

What Gets Covered? How Media Coverage of Elite Debate Drives the Rally-'Round-the-Flag Phenomenon, 1979-1998.

In seeking to explain the causes of the rally-round-the-flag phenomenon, some scholars have cited a surge of patriotism when the president focuses the nation's attention beyond the water's edge. Others have attributed the effect to an absence of elite criticism, or of media coverage of critical views, in the initial stages of foreign crises, when the Administration is the media's primary source of information. Still others have found evidence that the magnitude of rallies depends upon the extent of bipartisan support for a president's foreign policy. With several notable exceptions (esp. Brody 1991), most of these arguments are based on an assumption that elite debate, or the lack thereof, is mirrored in media coverage. And even those studies that *have* explicitly tested this assumption have done so with respect to only a small number of cases. As a consequence, the most broadly accepted explanations for the rally phenomenon – an absence of initial elite criticism reflected in uncritical media coverage – remains largely untested. This study corrects that deficiency. We undertake a comprehensive examination of television coverage of all major U.S. uses of military force from 1980 to 1998. Specifically, we content analyze all congressional evaluations of the president and the executive branch of government that appeared in ABC's *World News Tonight* within a 60-day time period centered on the start date of each use of force. We use this data to test a series of hypotheses concerning the nature and significance of the rally phenomenon. We find, contrary to the arguments of Brody (1991) and others, that elites show little inclination to suspend partisan attacks on the president during crisis periods. Indeed, we find an overwhelming prevalence of critical comments by Members of Congress before and in the immediate aftermath of rally events. Although presidents are not particularly successful at changing the tenor of elite debate when they employ military force, they are somewhat more successful at changing its *subject*. Indeed, consistent with the diversionary war hypothesis, we find that elite commentary immediately following the initiation of rally events turns disproportionately toward foreign policy. We conclude, in part, that the existence or absence of rallies is unlikely to be attributable to variations in the tenor of elite debate as presented in the mass media, and that politics was no more likely to stop at the water's edge in the final decade of the Cold War than in the post-Cold War era.

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Immediately following the initiation of the first Persian Gulf War on January 17, 1991, President George Herbert Walker Bush saw his approval ratings spike by 24 percentage points (from 59% in a January 3-6 Gallup Poll, to 83% in a January 17-20 Poll). Prior to the outbreak of the second Gulf War (“Operation Iraqi Freedom”) in March 2003, President George Walker Bush’s approval rating (58%) was nearly identical to that of his father prior to the initiation of Operation Desert Storm. While, following the outbreak of war, the younger President Bush’s approval ratings also spiked, the rise was only about half as large -- 13 percentage points (from 58% to 71%) – as that enjoyed by the elder President Bush.¹

Why did the elder Bush receive a rally effect nearly twice as large as that of his son prior to the outbreak of war in the Persian Gulf? Brody (1991) suggests a possible explanation. He argues that the existence or absence of elite criticism of the president immediately following the initiation of a use of force determines – or at least strongly influences -- the magnitude of a post-use of force rally (see also Brody and Shapiro 1989, ONeal *et al.*, 1996). Perhaps there was greater criticism of the younger President Bush among political elites. If so, this could explain the differential in their rallies. Yet a review of the pre-war debates in 1990-91 and 2002-03 suggest this explanation is in all likelihood insufficient. The elder President Bush barely managed to gain congressional authorization for using force to evict Iraq from Kuwait (by a 53 to 47 vote in the U.S. Senate), while the younger President Bush gained overwhelming congressional support for using force against Iraq (by a 77 to 23 vote in the Senate). And pre-war levels of public support for using force were quite similar during the run-ups to the two Gulf Wars, with the younger Bush enjoying slightly higher levels of public support for his war policy. In five Gallup Polls conducted in December 1990, for instance, between 48 and 55 percent of respondents favored “going to war with Iraq in order to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait” (Mueller 1994: 219).

¹ Source: Gallup Polls, 3/14-15/03 and 3/22-23/03.

In two separate Gallup Polls, conducted on February 28th and March 17th, 2003, public support for going to war against Iraq measured 59% and 64%, respectively. These data suggests that, in all likelihood, greater elite criticism cannot account for the smaller rally received by George W. Bush.

Baum (2002) offers an alternative explanation. Building on Brody and Shapiro (1989) and Brody (1991), he argues that the extent of elite debate may matter less for the size of rallies than the extent of *media coverage* of any such debate and the partisan makeup of the debaters. Baum's argument differs from Brody, however, by explicitly recognizing that these factors may not always move in tandem. To explain why this may be the case, Baum builds on a theory developed by Groeling (2001), who argues that the presence of divided or unified control of government can significantly alter elite partisan discourse in the news. In particular, Groeling argues that because the news media generally prefer novel, balanced, and conflict-filled stories featuring important actors, they prefer to devote precious airtime to stories about strife and discord within the president's party, particularly when the president's party controls both branches of government. Conversely, the non-presidential party in both unified and divided government can either oppose or support the president and be relatively assured of receiving coverage. Unified government therefore serves to amplify media coverage of conflict within the presidential party.

Groeling further argues that because they are atypical and represent costly signals, opposition party endorsements of, or presidential party attacks on, the president are extremely credible (Koeske and Crano, 1968; Dutton, 1973; Eagly, Wood and Chaiken, 1978; Eagly 1981, Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Groeling, 2001). More generally, typical individuals will consider statements by elites from their own party as more credible than statements by opposition elites. Hence, while the day-to-day patterns of press coverage during divided government include large quantities of opposition party attacks on the president, these very patterns, combined with journalists' preference for novel stories, and the greater credibility to party identifiers of statements by their fellow partisans, may actually enhance the size of rallies during divided

government. Moreover, because the public expects a president's fellow partisans to support him during an international crisis, the magnified novelty of any continued intra-party discord during rally events should be *even more* newsworthy for journalists, and so even more likely to gain airtime, as well as being especially damaging to the president's standing with the public.

This suggests that at least one factor contributing to the difference in magnitude of the rallies enjoyed by the two Presidents Bush may be the differing degrees of partisan control of government during their administrations. In other words, the elder President Bush went to war during divided government, while the younger Bush did so during a time of unified government. It may simply be the case that, for reasons having little to do with the relative merits of the two conflicts, the elder Bush received more favorable coverage in the media. Of course, absent data on the tenor of media coverage, this explanation remains conjectural.

In fact, most theoretical discussions of Brody and Shapiro's elite indexing hypothesis depend on a critical, yet unproven, underlying assumption concerning the tenor of media coverage of elite debate surrounding U.S. uses of military force. That is, these arguments assume that the valence and extent of elite debate is accurately reflected in media coverage. In addition, with several exceptions (e.g., Morgan and Bickers 1992, Edwards and Swenson 1997, Baum 2002), they have also treated the public as an undifferentiated mass. Indeed, most previous studies of the rally phenomenon (Mueller 1970 & 1973, Parker 1995, Kernell 1975, Brody and Shapiro 1989, Oneal *et al.* 1996, Jordan and Page 1992, Lian and Oneal 1993, Brody 1991) have either failed to account for partisan differences in rally effects, or have based their arguments largely on the aforementioned unproven assumption, or both.

