Military Force against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant”	35
9	2/6/15	Week of Obama’s budget proposal, Loretta Lynch nomination, votes to repeal Obamacare	35
10	1/27/12	Days after Obama’s annual State of the Union Address	34

* Also occurs on the raw count top 10 list

Republicans dominate Obama communications in general, so it is no surprise that Table 2, using a raw count of Republican sent messages for the ordering looks very much like table 1. The notable differences occur towards the bottom of the list and include additional years of annual budget fights, Obama’s request to authorize force against ISIL, additional State of the Union addresses, and his nomination of Loretta Lynch for attorney general.

**Table 3
Top Obama Mentioned days - Democrat Senders**

Rank	Day	Topic	Number Sent
1	9/9/11*	The Friday before 9/11 weekend, day after President Obama addressed a joint session of Congress to discuss jobs in America.	17
2	4/8/11*	Budget Showdown	13
3	1/26/11	President Obama delivered his second State of the Union address outlining a plan to 'win the future' through investments in innovation, education, infrastructure, and responsible government.	13
4	1/27/12*	Days After tax reform state of the union	12
5	1/31/14*	President Obama State of the Union address	12
6	6/24/11	Obama's speech on Afghanistan to bring home 30,000 American soldiers - a third of committed forces over 18 months	12
7	9/23/11	This week Obama sent to the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction his plan to jumpstart economic growth, the American Jobs Act	12
8	1/25/12	Day after President Obama delivered his State of the Union Address.	12
9	6/29/12*	Day after 5-4 SC ruling upheld President Obama's healthcare law on the constitutionality of individual mandate	11
10	7/29/11	Obama argues to raise the debt ceiling.	11

* Also occurs on the raw count top 10 list

Democrats tend to focus on the days after Obama makes new policy announcements, most often during annual State of the Union Addresses. A day that makes this list, but not the Republican list is after the SOTU in 2011 when the President made a host of arguments founded in the House Democrats' Make It In America agenda. He urged Congress to pass legislation investing in education in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, domestic manufactures, and infrastructure projects. Republicans, on average, did not find much wrong with

this address, but none were entirely sold. Here is one of the most favorable GOP responses from 1/26/11:

“In last night’s State of the Union address, President Obama recognized the need to spur job creation, strengthen the economy and reduce the size of government.

We agreed about some of the problems our country confronts.

Yet our solutions remain vastly different.

While the Republicans have called for immediately rolling back discretionary spending to pre-stimulus levels, the President called for freezing it at current levels - which means 84% more spending.

While Republicans have called for safely and responsibly exploring all domestic energy solutions, the President has shut down domestic energy exploration and called for new spending on "clean energy."
- Todd Akin (R-MO)

Table 4
Top Obama Mentioned days - Republican Magnified

Rank	Day	Topic	Num. Sent	Share of Messages
1	11/21/14*	Day after executive Immigration Reform announcement	42	82%
2	3/15/13	Obama came to Capitol Hill to discuss budget plans with House Republicans	34	97%
3	3/30/12*	Two-year anniversary of Obamacare – week of Supreme Court oral arguments challenging the constitutionality of the law	37	84%
4	2/6/15	Week of Obama’s budget proposal, Loretta Lynch nomination, votes to repeal Obamacare	35	88%
5	2/13/15	President Obama sent a joint resolution draft to Congress titled “Authorization for Use of Military Force against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)”	35	85%
6	9/20/13	House Vote in favor of legislation that defunds Obamacare, keeps the government running through a Continuing Resolution to avoid shut down.	34	85%
7	3/23/12*	Two-year anniversary of the President’s health care law	36	80%
8	2/15/13*	President Obama’s first State of the Union address of his second term.	36	80%
9	3/27/15	Obama releases a budget proposal	33	87%
10	2/17/12	Week of Obama’s budget proposal	35	81%

* Also occurs on the raw count top 10 list

Table 4 shows that on days that Republicans send many Obama related messages, they also tend to dominate the overall discussion, routinely accounting for over 80% of all Obama messages on a given day, and on some days making up nearly 100%.

