

Media and Intraparty Ideological Movements: How Fox News Built the Tea Party

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Abstract

Does media influence operate primarily on low-information swing voters, or can it also affect party activists who shape intraparty ideological factions? We examine Fox News' role in the rise of the Tea Party movement within the Republican Party, leveraging differences in its channel positions across cable systems to isolate exogenous variation in exposure to the channel (Martin and Yurukoglu 2017). In early 2009, Fox News did not noticeably boost Tea Party rally sizes. But later in the 2009-2010 cycle, exposure to the channel significantly increased campaign fundraising and primary election vote shares for Tea Party candidates compared to other Republican candidates. These findings dovetail with content analysis demonstrating pro-Tea Party slant on Fox News that emerged only in 2010. The Tea Party movement benefited from the backing of a powerful media outlet—a rare advantage among insurgent movements—which enabled it to rapidly move from the fringe to the center of the Republican Party.

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What are the limits on the electoral power of mass media? Existing research primarily examines party vote shares (Ash et al. 2024; Chiang and Knight 2011; DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007; Enikolopov et al. 2011; Gentzkow et al. 2011), under the assumption that media effects are concentrated among swing voters rather than committed partisans. This assumption implies that consumers' tastes for like-minded news constrain electorally-minded media owners: more extreme slant may increase an outlet's impact on its audience but alienate persuadable moderates, blunting or even reversing the outlet's overall electoral impact (Grossman et al. 2022; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017). Mass polarization and a shrinking mass of swing voters further limit the potential for persuasion in general elections (Smidt 2017). More generally, a media outlet cannot increase its favored party's vote share — i.e., it cannot have “media power” in the Prat (2018) sense — if its audience votes for that party with near certainty at baseline.

We challenge the notion that the electoral power of media is confined to voters with weak partisan attachments, and that outlets therefore must reach significant numbers of swing voters to be electorally consequential. Much of the power of ideological media, we contend, lies in shaping intra-party contests. Party affiliation, an otherwise powerful cue, loses its value in factional contests. The public's beliefs about intraparty movements, especially in their earlier stages, are less certain than they are about partisan divisions; such lower-information settings increase the scope for persuasion (Adena et al. 2015; Broockman and Kalla 2023, 2025; Hill 2017). And though mass polarization and partisan sorting in media consumption may constrain media power in general elections (Prior 2013), they do nothing to diminish intraparty media influence.

We also highlight media as an important but underexamined component of Extended Party Networks (Bawn et al. 2012). While horse-race coverage has been known to shape public perceptions of primary election candidates' viability (Cohen et al. 2008; Hall and Snyder 2015), to what extent media outlets can strategically influence intra-party factional competition is an open question. Departing from past research's primary focus on partisan seat shares, we examine media outlets' ability to advance ideologically aligned intra-party movements through favorable coverage and ultimately to help movement-affiliated candidates secure party nominations. Such

transformative effects of media slant on party organizations and platforms are especially salient in the United States, where parties have open nomination processes that are susceptible to outside influence, and insurgent political movements succeed by capturing control of established parties rather than by forming long-shot third parties (Lee 2020).

To examine the impact of media slant on intraparty ideological factions, we focus on the Tea Party movement, which transformed the Republican Party in the United States beginning in 2009 (Blum 2020; Gervais and Morris 2018; Kabaservice 2012; Parker and Barreto 2013; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). We first analyze broadcast transcripts of the Fox News Channel (hereafter FNC), CNN, and MSNBC, and establish that relative to competing outlets, FNC's movement coverage during 2009-10 exhibited a pro-Tea Party slant in airtime, topical emphasis (Roberts et al. 2019), and issue framing (Gentzkow et al. 2019), especially during the primary election season. We show that these across-channel differences are not explained simply by FNC's Republican lean.

Next, we examine FNC's impact on different facets of mass support for the Tea Party movement during 2009-2010, using exogenous variation in exposure to the channel due to differences in FNC's channel positions across cable systems (Martin and Yurukoglu 2017). We show that FNC was not decisive in the earliest stages of the grassroots-led Tea Party movement. Specifically, incidental exposure to FNC did not noticeably boost Tea Party rally attendance in April 2009, despite its electoral impact (Madestam et al. 2013), potentially due to the high resource barriers to protesting compared to other modes of political participation (Brady et al. 1995).

However, once the Tea Party movement transitioned into an electoral force in the 2009-2010 cycle, FNC played a key role in boosting the success of its candidates in fundraising and at the polls. Exogenous exposure to FNC increased itemized contributions to Tea Party candidates, with no effect on contributions to mainstream Republicans. It also increased Tea Party candidates' primary vote shares, helping them secure Republican nominations. These effects were concentrated among existing Republican donors and voters, suggesting that FNC's influence operated through committed partisans, rather than the moderates on whom prior research focuses.

In sum, while FNC did not initiate the Tea Party, it threw its weight behind the faction at a key moment in its development from a protest movement to an electoral one. The backing of a pre-built media organ with near-universal reach among party activists — an advantage that few other protest movements can claim — was a crucial mediator of the Tea Party’s ascent from fringe group to wielder of the levers of power within one of the United States’ two major parties.

How Intraparty Movements Transform U.S. Politics

While a global surge in political extremism has propelled the growth of radical parties in many countries, the United States’ two-party system, coupled with its comparatively open party nomination processes, means similar ideological movements must capture established political parties for formal representation and legislative influence (Lee 2020). Successful intra-party ideological movements can intensify elite polarization and legislative gridlock, reshape electoral competition, and instigate political realignment (Groenendyk et al. 2020; Izzo 2024; McCarty et al. 2013; Mian et al. 2014; Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Snyder and Ting 2002).