In the absence of reliable longitudinal data on the nature and extent of elite discussion in the mass media, the latter assumption has never been subjected to rigorous empirical testing.²

² One partial exception is Brody (1991), who analyzes the content of media coverage surrounding several specific rally events. His data does not, however, investigate all potential rally events during the period he investigates. He also does not consider the effects of the

This chapter corrects that deficiency. We explicitly investigate whether, as Groeling (2001) and Baum (2002) argue, differences in *media coverage* of elite debate in unified versus divided government can help account for variations in the size of post use-of force rallies. We also investigate the role of political partisanship as a mediating factor in influencing the likelihood that different types of individuals will rally under differing circumstances. To do so, we have collected data on media coverage of congressional discussion of the president and his policies in periods before and after all major U.S. uses of military force between 1979 and 1998. We find, somewhat surprisingly, that while, as Brody and Shapiro (1989) and others have argued, the magnitude of rallies does indeed appear to vary systematically with the tenor of elite discussion in the media, the *actual* tenor of such elite discussion is overwhelmingly negative, even during rally events. Moreover, the end of the Cold War appears to have produced virtually no effect on this near constant drumbeat of negativity. Indeed, we find little evidence of a partisan truce at the water's edge.

The remainder of this chapter proceeds as follows. We begin by presenting our theoretical argument. We then discuss our methods and data, and present the results of our empirical investigation. In the final section, we consider the implications of our findings and offer conclusions.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

What is Newsworthy?

Politicians expend considerable effort in seeking to shape their messages and images in the news media. However, because of their function as “gatekeepers” of political news content, journalists and news organizations maintain ultimate control over the content of their news programs. In deciding what political material is or is not “news”, certain characteristics of stories or sources make them more (or less) desirable for journalists. In particular, Groeling

partisan make-up of elites appearing in the media on different partisan subgroups in the population. Baum (2002), in contrast, undertakes the latter two investigations, but not the first.

(2001) argues that journalists are generally more likely to air a story if it is novel, conflictual, balanced, and involves authoritative political actors.³

In brief, a preference for **novelty** implies simply that journalists place a premium on stories that are actually new (*All else equal, journalists prefer stories that contain new or unexpected information to stories presenting old or expected information*).⁴ Journalists also prefer to emphasize negativity, or **conflict**, in their coverage, as this adds drama (*All else equal, journalists prefer stories in which political figures attack each other to stories in which political figures praise each other*).⁵ Journalists' preference for **balance**, in turn, follows from their strong incentive to use procedures or strategic "rituals" of objectivity in doing their jobs (Tuchman 1972 and others) (*All else equal, journalists prefer stories that include both parties' views to stories that only present the views of members of a single party*). Finally the premium placed on **authority** reflects reporters' belief that "the higher up an official's position in government, the more authoritative a source he or she was presumed to be, and the better his or her prospects for making the news" (Sigal 1986, 20) (*All else equal, journalists prefer to include sources with greater authority in their stories over less authoritative sources*).

Table 1 applies these story characteristic preferences to four types of partisan evaluations of the president. This allows us to determine which types of stories are most likely to gain airtime. With respect to such evaluations, Table 1 shows that praise of the president by his own party is of little interest to journalists, especially during divided government. This is

³ See Chapter 2 of Groeling (2001) for a more complete presentation of this argument.

⁴ As ABC's John Cochran observed, "We do try to find places where we can surprise people... If you can find a surprise; you've got to find a way to get them in the tent" (Kurtz 1999). See also Groeling and Kernell (1998) for empirical evidence of the media's sensitivity to changes in presidential support in their decisions to air such stories.

⁵ Authors such as Patterson (1996), Sabato (1991) and Cappella and Jamieson (1997) have observed that while negativity and conflict have long been staples of American journalism, the news media have increasingly embraced "attack journalism" and cynicism since the 1960s. Regardless of whether one attributes the shift to underlying changes in cynicism, competition, standards of performance, or other causes, there seems to be consensus within the scholarly literature that negativity is dominant in modern news coverage.

because it is neither novel nor conflictual when a member of the president's party praises the president. In contrast, presidential party criticism of the president is highly attractive to journalists, especially during unified government. After all, criticism is, by definition conflictual. And it is certainly novel – relatively unusual and unexpected -- when a president's fellow partisan criticizes him. Evaluations of the president by the non-presidential party, in contrast, tend to be newsworthy regardless of which party controls the Congress, albeit somewhat more so in divided government. This is because such comments are always either novel – if they consist of praise for the president – or conflictual – if they are critical of the president. Airing comments by the opposition party also helps to add balance to stories about the president and his policies. Finally, journalists' preference for authoritative sources leads to a tendency to over-represent the majority party in the Congress. If the majority party happens to share the president's party affiliation, then, for the reasons outlined above, this leads to the strongest possible incentive for journalists to air any intra-party criticism of the president, as such criticism is novel, conflictual, and authoritative, and may also enhance balance (at least if the story features the president or members of his administration advocating his policies).

[Table 1 here]

"Rally Events" as Special Cases

If Table 1 delineates the newsworthiness of "politics as usual," this raises the question of how newsworthiness in a foreign policy crisis might systematically differ. Implicit in the very notion of a "rally-'round-the-flag" is that international crises will induce each party to increase its support for the president. From a standpoint of newsworthiness, however, the impact is somewhat more complex.

If journalists do, in fact, expect politics to "stop at the water's edge" in times of crisis, their perception of the novelty of the various types of evaluations of the president might differ from "normal" times, as well. In other words, if journalists *expect* partisans from both parties to rally behind the president during a crisis, criticism of the president by *either* party -- but

especially the presidential party -- becomes even more newsworthy than during non-crisis periods. Table 2 illustrates this point. While this table tells us little about each party's intent to support the president in a time of crisis, it does suggest that should any members of either party choose to criticize the president, those members will find journalists even more eager to air their comments than during non-crisis times.

[Table 2 here]

What is Persuasive?

In determining each message type's effect on viewers, it is important to note not just the *content* of the message itself, but also its *credibility* and that of the speaker. Party messages are not "injected" into a passive public, but rather are processed by individuals who will accept or reject such messages depending in part on their credibility.⁶

One source of credibility for a message is the belief that the speaker and listener have common interests (Crawford and Sobel 1982). Restated in partisan terms, this suggests that *statements by a listener's own party will be regarded as more credible than those of the opposing party, all else equal*. We call this our **Partisan Credibility Conjecture**.⁷

Another important source of credibility derives from the interaction of source and message: whether the message being spoken is costly to the speaker (Spence 1973). Messages viewed as harming the interests of the speaker are regarded as more credible than those that impose no costs (so-called "cheap talk").⁸ In the context of partisan messages, it follows that

⁶ For some examples about how the source of a message can affect its credibility, see Asch 1952, Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991, Zaller 1992, Kuklinski and Hurley 1996, and Druckman 1999.