The second entry on this GOP-magnified list represents a rare time in which Republicans “praised” Obama for coming to Capitol Hill. Yet, a minimally thoughtful read of these communications shows that the praise is laced with obvious negative undertones.

“On Wednesday, President Obama addressed the House Republican Conference on a variety of issues, most importantly our nation’s fiscal and budgetary challenges. I was glad to see the President’s interest in speaking with us and I agree with him that we need a responsible plan that will get our fiscal house in order without harming the tepid economic recovery that is underway. Right now, the share of the national debt for each resident of San Bernardino County is over \$52,000. Until we get spending under control and reduce the debt, hard-working families that are already making difficult choices to make ends meet will be faced with the prospect of higher taxes.

Until the Administration releases its budget- which is now two months late - it will be difficult for serious discussions on reducing our deficit to move forward.” – Representative Gary Miller (R-CA)

**Table 5
Top Obama Mentioned days – Democrat Magnified**

Rank	Day	Topic	Num. Sent	Share of Messages
1	1/26/11	President Obama delivered his second State of the Union address outlining a plan to 'win the future' through investments in innovation, education, infrastructure, and responsible government.	13	76%
2	1/25/12	Day after President Obama delivered his State of the Union Address.	12	54%
3	9/9/11*	The Friday before 9/11 weekend, day after President Obama addressed a joint session of Congress to discuss jobs in America.	17	38%
4	7/23/10	President Obama signs Unemployment Insurance Extension and Wall Street Reform	10	63%
5	6/18/10	BP has reached a preliminary agreement with Obama Administration to pay \$20 billion over several years into an independent account to compensate Gulf residents affected by the spill.	11	52%
6	12/21/12	In response to Newtown shooting Obama announced that his Administration would send a gun control package to Congress next month; "fiscal cliff" dispute	11	50%
7	11/9/12	Obama re-election and proposal to put veterans to work protecting and rebuilding America, and provide them with the tools necessary to start small businesses.	7	78%
8	7/16/10	Obama announced new rule to make it easier for Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome to claim benefits	9	60%
9	9/24/10	Day after several consumer protection features of the new health reform initiative went into effect (Patient's Bill of Rights) six months after Obama signed the Affordable Care Act into law.	11	48%
10	1/5/11	Obama signs James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act into law	5	100%

The first major result from table 5 is that Democrats infrequently account for the majority of Obama communications on any day. They send far fewer messages – and even on high Obama-centric days, Republicans also send many messages.

Democrats did send more messages in the early Obama days when they held a numerical majority in the House and Senate, but even then the raw numbers are far fewer than what is normally sent by Republicans. Democrats rally around Obama initiatives that Republicans avoid – these topics include a bill to provide for an extension of Unemployment Insurance, Wall Street Reform, Veterans policies, and the James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act.

The days after the Newtown school shooting where more than 20 children were murdered, Democrats sent more messages than they normally do, but Republicans matched these efforts. At the same time of national mourning, there were growing concerns in D.C. of going over the “fiscal cliff”. Below are examples of the different ways members of each party discussed those topics.

“The tragedy in Newtown is a stark reminder that it is long past time to take action on gun control. President Obama just announced that his Administration would send a gun control package to Congress next month. I look forward to that. The President has also called for the renewal of the assault weapons ban. There is no reason Congress can’t take action on that quickly. I supported renewing the assault weapons ban in 2004, and I am sorry that it expired without a vote. We cannot prevent every act of violence, but there are certainly many steps that can be taken to improve safety. Congress must extend the assault weapons ban, close gun show loopholes, ban the sale of large capacity magazines, and restrict sales at gun shows. I support all of this. I am hopeful that meaningful gun control will finally be implemented early in 2013.