The modern Tea Party movement, a right-wing faction of the Republican Party, gained national prominence in 2009 following a conservative backlash against President Barack Obama, post-crisis government intervention, and seemingly out-of-touch Republican elites (Blum 2020; Gervais and Morris 2018; Kabaservice 2012; Parker and Barreto 2013; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). The movement’s success in the 2010 midterm elections accelerated the Republican Party’s rightward shift: most of the 47 newly-elected Tea Party Republicans were more conservative than even the most right-leaning prior members of the House GOP caucus (Skocpol and Williamson 2012). The Tea Party Movement subsequently waged a “civil war” in Congress (Blum 2020; Kabaservice 2012), aggressively advancing a conservative economic agenda, including a government shutdown to block funding for the Affordable Care Act, over party leaders’ objections (Rosenthal and Trost 2012). They also ousted former Speaker John Boehner, branding him a “Republican In Name Only” (Rosenthal and Trost 2012). The Tea Party Movement’s success ulti-

mately paved the way for the rise of Donald Trump (Blum 2020; Gervais and Morris 2018), and exemplifies how ideological factions can wage insurgencies within established parties by ousting moderate co-partisan incumbents and transforming party platforms through agenda control (Blum 2020; Kabaservice 2012; Lee 2020; Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

Strategic Media Promotion of Intraparty Ideological Movements

Qualitative accounts attribute the Tea Party's rapid ascent in part to favorable coverage by the Fox News Channel (FNC), a prominent conservative cable news outlet (Parker and Barreto 2013; Peck 2019; Rafail and McCarthy 2018; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Unlike its competitors, FNC promoted the movement early — publicizing major Tea Party rallies scheduled on Tax Day (April 15th) six weeks in advance — and offering Tea Party candidates a friendly platform to build name recognition among likely voters and donors (Rafail and McCarthy 2018; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). It also shaped public discourse by devoting extensive airtime to key issues Tea Party candidates campaigned on such as health care, taxes, and immigration, advocating the movement's positions (Rafail and McCarthy 2018; Rosenthal and Trost 2012; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Additionally, FNC delicately portrayed the Tea Party's association with the Republican Party. While movement activists initially touted their independence from party elites (Lee 2020; Parker and Barreto 2013; Skocpol and Williamson 2012), FNC echoed this anti-establishment sentiment by portraying Tea Party candidates as “real Americans” more in touch with grassroots conservatives than the GOP leadership (Peck 2019; Rafail and McCarthy 2018). Still, FNC underscored that the movement's legacy rested on restoring the Republican Party' to its conservative roots rather than forming a third party, implying Tea Party candidates were the rightful heirs to the GOP (Peck 2019; Rafail and McCarthy 2018; Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

Strategically promoting intraparty ideological movements may help for-profit media outlets boost viewership. By endorsing such movements, media outlets can undermine viewers' trust in mainstream party leaders, discrediting other party-aligned media and thereby softening the

market competition they face (Szeidl and Szucs 2022; Wang 2021). This rationale aligns with the reported belief of then-FNC Chairman and CEO Roger Ailes that supporting the Tea Party movement could attract white working-class viewers disenchanted with the Bush Administration following the 2008 Great Recession (Peck 2019; Peters 2022).

Media outlets may also choose to favor specific intraparty movements to advance shared ideological goals, making them an integral though under-examined component of Extended Party Networks (Bawn et al. 2012). Evidence from Martin and Yurukoglu (2017) suggests that the existence of such non-market goals is plausible for FNC: the channel's slant is more consistent with maximizing political influence than maximizing ratings. The Tea Party movement's goal to reshape the Republican Party resonated with key FNC personnel. Roger Ailes reportedly preferred Sarah Palin, a favorite of the Tea Party movement, over John McCain for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination (Peters 2022). Endorsement by Glenn Beck, a popular FNC host, was critical in the first successful Republican primary-election upset by a Tea Party candidate (Peters 2022). Sean Hannity, another prominent FNC personality, initially planned to attend a Tea Party rally and only canceled under pressure to maintain FNC's journalistic integrity (Peters 2022).

Why Media Matter in Intraparty Ideological Movements

While FNC is widely credited to aid the Tea Party's rise (Peck 2019; Rafail and McCarthy 2018), direct evidence linking FNC viewership to movement support is limited. Skocpol and Williamson (2012) describe FNC as a national platform for movement activists and affiliated candidates, and Parker and Barreto (2013) find FNC to be a primary news source for movement sympathizers. However, these observations need not prove FNC's impact and may instead reflect ideological sorting among political news consumers (Prior 2013).

Our analysis of FNC's impact on the Tea Party movement builds upon two strands of literature. First, it addresses the ongoing debate on the degree to which partisan media polarize the American public, with existing studies predominantly situated in interparty competition (Chiang

and Knight 2011; DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007; Gentzkow et al. 2011; Levy 2021; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017; Prior 2013). Second, our focus on the Tea Party aligns with a growing body of research highlighting the crucial role of allied media in the rise of radical parties in comparative contexts (Adena et al. 2015; Enikolopov et al. 2011; Grossman et al. 2022; Guriev et al. 2021; Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018; Zhuravskaya et al. 2020).

Our study illuminates the behavioral underpinnings of media's political influence. From a Bayesian perspective, political media consumption generates more pronounced attitudinal shifts when the public lacks prior knowledge, crystallized beliefs, or useful cues (Adena et al. 2015; Broockman and Kalla 2023, 2025; Hill 2017; Zhuravskaya et al. 2020). Despite the lack of systematic quantitative studies on how media slant shapes popular support for intraparty ideological factions in the United States, these settings are precisely where media effects could be significant. We examine the Tea Party movement during its early stages in the 2009-10 election cycle, when many affiliated candidates were non-incumbents (Blum 2020; Gervais and Morris 2018; Kabaservice 2012; Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

The movement's strategy of contesting Republican nominations meant that partisan labels—an otherwise powerful cue—do not differentiate Tea Party candidates from co-partisan competitors. Meanwhile, subpartisan cues such as Tea Party affiliations, though informative (Gervais and Morris 2018), are not available to primary voters at the polls. Such lower-information settings can heighten media power in raising candidate profiles and persuading voters of candidate messaging. These attributes set our study apart from past research primarily focused on media influence over support for mature parties in inter-party contests (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007; Grossman et al. 2022; Guriev et al. 2021; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017; Wang 2021).

This paper also broadens the theoretical scope of media power in politics by illuminating the role of media organizations in Extended Party Networks (EPN). EPN theory conceptualizes parties as coalitions of formal party organizations, activists, donors, and interest groups that coordinate to select candidates and advance policy goals (Bawn et al. 2012). However, the role of media in these networks remains under-theorized, often limited to discussions of their influence on can-

didate viability in general elections via horse-race coverage (Cohen et al. 2008; Hall and Snyder 2015). Our content analysis shows that, far from being a passive observer, FNC was an active participant in the Republican Party's EPN, consistently amplifying Tea Party candidates' messaging especially during the 2010 primaries. Furthermore, by tracing FNC's impact across multiple stages of movement support, we demonstrate how media organizations galvanize intraparty factions. Crucially, FNC's electoral impact stemmed mainly from persuading committed Republican donors and voters to support Tea Party candidates, rather than attracting new donors and voters with weak prior partisan attachment. These findings thus highlight media organizations as key coalition partners within EPNs capable of shaping intraparty factional competition.