⁷ Note that this does not imply that a voter will regard their own party's statements as unvarnished truth, but rather that they would be less willing to believe the same statement coming from a member of the opposite party. This assumption is also consistent with observations of partisan perceptual screens, such as those discussed by Zaller (1987).

⁸ A related line of inquiry is research in the social psychological literature into the influence of "incongruous" stances, or ones that appear to be inconsistent with a speaker's best interests (Walster, Aronson, and Abrahams 1966, Koeske and Crano 1968). This perspective is also

messages by partisan speakers that appear to damage their own party or help the other party are regarded as more credible than messages that help their own party or damage the other party. We term this our **Costly Credibility Conjecture**. Such costly messages should be at least somewhat credible regardless of the party affiliation of the listener. Table 3 summarizes the relative credibility of different partisan messages about the president based on their partisan and costly credibility.

[Table 3 here]

Table 3 demonstrates the relatively weak persuasive power of “politics as usual” statements (i.e., non-presidential party attacks of the president, and presidential party praise). Such statements serve only to rally their own followers, who in all likelihood *already* approved of the president *prior* to any rally event, and, hence, are unable to re-evaluate the president upward following a use of military force (Baum 2002). In contrast, non-presidential party praise should be exceptionally persuasive and beneficial to the president, especially among citizens belonging to the non-presidential party. If rally events really do produce bipartisan elite support for the president, this suggests such support should be highly effective at moving public opinion – especially among opposition identifiers -- in support of the president. Similarly, if members of the president’s own party attack him, the effects on public opinion should be similarly dramatic (but negative), especially among the president’s fellow partisans. In both cases, the media demand for such stories virtually ensures they will receive coverage if offered.

Hypotheses

A large number of hypotheses concerning the nature, extent, and consequences of partisan rhetoric in the media follow from the theory summarized above. For this chapter, however, we focus our empirical tests on seven hypotheses pertaining, directly or indirectly, to the implications of the theory for the rally phenomenon⁹:

reinforced by further findings that “disconfirming” messages (i.e. messages in which a speaker takes an unexpected position) are more persuasive than “confirming” messages. See Eagly, Wood, and Chaiken 1978, Eagly 1981).

⁹ For tests of a broader range of hypotheses derived from the theory, see Groeling (2001).

- (1) ***The Elite Indexing Hypothesis:*** *The more supportive the elite commentary presented in the media during rally events, the larger the rally effect among the general public. This hypothesis tests the indexing hypothesis advanced by Brody and Shapiro (1989) and others.*
 - (2) ***The Negativity Hypothesis:*** *Overall, a majority of all elite comments concerning the president featured in the media will be critical of the president and his policies, even during rally events. This hypothesis tests one of the assumptions of our model.*
 - (3) ***The Credible Cue Hypothesis:*** *Presidential evaluations by members of a given party will have a stronger effect on the propensity to rally of that party's identifiers than will comments by party elites of the other party. This hypothesis specifically tests the impact of partisan credibility on public opinion.*
 - (4) ***Corollary 1 to the Credible Cue Hypothesis:*** *As praise by the non-presidential party increases, relative to criticism by the presidential party, rallies will increase in magnitude. This corollary predicts a strong persuasive impact from partisan statements with a high level of costly credibility.*
 - (5) ***Corollary 2 to the Credible Cue Hypothesis:*** *Variations in the ratio of criticism by the non-presidential party to praise by the presidential party will have a weaker effect on rallies. In contrast to Corollary 1 above, this hypothesis predicts a weaker impact of partisan statements with the lowest level of costly credibility.*
 - (6) ***The Unified Government Hypothesis:*** *Presidential party criticism of the president will be featured more frequently in the media during unified government than during divided government. Non-presidential party criticism of the president will be similarly featured in the media during both unified and divided government. This hypothesis predicts that unified government will increase media coverage of internal disputes within the presidential party (see Groeling 2001).*
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(7) ***The Unified Rally Hypothesis:*** *Due to their exceptional novelty, presidential party criticism of the president will be featured even more prominently during rally events than during other periods. The praise-to-criticism ratio for the non-presidential party will vary less across unified and divided government, or across rally and non-rally periods. As illustrated in Table 2, the special case of rallies increases the novelty value of internal disputes within the presidential party, particularly in unified government.*

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Mueller (1970, 1973) lists six categories of rally events: sudden military interventions, major military developments in ongoing wars, major diplomatic developments, dramatic technological developments, meetings between the U.S. president and leaders of other major powers and the start of each presidential term. He argues that for an event to be classified as a potential rally event, it should satisfy three criteria: (1) be international, (2) directly involve the U.S. in general, and the president in particular, and (3) be “specific, dramatic and sharply focused” (1973:209). Oneal *et al.* (1996:265) further restrict their definition of rally events to “major uses of force during a crisis.” This, they argue, ensures that they are “considering only cases that were truly consequential for the U.S. and salient to the public, necessary conditions for a rally...” Following Oneal *et al.* (1996), we restrict our analysis to major uses of force during foreign policy crises.

For our data set, we rely upon Baum (2002), whose data encompasses the period 1953-1998. Baum’s data is derived from an updated version of Blechman and Kaplan’s (1978) data set on political uses of force (see also Kaplan and Blechman 1978, Oneal *et al.* 1996, Fordham and Sarver 2001). Following Oneal *et al.* (1996), we code all uses of force measuring levels 1-3 on Blechman and Kaplan’s (1978) scale as “major uses of force.” Of these, also following Baum (2002), we exclude several events that appeared inconsistent with the aforementioned definitions, either because they represented long-scheduled military exercises (e.g., “Team Spirit” in Korea in March 1990), or a cancellation of a previously scheduled withdrawal of forces, rather than a

proactive and unscheduled force deployment (e.g., November 1991 in Korea), or because they clearly did not constitute major uses of force during a U.S. foreign policy crisis (e.g., U.S. support for withdrawal of U.N. forces from Somalia in January-March 1995, which took place long after the U.S. withdrew its forces from that nation). Our data includes a total of 37 rally events, representing “major uses of force” by the United States between 1979 and 1998.

With the aid of a small army of research assistants, we collected data on congressional comments on the president and the executive branch of government during the periods immediately preceding and following each candidate rally event.¹⁰ Because American uses of military force typically do not emerge overnight as bolts from the blue, we collected data for a 60-day window surrounding each rally event, from 30 days before to 30 days after the start date. Given our primary interest in explaining short-term media and public responses to foreign policy rallies, for our primary analysis we designate rally periods beginning 10 days prior to the start date of each event until 20 days following the event. Figure 1 illustrates the preponderance of congressional commentary in the media regarding foreign policy within this window.