Plan B and the Fiscal Cliff

An agreement on the fiscal cliff has still not been reached, so yesterday, Speaker Boehner tried to place what he referred to as “Plan B” on the House floor for a vote. That measure would have made tax cuts permanent for the first \$1 million in income for all taxpayers, and let them expire for income over \$1 million. It also included a permanent extension of the tax rate on Capital Gains and Dividends at

15% for income up to \$1 million and a permanent extension of current Estate Tax rates. It did not extend the expansions of the Earned Income Tax Credit or the Child Care Tax Credit. It also eliminated the American Opportunity Tax Credit, which is for higher education expenses. By not addressing these three provisions, 25 million families would have seen an average tax increase of \$1,000".
- Representative Michael Capuano (D-MA)

From that same day, Republican Senator Kelly Ayotte writes,

"The Senate wrapped up votes for the week late Friday afternoon. While I'm pleased that we passed the annual defense bill, which included several provisions I wrote to support our troops and bring greater accountability to the Pentagon, I'm disappointed that an agreement has not been reached to prevent the so-called 'fiscal cliff.' I continue to believe that Congress and President Obama need to produce a plan that delivers serious deficit and debt reduction without harming our economy.

Our hearts remain heavy as we mourn with the community of Newtown, Connecticut. In these final days before Christmas, I hope you will keep the victims of this horrible tragedy and their families in your thoughts and prayers. May we all count our blessings during this holiday season." – Senator Kelly Ayotte (R-NH)

As before, an in-depth analysis of this specific topic is the aim of a different study, but immediate differences are apparent. Both call on Obama to act, but Democrats urge movement on gun reforms while Republicans offer condolences and spell out no role for the executive in this realm, yet do urge the President to deal with the "fiscal cliff". In the next section I perform the sort of in-depth analysis I allude to on the e-newsletters sent on November 21, 2014 after Obama's immigration reform announcements.

Results: The terminology and tropes used by Republicans and Democrats to refer to Obama - Immigration Case

To assess the way Republicans and Democrats speak about Obama every communication on the above reported high profile days, are processed in the following manner:

- 1.) Create one overall document for each party combining every Obama mentioning email from that day.
 - Only using paragraphs that mention Obama or the President – to avoid analyzing extraneous, district specific text.
- 2.) Compare the relative sizes of each text
- 3.) Remove common and stop words from each text.
- 4.) Create lists of most frequently used words for each party
- 5.) Further analyze the texts for the most frequently used bigrams (combinations of 2 words), trigrams (3 words), 4-grams, and 5-grams
 - Common and stop words are reinserted prior to this step for grammatical sense.

Performing the above steps on multiple topics is the task of a larger project, for this paper I report only on the highest Obama-Centric day regarding immigration reform. After removing stop words, common e-newsletter words (from, sender, date, etc.), and common signature terms (House, Senate, Representative, Senator, Washington, etc.) table 6 compares the most frequently used words in messages that mention Obama on November 21, 2014 – the day after his immigration proposal. Republicans sent significantly more messages than Democrats on this day; when combined into two overall Republican and Democrat corpuses – it would take approximately 53 minutes for a human to read the whole Republican text, and only 16 to read the Democrat text.

Table 6
Most Frequently used words in Congress-to-Constituents by Party: November 21, 2014

Rank	Republican	Democrat
1	President	President
2	Immigration	Immigration
3	Obama	Action
4	Executive	Families
5	American	Obama
6	People	Executive
7	Action	Reform
8	Amnesty*	System
9	Laws	Republicans
10	System	Broken
11	Law	Comprehensive
12	Constitution	Bipartisan
13	Actions	Country
14	Border	Millions
15	Immigrants	Actions
16	Nation	Economy
17	Reform	Immigrants
18	Illegal	People
19	Authority	Undocumented
20	Country	Authority

Bold indicates terms that only make the top 20 for one party

* Indicates terms that are never used by the other party

Table 6 makes shows important few partisan differences in how Republicans and Democrats communicated their opinions on Obama’s actions regarding immigration. Most notably, Republicans were quick to characterize the actions as “amnesty” and no Democrats ever used that term. Another nearly exclusive Republican focus is about how Obama was in violation of the “Constitution” and risked the “border” by his actions towards “illegal” immigrants. Democrats on the other hand mentioned how Obama’s actions will improve the lives of “families” who are made up in part of “undocumented” immigrants that number in the “millions” and contribute to our “economy”. There is also noticeable anti-House “Republican” sentiment for failing to take up the Senate passed “bipartisan comprehensive” immigration reform.