Data Collection

We draw on a variety of data sources. Detailed notes and explanation of data collection and processing are in Online Appendix A; we provide a summary here. First, to measure news content, we use full transcripts from the Lexis-Nexis database, covering all regularly scheduled programs on FNC, CNN, or MSNBC during 2009-2010. To gauge exposure to and consumption of cable news, we use data on channel availability and channel position at the zip-code level in 2009-2010 from the Nielsen FOCUS database, and county-level ratings from the Nielsen Local TV (NLTV) database. Second, we use the replication data for Madestam et al. (2013)¹ county-level attendance estimates for Tea Party rallies on Tax Day of 2009. Third, following Skocpol and Williamson (2012), we focus on House Republican candidates in 2009-2010, and classify 173 of them as Tea Partiers based on their membership in the House Tea Party Caucus (48), or endorsements from Tea Party-affiliated activist organizations such as FreedomWorks, Tea Party Express, Tea Party Nation, and the Independence Caucus during the 2010 midterm elections (138) (Zernike et al. 2010). Fourth, we collect itemized contributions from individual donors (geocoded by zip code) to 173 Tea Party candidates and 1,192 non-Tea Party Republican candidates for 1980-2010 from

¹We thank these authors for generously sharing their data.

the Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections (DIME) (Bonica 2019). Finally, we collect precinct vote totals from state secretaries of state and county election boards for congressional primary elections in 2009-2010, and aggregate them to the zip code level using shape files provided by the Harvard Election Data Archive (Ansolabehere et al. 2014). We are able to compile both precinct vote and geospatial data for 74 Tea Party candidates across 16 states.

Content Analysis of Major Cable News Outlets

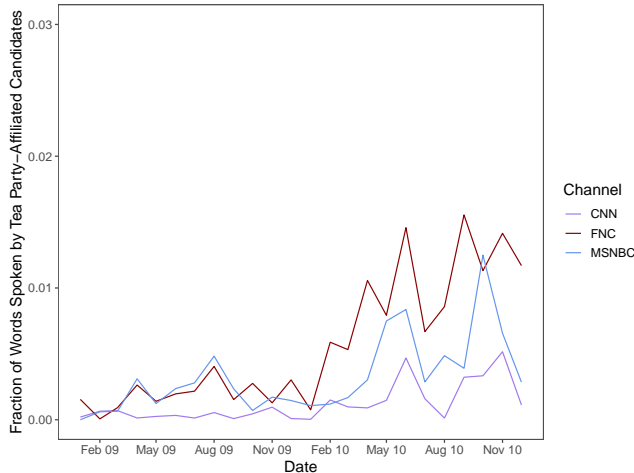
We conduct several analyses of Tea Party Movement coverage from FNC, CNN, and MSNBC. First, we quantify the relative airtime devoted to Tea Party versus mainstream Republican candidates across cable channels, illuminating differences in the scale of the platform for Tea Party candidates to present issues and make arguments to voters. Second, we compare the time allotted to topics emphasized by Tea Party versus mainstream Republican candidates by channel over time, assessing the congruence between cable news agenda and the Tea Party's platform. Lastly, we examine similarity in framing between channels and Tea Party candidates by measuring the channels' use of phrases distinctive to Tea Party versus mainstream speakers over time.

Airtime To test whether FNC gave disproportionate airtime (relative to CNN and MSNBC) to Tea Party candidates in 2009-2010, we identify Congressional candidates in that election cycle who appeared in the broadcast transcripts, matching by name.² We then calculate the fraction of words spoken on air by Tea Party and mainstream Republican candidates by channel and month.

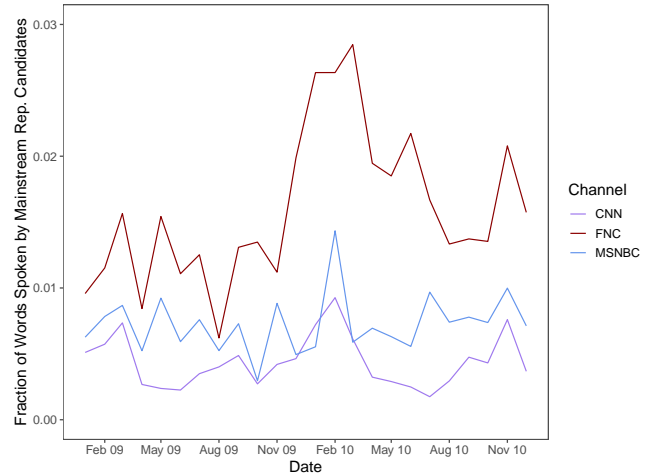
Figure 1a displays month-to-month variation in the fraction of total words spoken on air by Tea Party candidates on CNN, FNC, and MSNBC during 2009-2010.³ Although airtime for Tea Party candidates increased across all channels as the movement gained momentum, FNC both

²Lexis-Nexis transcripts identify the speaker, typically with enough contextual information for disambiguation. We matched these speakers to candidate names in DIME (Bonica 2019).

³Appendix Figure B.1.1a adds confidence intervals for the time series plotted here.



(a) Tea Party Candidates



(b) Mainstream Rep. Candidates

Figure 1: Fraction of words in broadcast transcripts by channel-month spoken by Tea Party vs. mainstream Congressional Republican candidates.

increased its coverage earlier and reached a higher peak. The ratio of Tea Party candidates’ airtime on FNC to MSNBC consistently exceeded 2:1, except in the month of October 2010 leading up to the general election. Figure 1b presents the corresponding plot for mainstream (non-Tea Party) Republican candidates, who consistently enjoyed more airtime on FNC than other channels, including during the final election months. This timing difference is suggestive that FNC gave prominent airtime to Tea Party candidates during the Republican primaries, then backed off during general elections to prevent hard-edged conservatives from alienating the general electorate. Conversely, MSNBC may have allotted more airtime to Tea Party candidates at the height of the general election season for precisely the same reason. While Tea Party candidates actively sought media attention (Gallagher and Rock 2012), they benefited from greater access to FNC in messaging to Republican-leaning voters during the party nomination process.