[Figure 1 here]

For each event, we first searched the Vanderbilt Television News Abstracts to locate every instance on the evening news broadcasts of a representative broadcast network (ABC’s *World News Tonight*) in which a Senator or Representative appeared in stories related to the president or the executive branch of government. Next, our research assistants watched videotaped recordings or read verbatim transcripts of all of the stories, coding the valence (positive, negative or neutral) of each member of Congress’ comments, as well as their subject matters (e.g. foreign or domestic

¹⁰ We are indebted to the tireless efforts of Jeff Barry, Connie Choe, Jenny Cocco, Jennifer Dekel, Betty Fang, Brette Fishman, Rita Ghuloum, Daniel Gordon, Kazue Harima, Julia Heiser, Marchela Iahdjian, Sangeeta Kalsi, Robert Kelly, Jihyun Kim, Alain Kinaly, Priya Koundinya, Jennifer Lee, Andrea Peterson, Brittney Reuter, David Rigsby, Brooke Riley, Dean Sage, Paula Simon, Erin Skaalen, Katherine Steele, Julia Tozlian, Alyson Tufts, Phuong Vu, William Whitehorn, Jordan Yurica, and especially Michael Sefanov, Maya Oren, Alexandra Brandt and Elizabeth Cummings.

policy issues) and the characteristics of the speaker (e.g., party affiliation, leadership position in the Congress, etc.). In order to be included in our analysis, the member's statements had to be presented in the broadcast as a direct quote of an identifiable member, and their statement had to pertain directly to the president or executive branch of government. (The content analysis coding form is presented in the Appendix.) We identified a total of 625 comments on *World News Tonight* appropriate for coding during the 2220 days falling within ± 30 day windows surrounding our 37 rally events.¹¹ The magnitude of the coding project prevented us from assigning multiple coders to all of our observations. As a "second best" alternative, we performed inter-coder reliability tests on a randomly selected subset of approximately 20% of our data. The results from these tests indicated that our coders agreed on approximately 80% of all coding decisions. Though certainly not ideal, we consider this an acceptable level of inter-coder agreement for this initial stage of our research. We turn next to our findings.

STATISTICAL RESULTS

We begin by testing the Elite Indexing and Credible Cue Hypotheses.¹² Figures 2-4 illustrate the relationship between changes in the valence of partisan discussion in the media and the size of post-use of force rallies. The curve in Figure 2 appears to confirm the Elite Indexing Hypothesis; in these data, each one percent increase in positive elite discussion on *World News Tonight* is associated with about a 1.4 percent increase in the magnitude of a post-use of force rally. The R^2 indicates that the valence of media coverage of elite discussion alone accounts for nearly 18 percent of the variation in rally magnitude in our data.¹³

¹¹ Note that several of the rally events occurred at relatively close intervals, such that their "windows" overlapped. About 10% of our coded evaluations (63 out of 625) occur fewer than 30 days before one rally and fewer than 30 days after another rally.

¹² The former hypothesis simply restates of Brody's (1991) argument, with the exception that we focus more explicitly on the presentation of elite discussion in the media, rather than the true extent of elite support or criticism.

¹³ Note that Figures 2-4 do not use the rally / non-rally period division discussed earlier (e.g. 10 days prior / 20 days after the event). Rather, because we are interested in changes in valence and approval, we simply divide our data into 30-day periods before or after rallies. To avoid

[Figure 2 here]

Figures 3 and 4, in turn, test the Credible Cue Hypothesis, along with its two corollaries. Once again, the results are consistent with all three hypotheses. In Figure 3, the dashed gray curve tracks the relationship between the valence of presidential party comments about the president during rally events and the size of rallies among the president's fellow partisans. The solid dark curve then does the same for the non-presidential party. In both cases, the curves are substantially steeper than in Figure 2 and the R^2 values are much larger (.30 and .27, respectively). This indicates that, presumably due to their relatively greater credibility, rallies among members of a given party are much more strongly influenced by elites from the same party than by elites from the opposition party.

[Figure 3 here]

Figure 4 tests our two corollaries to the Credible Cue Hypotheses. The credible evaluations data, shown in gray, offers strong support for the first corollary. In these data, increases in credible praise, and/or decreases in credible criticism -- from either party -- are clearly associated with increases in the overall size of post-use of force rallies. In contrast, increases in non-credible praise or decreases in non-credible criticism (shown as solid black) have virtually no effect on rally magnitude. This represents clear support for the second corollary.

[Figure 4 here]

We turn next to the Negativity Hypothesis. Table 4 summarizes the valence of partisan evaluations in our data. The most noteworthy pattern in Table 4 is the consistent, overwhelming predominance of negative evaluations of the president and his administration, both with respect to foreign and domestic politics. Regardless of how the data is parsed, roughly three-

double-counting observations when rally periods overlapped, if an evaluation occurred within 30 days before one rally event and 30 days after another, we would only include that evaluation as after the prior rally event. We also had to exclude rally observations that did not include evaluations before and after the event.

quarters of all evaluations featured on *World News Tonight* during the 60 days windows surrounding rally events were *negative*.

[Table 4 here]

Somewhat more surprisingly, as Table 5 indicates, the overwhelming predominance of negativity ebbs hardly at all during rally events. Indeed, when we focus only on foreign policy evaluations, criticism of the president and his administration actually *increase* modestly following the initiation of a rally event.

[Table 5 here]

One possible explanation for these patterns may be the disproportionate weight our data places on the post-Cold War era, which accounts for fully half of the years included in our investigation. Some scholars (e.g., Holsti 1996) have conjectured that absent the unifying threat to national survival posed by the Soviet Union, domestic politics may wield a stronger influence on American foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. If so, we would expect to see a shift in our data in the level of negativity between the Cold War (1979-1988 in our data) and post-Cold War (1989-1998) periods. Yet, as shown in Table 6, our results offer at most limited support for this conjecture. While the level of negativity in congressional evaluations did rise in the post-Cold War period, the differences are small and statistically insignificant for comments by members of both the presidential and non-presidential parties.

[Table 6 here]

Taken together, the results from Tables 4-6 offer strong support for the Negativity Hypothesis. On both foreign and domestic policy issues, during rally and non-rally periods, as well as during and after the Cold War, the patterns of elite discussion of the president and his policies featured in the media remain consistently and overwhelmingly negative and critical.

The final two hypotheses we investigate are the Unified Government and Unified Rally Hypotheses. Table 7 offers support for the former hypothesis. As predicted, presidential party criticism of the president and his policies increases by 13 percentage points during unified government, from 64 to 77 percent of all presidential party evaluations featured on *World News*

Tonight ($p \leq .05$). As also predicted, the praise-to-criticism ratio for the non-presidential party, as featured in the media, changes hardly at all from unified to divided government.