For more detailed analysis, I isolate the most frequently used bigrams, trigrams, 4-grams, and 5-grams, these are reported by party in Table 7.⁵

⁵ Some repetitive bi-5 grams are not displayed. An example is when something like “will of the American people” is the most frequent 5 gram, but so is “*the* will of the American” and “of the American people *and*”. In each of these instances I report the most root version of the bi-5 gram.

Table 7
Most Frequent bigrams-5-grams in Congress-to-Constituents by Party:
November 21, 2014

Republican	Count	Democrat	Count
Bigrams			
President Obama	99	immigration system	23
the President	79	immigration reform	19
the American	57	the President	18
American people	53	President Obama	15
on immigration	35	broken immigration	15
immigration system	30	comprehensive immigration	13
the Constitution	27	millions of	12
The law	21	executive action	12
executive action	21	of families	10
millions of	19	Refused to	9
executive order	18	our country	9
illegal immigrants	18	our economy	8
immigration reform	18	House Republicans	8
Trigrams			
the American people	48	broken immigration system	15
President Obama has	15	comprehensive immigration reform	10
action on immigration	15	millions of families	7
to work with	15	Immigration Accountability Executive	6
will of the	12	bipartisan comprehensive immigration	6
amnesty to millions	12	night President Obama	6
4-grams			
of the American people	14	our broken immigration system	11
executive action on immigration	10	bipartisan comprehensive immigration reform	4
amnesty to millions of	10	Last night President Obama	4
5-grams			
will of the American people	8	President Obama's Immigration Accountability Executive	3
grant amnesty to millions of	6	bipartisan comprehensive immigration reform bill	3
does not have the authority	6	fix our broken immigration system	3

Implications

A glaring difference between Democrats and Republicans is how often they choose to engage constituents regarding Obama. Republicans are far more likely to use Obama as a piñata in communications than Democrats are to praise the leader of their party. Congressional Democrats are in a trickier situation – not clearly knowing how their constituents view Obama, and presumably wanting to be re-elected to office they must devise a strategy that either attempts alignment with Obama in the hopes that his coattails will help them into office, or they must distance themselves if they fear association does more harm than good. However, as a party brand tactic - the lack of strong presidential support allows the GOP to better control the chatter and memes regarding Obama.

In terms of specific policy issues Democrats again risk brand harm in not developing and parroting memes or talking points that would provide popular or media supporters with a common lexicon when discussing issues. Part of this divergence undoubtedly lies with the different organizational structures and willingness to submit to hierarchy between Republicans and Democrats. Republicans tend to be more “on message”, willing to develop centralized talking points that are subsequently communicated by the party, and more willing to abide by such authoritarian structures in general (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009). Even differences between Establishment and Tea Party Republicans are mostly eliminated when the topic is President Obama.

This type of research is important for a few reasons. To start, there is some ambiguous sense of what political observers, experts, reporters, and academics “know” about the parties and how each regards Obama, but what is this “knowledge” based on? By archiving and rigorously analyzing original texts from members of Congress to constituents our collective theoretical understanding of congressional-executive and congressional-constituent relations is on stronger footing. The results presented here contribute to the overall polarization or sorting

literatures in a different way than previous partisan difference research has. The results provide strong empirical evidence that members of different parties speak about the same topics drawing on different framing choices.

The individual words and collections of words that come up as most frequent via computer processing are informative and straightforward – but the truly valuable and interesting information is only uncovered with human analysis of the resultant data, and cross checking of the actual e-newsletters. This type of mixed work spanning qualitative and quantitative schools of thought has limitations, in an area that is increasingly influenced by “big data” a level of human based, academic insights is not only desirable, it is necessary.

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