News Topics To examine how the issue agendas presented on each channel echoed those emphasized by Tea Party candidates, we fit a structural topic model (STM) (Roberts et al. 2019) to the transcript data, using speaker affiliations (Tea Party, Republican, or Democratic), channel indicators, and transcript month indicators as covariates. We set the dummy variable for Republican affiliation to equal to one for all Republican speakers, such that the coefficient on the Tea Party

dummy captures topics which are unusually highly emphasized by Tea Party speakers relative to all Republicans. We use spectral initialization to automatically choose the number of topics, yielding a model with 52 distinct topics. We then identify topics for which the STM Tea Party coefficient had an estimated t -statistic greater than 2, as these topics were more prominent in Tea Party candidates' appearances relative to other cable news content.

Table 1 shows the topics with high weight in the speech of Tea Party candidates according to our STM model, broadly aligning with qualitative accounts of their agenda. Beyond cable news' general focus on "horse race" coverage—such as the Nevada Senate Campaign (in which Tea Party-endorsed Sharron Angle won a highly contested Republican primary and unsuccessfully challenged former Majority Leader Harry Reid) and more generally Tea Party candidates' election prospects in 2010—the most distinctive substantive topics were enforcement of immigration laws, political correctness regarding race, the Supreme Court (particularly former President Barack Obama's nominations of Justices Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan), and Islam. For comparison, Table 2 shows that mainstream Republicans emphasized different topics, such as taxes and government spending, unemployment, healthcare, and congressional politics.

Figure 2 visualizes the relative weight of Tea Party-focused issues in both candidate appearances (top panel) and in cable news coverage (bottom panel). Immigration enforcement dominated Tea Party candidate appearances compared to Democrats and mainstream Republicans, especially in 2009-early 2010. Interestingly, there is minimal discussion of this topic on any of the cable channels (outside of Tea Party candidate appearances) throughout 2009. During the 2010 primary season, however, FNC devoted substantially more coverage to this topic than the other two channels, peaking in August before declining back near the level of CNN / MSNBC in September. While FNC also emphasized taxes and spending, this was common across Republican appearances and less distinctive to the Tea Party. Also, both FNC and MSNBC covered the Tea Party as an electoral phenomenon extensively. Finally, immigration was where FNC's coverage most aligned with the Tea Party agenda, and where its timing coincided with the Tea Party's insurgency in the Republican primaries.

Table 1: Topics emphasized in Tea Party candidate appearances on cable TV.

Topic	Label	Estimate	t-stat	Top Words
24	NV Senate Campaign	0.024	12.484	paul, nevada, messag, sharron, rand, harri, kentucki
4	Tea Party Election Prospects	0.013	4.501	voter, tea, parti, midterm, candid, primari, incumb
64	Immigration Enforcement	0.010	3.975	immigr, arizona, illeg, law, brewer, alien, citizenship
12	Racism / Political Correctness	0.010	5.795	black, apolog, racist, african-american, racism, stupid, racial
17	Supreme Court	0.010	4.809	sotomayor, court, sonia, kagan, suprem, judici, judg
25	Religion (Islam)	0.009	3.654	mosqu, religion, church, pastor, muslim, cathol, imam

Table 2: Topics emphasized in Republican candidate appearances on cable TV.

Topic	Label	Estimate	t-stat	Top Words
15	Taxes / Budget / Stimulus	0.059	31.952	tax, stimulus, deficit, spend, budget, cut, trillion
65	(Un)employment	0.044	32.310	need, opportun, forward, togeth, futur, work, applaus
59	Legislative Process	0.024	26.290	bill, legisl, pass, reconcili, provis, vote, veto
40	House Politics	0.020	28.325	pelosi, rangel, speaker, nanci, congress, stupak, congressman
7	Healthcare	0.020	14.983	insur, health, care, option, medicar, reform, uninsur
23	Senate Politics	0.010	9.157	senat, compromis, bipartisan, lieberman, mcconnel, filibust, bipartisanship

Figure B.2 in the Online Appendix shows the corresponding plots for topics emphasized by all Republican candidates. Notably, FNC was no more aligned with general Republican agenda than was MSNBC, suggesting FNC devoted special attention to the Tea Party’s issue priorities.

Framing Finally, we compare the language used by Tea Party candidates to that used in the channels’ news coverage. We begin by identifying phrases that indicate movement affiliations following Gentzkow et al. (2019). We fit penalized logistic regression models of phrase usage on party and faction membership in speech by Congressional candidates in 2009-2010 appearing on any of the three cable channels.⁴ Gentzkow et al. (2019)’s method fits separate “inverse” Poisson regressions of phrase usage on candidate affiliations for each phrase, taking the form:

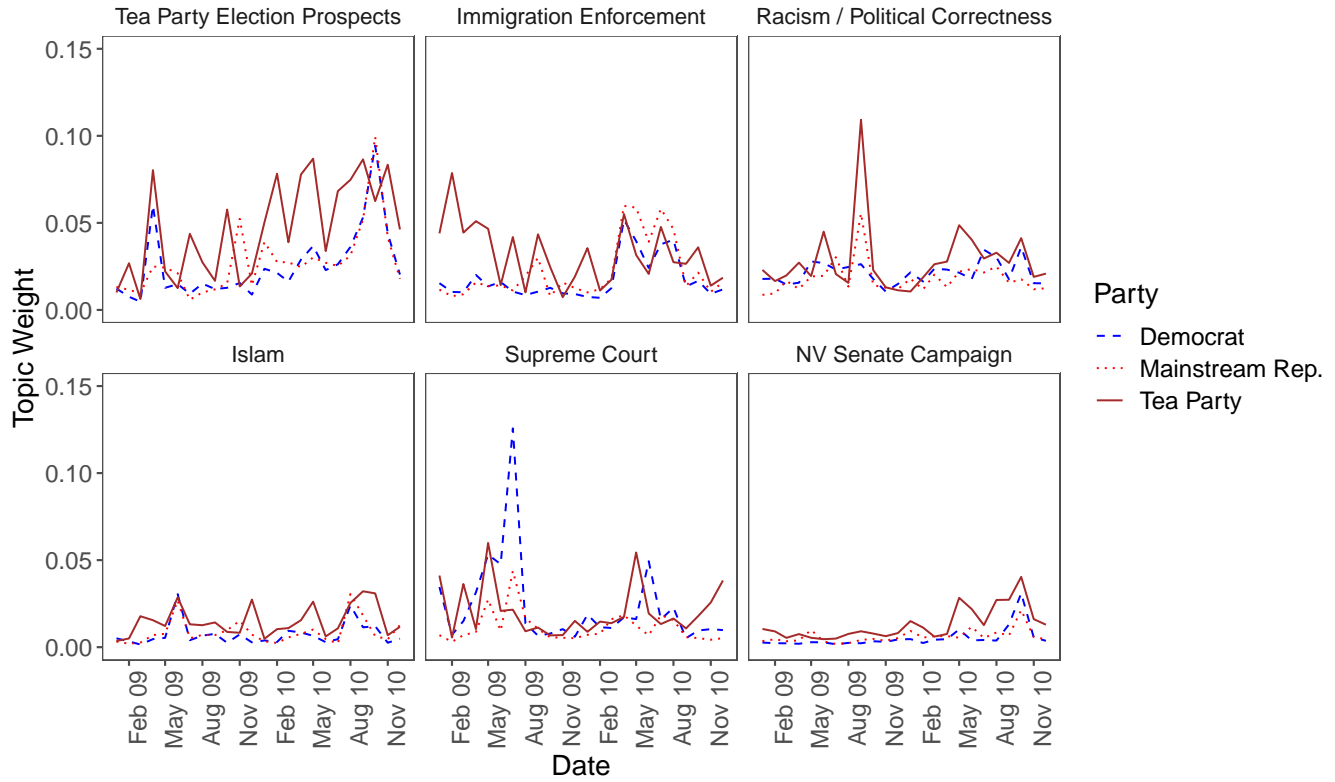
$$f_{ijt}(\mathbf{x}_{jt}) \sim \text{Poisson}(\exp[\mu_i + \alpha_j + \beta_i' \mathbf{x}_{jt}]) \quad (1)$$

\mathbf{x}_{jt} are covariates associated with speaker j in period t , including indicator for Republican Party affiliation, an indicator for Tea Party affiliation, and month indicators from January 2009 to December 2010. μ_i is an intercept capturing the overall usage of phrase i . α_j is a speaker fixed effect. Finally, β_i is a phrase-specific vector of coefficients. The intercepts and month dummies are unpenalized, but the Republican and Tea Party coefficients have an associated L1 (LASSO) penalty that shrinks these towards zero, correcting for small-sample bias from the many very infrequent phrases that by chance may have high correlation with candidate affiliations.

We use the estimated coefficients on the Tea Party and Republican dummies for each phrase to construct Tea Party and Republican scores for any sample of text; many coefficients are sparse due to the L1 penalty. Taddy (2013) shows that this score is a sufficient statistic for the full matrix of phrase frequencies. Hence, we can then fit a bivariate “forward” logit regression of the party labels on the scores, which we use to project probabilities of party or faction membership for speakers,

⁴We identify segments attributable to 386 distinct candidates, and 3433 distinct channel-month-candidate combinations in the transcripts.

(a) Candidate Appearances



(b) All Other Content

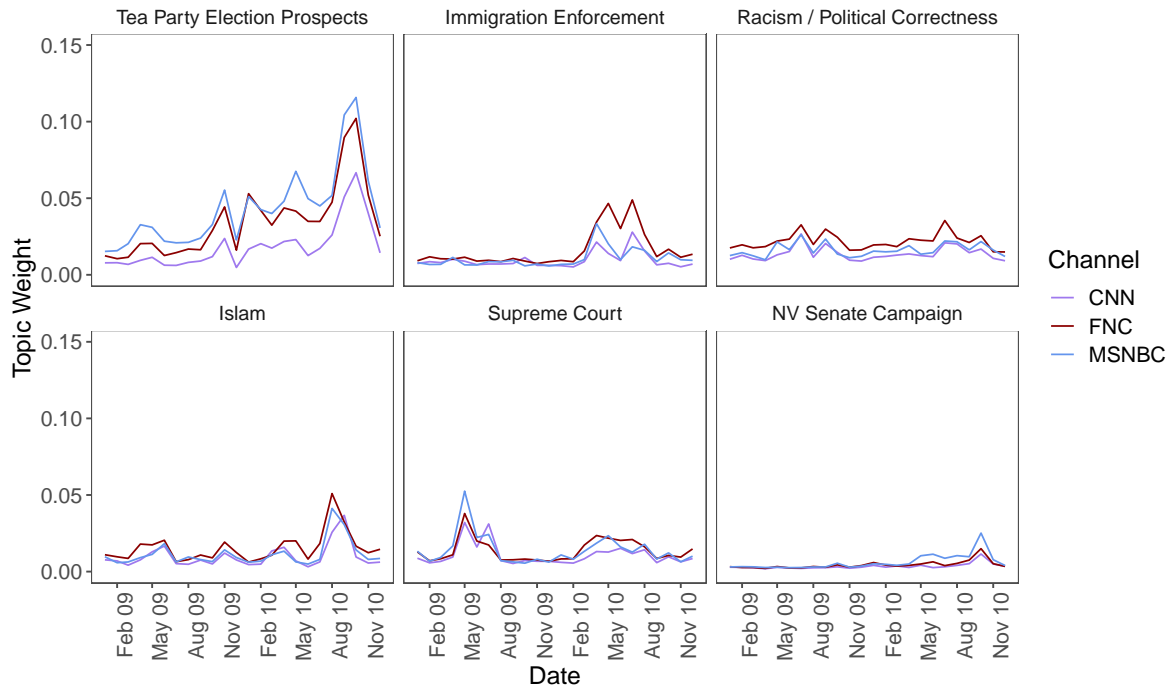


Figure 2: Estimated topic weights of Tea-Party emphasized topics, in candidate appearances (top) and all other cable content (bottom).

such as the non-candidate guests and hosts on the cable channels who have unknown affiliations. Figure 3 shows the predicted probability that the text in the cable transcripts from a given month was produced by a Tea Party speaker (3a); the right panel shows the same predicted probability for a mainstream Republican speaker (3b). FNC’s language consistently aligned more closely with Tea Party rhetoric (which equation 1 distinguishes from mainstream Republican rhetoric) than did CNN and MSNBC. The relative magnitude of the difference in estimated Tea Party language scores is comparable to that between FNC and the other two channels in the mainstream Republican score.⁵ In short, FNC not only exhibited a pro-Republican slant but also specifically championed Tea Party talking points.