[Table 7 here]

Finally, Figure 5 presents the results of our test of the Unified Rally Hypothesis. The first two bars in Figure 5 show the flows of elite discussion during unified government. As predicted, due to their exceptional novelty – and, once again, contrary to the conventional wisdom regarding the rally phenomenon -- criticism of the president by the presidential party actually *increases* during rally events. In contrast, the existence or absence of a rally event makes virtually no difference with respect to the tenor of elite discussion in the media during divided government.

[Figure 5 here]

Several other interesting patterns are apparent in Figure 5. First, during unified government, at least in terms of media coverage, non-presidential party criticism of the president appears muted during rally periods. At the same time, media coverage of non-presidential party praise of the president rises during rallies in unified government, both absolutely and relative to non-presidential party criticism. These results, though not directly predicted by our hypotheses, may help explain Baum's (2002) finding that the bulk of post-use of force rallies occur among opposition party identifiers, rather than among the president's fellow partisans. Baum attributes this to the greater number of opposition disapprovers who are potentially available to rally. (After all, if one *already* approves of the president's job performance, then there is no room to re-evaluate upward.) Our findings suggest a second, complementary causal factor may also be at play. That is, even as criticism by the president's fellow partisans becomes increasingly prevalent in the media following rally events, such criticism by the non-presidential party drops off dramatically, while non-presidential party praise increases considerably (particularly as a proportion of all non-presidential party comments). Hence, not only are more opposition party identifiers *available* to rally, but they are also more likely than the president's fellow partisans to receive highly credible signals of

support for the president (i.e., supportive comments from their own party's elites appearing in the media).¹⁴

Perhaps mitigating this tendency, to at least some extent, is an additional interesting pattern apparent in Figure 5. That is, during unified government, but not during divided government, the non-presidential party appears in the media far less frequently during rally periods than during non-rally periods. This may help account for the pattern highlighted above. It may be the case that non-presidential party elites are continuing to criticize the president, but that journalists are simply more likely to ignore such criticism during rally periods, instead focusing on the relatively small number of supportive comments by opposition party elites.¹⁵ The net effect would be a predominance of positive commentary in the media by non-presidential party elites, albeit in the context of a substantially reduced overall volume of opposition party rhetoric in the media.

CONCLUSION

We now briefly return to the anecdote with which we began this chapter. Our theory suggests that a likely explanation, at least in part, for the difference in the magnitude of the

¹⁴ Baum (2003) reports evidence of a trend, between 1953 and 1998, toward larger rallies among the least educated members of the public, but not among their highly educated counterparts. At first glance, this seems inconsistent with our findings of (a) overwhelmingly critical elite discussion of the president during rally events since 1979, and (b) a strong relationship between such coverage and rally magnitude. Yet, in addition to increased non-presidential party support for presidents during unified government, these results are not necessarily contradictory for at least three reasons. First, education levels in America have risen such that the least-educated group has constricted as a proportion of the overall public since the 1950s. It may simply be the case that smaller rallies among highly educated Americans outweigh the effects of larger rallies among the least-educated segments of the public. Second, Baum's time series extends far longer than our data, making it difficult to draw direct comparisons between our findings and his. And third, there may be other factors not included in our present analysis – such as support for the president from non-congressional sources – working against the rally-suppressing effects of congressional criticism.

¹⁵ An alternative explanation for the prevalence of supportive comments from the non-presidential party in the media during rallies might be that journalists are fearful of appearing unpatriotic when the U.S. is at war, lest they alienate their audience, and so lose ratings. Of course, absent systematic evidence that news outlets do in fact suffer lower ratings when they present critical coverage of the president in times of crisis, this possibility remains conjectural.

rallies enjoyed by the two Presidents Bush may be the differences in elite rhetoric presented by the media. We have found evidence that attacks on the president will tend to be more prevalent in the media during times of unified government, as prevailed during the 2003 war in Iraq, than during periods of divided government, as prevailed during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. And, in fact, a review of media content during the 60-day windows surrounding the start dates for the two wars reveals that the younger president Bush does appear to have endured greater criticism of his war policy from congressional elites than did his father.

In the month prior to the first Persian Gulf War, partisan rhetoric in the media followed predictable patterns: Democratic members of Congress appearing on *World News Tonight* were three times as likely to criticize as praise the president, while Republicans were five times as likely to praise him. Yet, once the war started, *World News Tonight* featured *not one* criticism of the president by a member of Congress.¹⁶ In sharp contrast, during the entire 60-day window we investigated surrounding the 2003 war in Iraq, *World News Tonight* presented not a single supportive comment toward the president from a member of Congress. Indeed, as we anticipated, the younger President Bush appears to have received uniformly more critical coverage than his father in at least this one prominent media outlet. Of course, there are many possible explanations for this pattern – such as the far more extensive criticism of U.S. policy from some of America’s traditional allies -- and hence for the difference in rally magnitudes enjoyed by the two presidents.¹⁷ These results should therefore be interpreted as merely suggestive.

¹⁶ Note that ABC and other networks provided considerable news coverage outside of their normal half-hour news programs during both Gulf Wars. However, ABC continued to present and archive their flagship evening news broadcast as a separate entity throughout both war periods.

¹⁷ There may also have been a substitution effect in the 2003 case: Unlike 1991, in which leaders of the Democratic majority in Congress were the most prominent representatives of the opposition Democratic Party, in 2003 a veritable army of Democratic presidential candidates aggressively competed for media attention.

More generally, our findings, though preliminary, hold potentially important implications for future presidents. With the possible exception of full-scale wars, we find little evidence that future presidents can expect to consistently enjoy meaningful rallies following uses of force abroad, at least to the extent that rally magnitude does indeed follow from the nature and extent of elite debate presented in the media. (We found evidence in support of this hypothesis. Yet further testing is clearly necessary.) Indeed, the most striking pattern in our findings is the seemingly unyielding wave of negativity in media coverage of elite discussion concerning the president and his policies. The emergence of rally events appears hardly to matter to the tone of elite discussion featured in the media. Regardless of how we parse the data, roughly three-quarters of all comments concerning the president or his administration by members of Congress were critical.

In addition to offering support for our theory concerning the effects of individual and institutional factors in shaping the nature and extent of post-use of force rallies, our findings also hold an important implication for diversionary war theory (Levy 1989). If presidents cannot be confident of receiving favorable treatment by the media when they employ military force abroad – at least short of a full-scale war like Operation Iraqi Freedom -- it seems highly unlikely that they would do so for purely domestic political purposes. Our data suggest that attempting to divert public attention from domestic difficulties through a use of force abroad is a highly risky strategy.

Our findings in this initial inquiry suggest that while Brody's (1991) hypothesis concerning the link between elite debate and the magnitude of rallies appears to be borne out by the data, one central implication of this hypothesis -- given the apparent predominance of critical congressional comments in the media -- is that politically consequential rallies are likely to be relatively few and far between, particularly in times of unified government. To more thoroughly test our hypotheses, however, as well as a variety of additional hypotheses that follow from our theory, we intend to expand our content analyses to include additional media outlets, additional sources of elite rhetoric, and additional years. By expanding our

investigation, we hope, in part, to determine whether, perhaps, supportive comments from other sources, such as policy experts or administration officials themselves, may in at least some instances counter-balance the effects of incessant congressional criticism. If so, perhaps the rally phenomenon may yet prove to be of some political consequence.

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APPENDIX: CONTENT ANALYSIS CODING FORM

What is your student ID number?

To ensure accuracy, please re-type your student ID number here:

Story Identifier Code:

Was at least one member of Congress (MC) or Senator QUOTED or did they SPEAK in their own voice in the story? Yes
[If no, stop here. If yes, please fill out the information below for EACH Senator or MC speaking in the story] No

1. Is the person a Senator or a member of the House of Representatives? Senator
 Representative
 Unidentified

2. What is their name?

3. What is their state? (If you don't know a state's two-letter Postal abbreviation, you can look it up [here](#). If their state is not given in the story at all, please code their state as ZZ)

4. What is their party? Democrat
 Republican
 Independent
 Not Given in Story/Unknown
(Note: Only code their party if it is explicitly cited in the story... don't look it up or guess or rely on your existing knowledge)

5. What is their position within the legislature?
[In other words, do they have a title such as a leadership position or committee chairmanship noted in the story other than Rep or Senator? Things like "Majority Whip", "Commerce Committee Ranking Member" etc. Leave blank if they're only identified as a senator or rep]

6. For each of the issue areas below, please indicate if the member quoted above praises or criticizes *the president* in their quoted comment or statement, or imparts neutral information/talks about the subject without taking a position (note that a single member might do both in the same statement):

<input type="checkbox"/> Praise <input type="checkbox"/> Criticize <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	Management of the U.S. Economy
<input type="checkbox"/> Praise <input type="checkbox"/> Criticize	International Trade/Finance

<input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	
<input type="checkbox"/> Praise <input type="checkbox"/> Criticize <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	Government Budget/Deficit/Spending/Taxation
<input type="checkbox"/> Praise <input type="checkbox"/> Criticize <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	Foreign Policy/Military
<input type="checkbox"/> Praise <input type="checkbox"/> Criticize <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	Domestic Policy (including Welfare, Social Security/Medicare, Crime, Education, Abortion)
<input type="checkbox"/> Praise <input type="checkbox"/> Criticize <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	Scandal/Personal Behavior
<input type="checkbox"/> Praise <input type="checkbox"/> Criticize <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	Personal characteristics/Leadership
Other Praise? Please specify:	<input type="text"/>
Other Criticism? Please specify:	<input type="text"/>
7. For each of the issue areas below, please indicate if the member quoted above praises or criticizes a member/agency/department of the executive branch or the policy of the government in general in their comment/statement their quoted comment or statement, or imparts neutral information/talks about the subject without taking a position(note that a single member might do both in the same statement):	
<input type="checkbox"/> Praise <input type="checkbox"/> Criticize <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	Management of the U.S. Economy
<input type="checkbox"/> Praise <input type="checkbox"/> Criticize <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	International Trade/Finance
<input type="checkbox"/> Praise <input type="checkbox"/> Criticize <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	Government Budget/Deficit/Spending/Taxation
<input type="checkbox"/> Praise <input type="checkbox"/> Criticize <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	Foreign Policy/Military
<input type="checkbox"/> Praise <input type="checkbox"/> Criticize <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	Domestic Policy (including Welfare, Social Security/Medicare, Crime, Education, Abortion)
<input type="checkbox"/> Praise <input type="checkbox"/> Criticize <input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	Scandal/Personal Behavior

TABLE 1:
Newsworthiness of Partisan Evaluations of the President

Message Type	Journalist Payoff from:				
				Authority	
	Novelty	Conflict	Balance	Div. Govt	Uni. Govt
President praised by his party	<i>low</i>	<i>low</i>	<i>low</i>	<i>low</i>	<i>high</i>
President criticized by his party	<i>high</i>	<i>high</i>	<i>low</i>	<i>low</i>	<i>high</i>
President praised by other party	<i>high</i>	<i>low</i>	<i>high</i>	<i>high</i>	<i>low</i>
President criticized by other party	<i>low</i>	<i>high</i>	<i>high</i>	<i>high</i>	<i>low</i>

TABLE 2:
Novelty of Partisan Evaluations of the President,
“Normal” vs. “Rally” Periods

Message Type	Normal	Rally
President praised by his party	<i>low</i>	<i>lower</i>
President criticized by his party	<i>high</i>	<i>higher</i>
President praised by other party	<i>high</i>	<i>lower</i>
President criticized by other party	<i>low</i>	<i>higher</i>

TABLE 3.
Party and Costly Credibility By Party of Speaker and Viewer

	Non-Presidential Party (NPP) Attacks President			Presidential Party (PP) Attacks President		
	NPP viewer	Ind. viewer	PP viewer	NPP viewer	Ind. viewer	PP viewer
Party Credibility	+	-	-	-	-	+
Costly Credibility	-	-	-	+	+	+
	Non-Presidential Party (NPP) Praises President			Presidential Party (PP) Praises President		
	NPP viewer	Ind. viewer	PP viewer	NPP viewer	Ind. viewer	PP viewer
Party Credibility	+	-	-	-	-	+
Costly Credibility	+	+	+	-	-	-

**TABLE 4:
Valence of Congressional Evaluations of the President or Government**

	Valence of Message		
	Negative	Positive	n
<i>President and/or Government</i>	78%	22%	490
<i>President Only</i>	74%	26%	291
<i>Foreign Policy Only</i>	78%	22%	197
<i>President Foreign Policy Only</i>	74%	26%	119

**TABLE 5.
Valence of Congressional Evaluations of the President or Government, Rally and Non-Rally Periods**

Target	Valence of Messages (Non- Rally)			Valence of Messages (Rally)		
	Negative	Positive	n	Negative	Positive	n
<i>President and/or Government</i>	79%	21%	182	78%	22%	308
<i>President Only</i>	79%	21%	90	76%	24%	201
<i>President and/or Government, Foreign Policy Only</i>	75%	25%	55	77%	23%	141
<i>President, Foreign Policy Only</i>	72%	28%	29	76%	24%	90

**TABLE 6:
Valence of Congressional Evaluations of the President or Government, During and After the Cold War**

	Valence of Messages (Cold War)			Valence of Messages (Post Cold War)		
	Negative	Positive	n	Negative	Positive	n
<i>Presidential Party</i>	68%	32%	96	69%	31%	91
<i>Non-presidential Party</i>	81%	19%	140	87%	23%	163