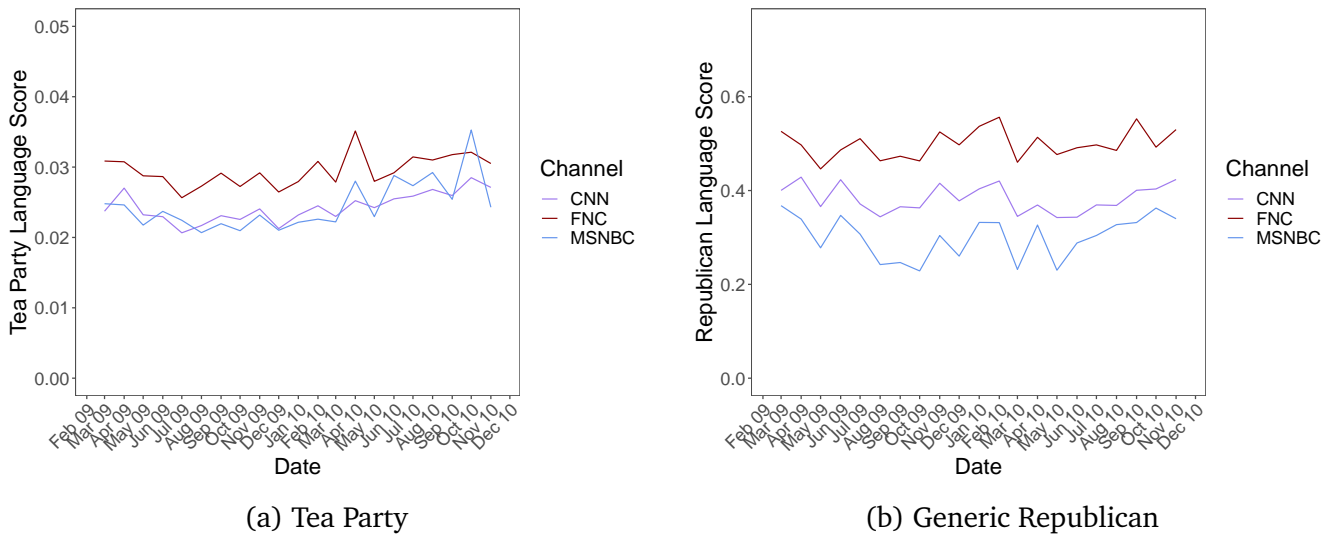


Figure 3: Predicted probability of being a Tea Party (left) and mainstream Republican (right) candidate, based on Gentzkow et al. (2019) method applied to cable news transcripts. The training data is text spoken by Congressional candidates appearing on the cable channels, and test data is all other text in the transcripts.

⁵Online Appendix Figure B.3.1 constructs confidence intervals for these scores using Gentzkow et al. (2019)’s method; the confidence interval for FNC’s Tea Party score excludes the point estimates for both CNN or MSNBC.

Research Design for Testing FNC Impact on Movement Support

How did FNC's pro-Tea Party slant affect the movement's rise during 2009-2010? To isolate sources of exogenous variation in FNC viewership, we use a research design first established in Martin and Yurukoglu (2017), which uses the ordinal position of FNC on the local cable system as an instrument for FNC viewership.⁶ Martin and Yurukoglu (2017) explain FNC's rollout across cable systems during the mid-1990s, and establish that FNC's cable channel positions 1) strongly predict FNC viewership among wired cable TV subscribers (relevance) and 2) do not predict viewership among satellite TV subscribers — who see a single, nationwide ordering on their set-top boxes that does not vary across municipalities — or correlate with realized or predicted (from demographics) political behavior prior to FNC's entry in 1996 (exclusion).⁷ This instrument works because when TV viewers switch channels (e.g., because a commercial block has begun), they tend to sequentially search away from the current channel. This behavior increases the odds of incidental exposure to a cable news channel, the closer it is in the channel order to more popular non-news channels. For historical reasons, the most popular cable channels⁸ are usually

⁶Our results will generally focus on reduced form rather than 2SLS estimates because television viewership is measured with significant sampling error, especially at low geographic levels like zip codes. Positions are much more stable over time and measured with much less error than ratings. With those caveats, readers can always rescale by dividing by the first stage reported in Tables C.1.1 and C.1.2 in the Online Appendix to get effects in per-viewer or per-hour terms.

⁷A proposed placebo test where pre-2009 FNC channel positions should not predict future movement support is infeasible given stability in FNC channel positions in most cable systems over time (Martin and Yurukoglu 2017).

⁸Including entertainment- and sports-focused outlets like ESPN, Discovery or TLC as well as broadcast networks like ABC or CBS.

positioned near the the bottom of the order. In combination with sequential-search behavior, this pattern generates higher average FNC viewership when its position on a cable system is lower.

For our purposes, the key question is whether FNC’s cable channel positions can affect viewers who are potential demonstrators, donors, or Republican Congressional primary election voters, who likely have stronger-than-average preferences over news sources. If the “compliers” for this instrument were all politically disengaged non-participants indifferent over the political slant of their news sources, channel positions might not induce any variation in our outcomes of interest.

We argue that exposure to FNC among even politically engaged citizens *is* affected by channel position. First, channel positions are very stable over time — with a year-to-year autocorrelation of 0.98 (Martin and Yurukoglu 2017) — and hence position variation induces a long-term cumulative effect on total FNC viewing in the local area. It is not necessary that the viewing of any specific individual be directly affected, since, as Druckman et al. (2018) show, a “two-step flow” of information from cable TV sources can and does spread through social networks. Those who live in a place with FNC in low position are therefore likely to have greater indirect exposure to FNC content, even if their own viewing is unaffected. Second, Online Appendix C reports that the first stage is quite homogeneous across demographic groups, using individual-level viewing data from the GfK-MRI Survey of the American Consumer (2001-2009), except for the most conservative and the oldest viewers, implying those groups are relatively under-represented among the compliers. Third, Online Appendix C also shows that channel position affects both the extensive (watching or not) and intensive (how many hours to watch) margins of viewership. Thus, the instrument can affect the “dosage” received even by those who would already be watching regardless of channel position.