**TABLE 7:
Valence of Congressional Evaluations of the President or Government, Unified and Divided Government**

	Valence of Messages (Unified Government)			Valence of Messages (Divided Government)		
	Negative	Positive	n	Negative	Positive	n
<i>Presidential Party</i>	77%	23%	62	64%	36%	125
<i>Non-presidential Party</i>	86%	14%	51	84%	16%	252

FIGURE 1:
Trend in Positive and Negative Foreign Policy Evaluations Preceding and Following Rally Events

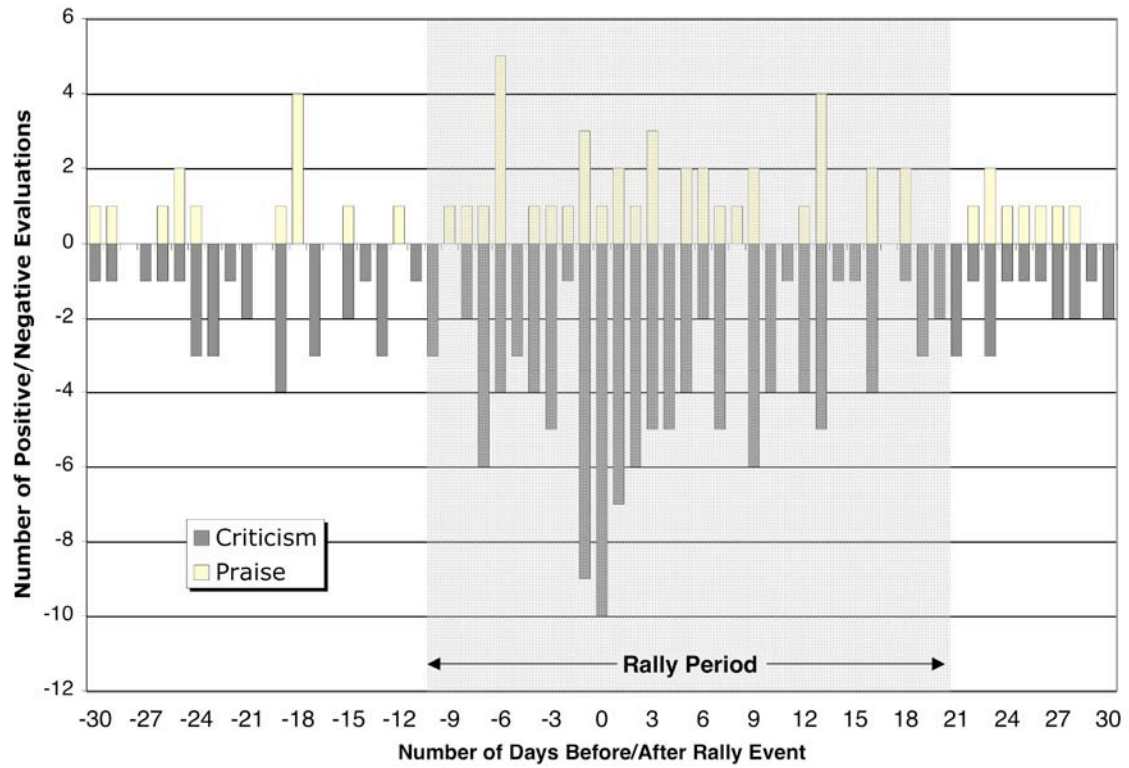


FIGURE 2:
Overall Rally Size as a Function of Changes in the Valence of Evaluations from All Sources

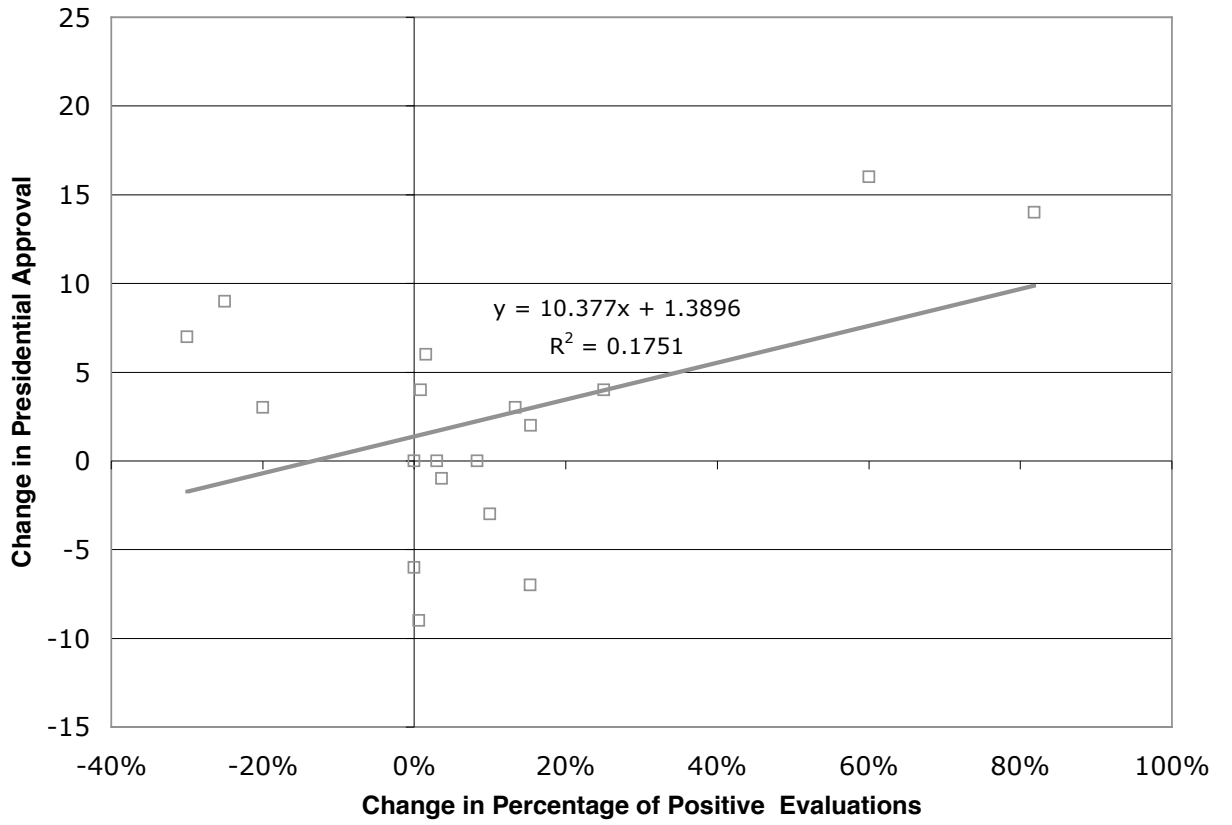


FIGURE 3:
Partisan Rally Size as a Function of Changes in the Valence of Evaluations from Fellow Partisans

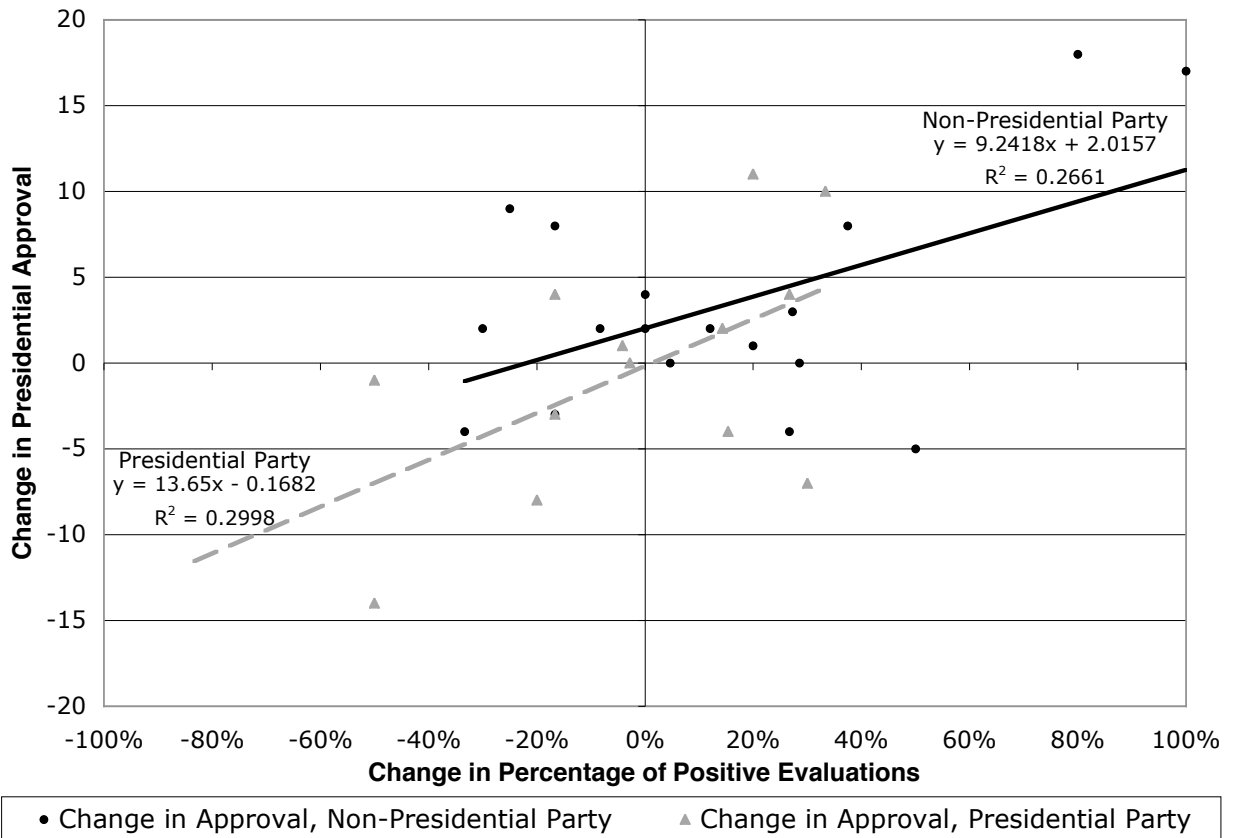


FIGURE 4:
**Partisan Rally Size as a Function of Changes in the Ratio of Credible/Not Credible
 Positive and Negative Evaluations**

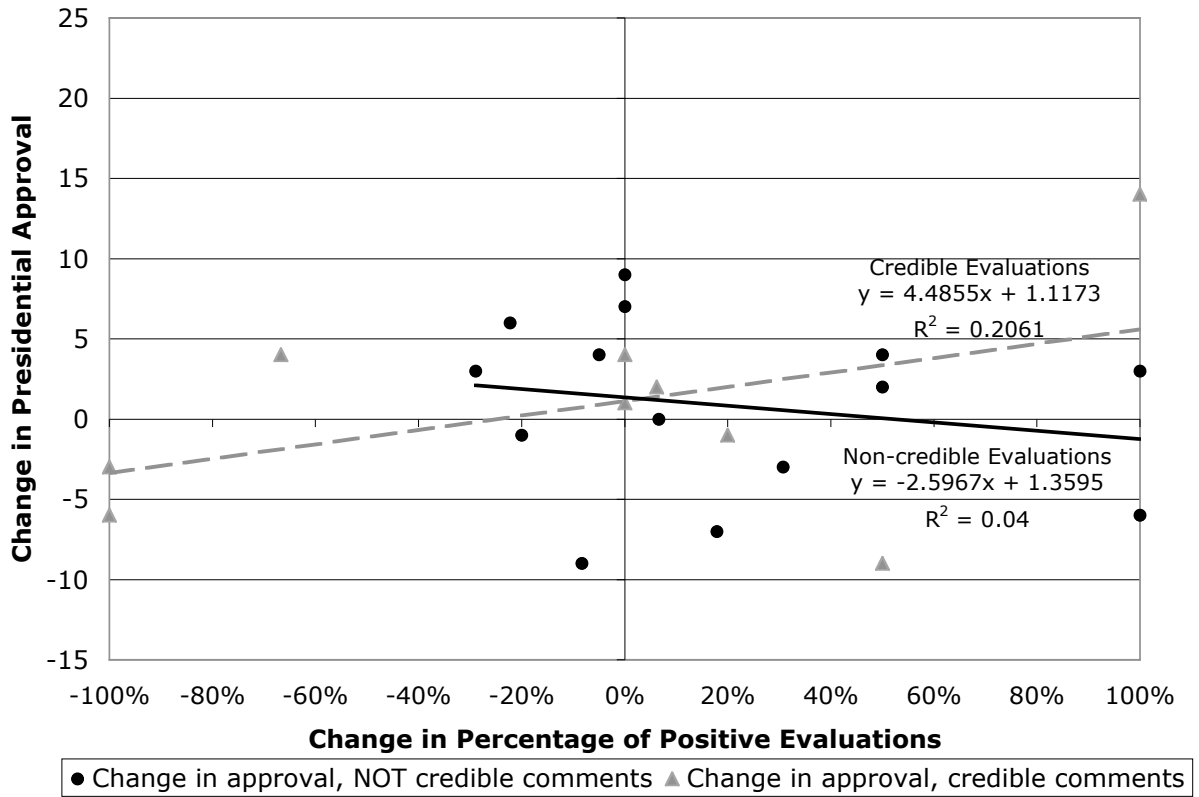


Figure 5:
Valence of Evaluations from Presidential and Non-Presidential Party During Unified and Divided Government, Rally and Non-Rally Periods