Lastly, FNC’s ultimate impact on movement support likely depends on two factors: how pivotal persuasion is for converting viewers into Tea Party supporters, and how easily such conversion leads to action. On the former point, since the Tea Party represents a right-wing faction within the Republican Party, FNC is unlikely to shift movement support among staunch conservatives (who likely already embraced the movement) or independents and Democrats (who are unlikely to be

moved). Instead, moderate or mainstream Republicans are the most susceptible to FNC’s influence. On the latter point, converted FNC viewers are more likely to support the Tea Party through less resource-intensive actions such as voting, compared to campaign contributions, which require wealth, and protests, which demands significant time and organizing skills (Brady et al. 1995).

Tea Party Rallies

One of the Tea Party’s earliest milestones was nationwide Tax Day rallies on April 15th, 2009. Prior accounts of the movement emphasize that, unlike other cable news outlets, FNC reported on these rallies weeks in advance (Rafail and McCarthy 2018; Skocpol and Williamson 2012); Figure D.1 in the Online Appendix replicates this finding in our data. We test for possible effects in both causal directions, as it is conceivable both that FNC increased rally turnout, and that exposure to Tea Party rallies stimulated subsequent interest in news with a conservative slant.

FNC may boost Tea Party rally attendance through two mechanisms. First, by adopting Tea Party rhetoric and highlighting its policy agenda, FNC may persuade viewers who are otherwise uncommitted to the movement to become supporters (Broockman and Kalla 2025), thereby prompting them to attend rallies if the persuasive effect outweighs time and other resource constraints to participation (Brady et al. 1995). Second, FNC’s anticipatory coverage of rallies may alert existing supporters to upcoming events, helping them coordinate their participation (Rafail and McCarthy 2018; Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

We estimate the effect of exogenous exposure to FNC on Tea Party rally sizes on Tax Day of 2009 from the following regression:

$$RallySize_c = \beta_{FNC} p_c^{FNC} + \beta_{MSNBC} p_c^{MSNBC} + \lambda RainRally_c + \mathbf{X}_c \Gamma + \epsilon_c \quad (2)$$

$RallySize_c$ represents the size of the largest Tea Party rally held in county c in 2009 as a percentage of county population, as collected by Madestam et al. (2013).⁹ p_c^{FNC} is the FNC channel position on the system with the largest number of subscribers in county c . Aggregation to county level is necessary here since Tea Party rallies were recorded at the county level. Since higher FNC cable channel positions predict lower FNC viewership, we hypothesize $\beta_{FNC} < 0$ insofar as FNC increased viewers' propensities to attend the Tea Party rallies on Tax Day in 2009.

p_c^{MSNBC} similarly denotes the channel position of MSNBC on the system with the largest number of subscribers in county c . This controls for possible countervailing media influence from a left-leaning channel.¹⁰ Since rainfall reduced turnout for Tea Party rallies (Madestam et al. 2013), $RainRally_c$ controls for whether or not it rained on Tax Day in 2009 by county. Finally, X_c includes control variables that mirror those in Madestam et al. (2013). In the baseline specification, these include counties' population deciles, region fixed effects, deciles of counties' prior probabilities of raining on Tax Day, and county-level cable system characteristics. We also incorporate county demographics from the 2010 Census. In the most rigorous specification we add county electoral outcomes in the 2006 House elections and the 2008 presidential elections.

Table 3 reports estimation results with different sets of control variables, weighting by county population to account for heteroscedasticity. To ensure comparability with Madestam et al. (2013), we follow their protocol of clustering standard errors by state, although all results are robust to alternatively clustering by cable systems by which channel positions vary. Weighted FNC channel position by county has no statistically significant effect on the size of the largest Tax Day rally as a fraction of the county population. This challenges existing notions of FNC's role in mo-

⁹Madestam et al. (2013) includes three sources of attendance data for each county. We calculate $RallySize_c$ based on the mean value across these three sources divided by county population.

¹⁰ We exclude CNN position, following Martin and Yurukoglu (2017), since CNN entered much earlier than the other two channels, before the mid-1990s period of analog-to-digital upgrades and consequent channel position randomization.

Table 3: Effect of Exposure to Fox News On Tea Party Rally Size

	% Tea Party Rally Attendance		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
FNC Channel Pos.	0.0009 (0.0009)	0.0005 (0.0008)	0.0006 (0.0008)
MSNBC Channel Pos.	0.0005 (0.0008)	0.0002 (0.0006)	0.0002 (0.0006)
Rain on 4/15	-0.069*** (0.021)	-0.078*** (0.020)	-0.084*** (0.022)
Cable System Controls	✓	✓	✓
County Demographics		✓	✓
2008 and 2006 Voting			✓
Rain Prob. Decile FEs	✓	✓	✓
Population Decile FEs	✓	✓	✓
Region FEs	✓	✓	✓
Observations	2,656	2,656	2,656
R ²	0.07	0.15	0.16
Mean of DV	0.074	0.074	0.074

bilizing grassroots support for Tea Party rallies in 2009 (Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Given the time-consuming nature of protests (Brady et al. 1995), persuasion from FNC may not have been sufficient to overcome resource barriers to attending rallies—particularly among the marginal FNC viewers in our research design who tended to be younger, working-age adult viewers (See Table C.3 in the Online Appendix). In contrast, the prototypical Tea Party protesters were often retired or spent more time at home (Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Moreover, while FNC may have raised general awareness of Tea Party rallies, many prospective participants likely relied more on local Tea Party Facebook groups—rather than national media—for specific information on local rally times and locations (Rosenthal and Trost 2012). Lastly, since we cannot trace rally attendees to zip codes within counties, our aggregation may obscure a positive effect present at more granular levels.

We also conjecture potential reverse impact: greater Tea Party rally attendance may have boosted subsequent FNC viewership, since salient events attract viewers to tune in to politically

congenial news coverage (Kim and Kim 2021). If true, this could explain the remarkable durability of the Tea Party protests’ influence on US politics: that rallies provided the initial entry point into consumption of conservative media.¹¹ We test this conjecture in the following regression:

$$PostRallyRatings_c^{FNC} = \alpha RallySize_c + \mathbf{X}_c \Gamma + \epsilon_c \quad (3)$$

$PostRallyRatings_c^{FNC}$ measures the average FNC rating in county c between April 1 and July 31, 2010, covering the primary election season in that year. The treatment variable is Madestam et al. (2013)’s measure of Tea Party rally size in county c . We include different combinations of control variables \mathbf{X}_c that include cable channel positions and cable system characteristics, pre-April 2009 ratings of FNC in the same county, and the other controls included in Table 3. If Tea Party rallies stimulated greater interest in FNC, we would expect $\alpha > 0$. However, residents in counties that saw a higher Tea Party rally turnout may also have a greater baseline taste for FNC. To estimate the causal effect of Tea Party rallies on subsequent FNC viewership, we follow Madestam et al. (2013) and instrument rally sizes with rainfall on Tax Day in each county.

Table 4 reports OLS estimates based on equation 3. We cluster standard errors by state and weight observations by county population.¹² Variation in 2009 Tea Party rally attendance is strongly correlated with primary-season FNC ratings, even when conditioning on the obvious confounder of pre-rally FNC ratings. However, the estimate declines and falls below conventional significance levels when additional county-level controls are added. An analysis using Madestam et al.’s (2013) strategy that instruments for rally attendance with rainfall on 4/15 yields similarly large but imprecisely estimated positive coefficients; see Table D.1 in the Online Appendix. The evidence for rallies’ effects in converting local participants or observers into FNC viewers is thus suggestive but inconclusive.

¹¹Madestam et al. (2013) report that rain on Tax Day 2009 reduced Republican vote shares in the November 2010 elections by a full percentage point, a year and a half after the rallies.

¹²Relative to Table 3, we lose 49 counties due to missing FNC ratings data.

Table 4: Effects of Tea Party Rally Size on Subsequent FNC Ratings (OLS)

	Fox News Rating, Summer 2010			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
% Tea Party Rally Attendance	0.118** (0.047)	0.106** (0.046)	0.075 (0.048)	0.066 (0.048)
Pre-April 2009 Rating		0.087*** (0.014)	0.071*** (0.011)	0.061*** (0.011)
Cable System Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cable Positions	✓	✓	✓	✓
County Demographics			✓	✓
2008 and 2006 Voting				✓
Rain Prob. Decile FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Population Decile FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Region FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	2,607	2,607	2,607	2,607
R ²	0.11	0.16	0.20	0.22
Mean of DV	0.709	0.709	0.709	0.709

Campaign Contributions

While FNC appears to have limited impact in earlier stages of the Tea Party movement, it could still rally electoral support for Tea Party candidates once they had formally entered the 2010 midterm elections. To estimate the effect of incidental exposure to FNC on campaign contributions to Tea Party candidates in the 2009-2010 election cycle, we estimate the following regression:

$$Contrib_z^{TeaParty} = \beta_{FNC} p_z^{FNC} + \beta_{MSNBC} p_z^{MSNBC} + \mathbf{X}_z \Gamma + \epsilon_z \quad (4)$$

$Contrib_z^{TeaParty}$ summarizes itemized campaign contributions from donors residing in zip code z to Tea Party candidates in 2009-2010, aggregated as total dollar amount. p_z^{FNC} and p_z^{MSNBC} are the channel positions of FNC and MSNBC on the largest cable system in zip code z in 2009. We expect $\beta_{FNC} < 0$ if FNC increased viewers' willingness to contribute to Tea Party candidate campaigns. \mathbf{X}_z represent zip code-level cable system characteristics and demographic composition as

well as state fixed effects.¹³ Since we are interested in FNC's impact on campaign giving to Tea Party candidates specifically, we also estimate analogous regressions for itemized contributions to non-Tea Party Congressional Republican candidates for comparison.

Table 5 reports estimates for zip-code total itemized contributions to Tea Party candidates in dollars in columns 1-3, and those to other Congressional Republican candidates in columns 4-6.¹⁴

¹⁵ We cluster standard errors by cable systems since channel positions vary by them. Higher FNC cable channel positions systematically reduced itemized contributions to Tea Party candidates during 2009-2010, but not for other Republican Congressional candidates. While differences in estimated effects for these two types of candidates are not uniformly precise (see Table G.4 in the Online Appendix),¹⁶ Table 5 nonetheless suggests that FNC's ability to rally donors for Republican candidates may have been particularly strong for those associated with the Tea Party movement during the 2010 midterm elections. Moreover, FNC's fundraising effect for Tea Party candidates is sizable. Based on column 3 of Table 5, raising FNC's cable channel position by one standard deviation (residualized by state) reduces itemized contributions to Tea Party candidates by \$404, which is 11.3% of the average zip-code total fundraising for these candidates (\$3,588).¹⁷ Such FNC-induced fundraising boosts could disproportionately benefit Tea Party candidates since many

¹³Although rainfall reduced Tea Party rally turnout (Madestam et al. 2013), Online Appendix F shows that it is not an omitted variable here since it is uncorrelated with FNC channel positions.

¹⁴In columns 2, 3, 5, and 6, we lose 1,061 zip codes due to missing Census demographic data.

¹⁵For this and subsequent findings on campaign giving, Online Appendix G shows coefficient stability, robustness to outliers, and numbers of contributors as alternative outcome variables.

¹⁶Online Appendix G.5 shows that FNC channel positions did not impact itemized contributions to Democratic candidates.

¹⁷This represents 3.49% of all individual campaign contributions given to Republican candidates in an average congressional race in our sample, comparable in magnitude to Grumbach

of them, as non-incumbents, enjoy higher marginal returns from campaign spending (Broockman and Kalla 2023).

Table 5: FNC Effect on Zip Code-Level Total Itemized Contributions In Dollars

	Tea Party Candidates			Other Rep. Candidates		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
FNC Channel Pos.	-30.8*** (11.6)	-24.1** (11.4)	-29.2*** (10.1)	-14.8 (27.4)	-2.29 (28.3)	-1.67 (25.2)
MSNBC Channel Pos.	1.86 (9.30)	14.3 (9.16)	8.04 (9.02)	-45.5** (22.2)	-20.4 (20.1)	-22.2 (15.2)
Cable system controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic controls		✓	✓		✓	✓
State FEs			✓			✓
Observations	24,360	23,299	23,299	24,360	23,299	23,299
R ²	0.010	0.08	0.10	0.02	0.10	0.11
Mean of DV	3587.634	3725.453	3725.453	7983.344	8280.421	8280.421

We explore the potential mechanisms for such fundraising impact of incidental exposure to FNC by examining donor heterogeneity. First, to differentiate FNC’s conversion of Tea Party supporters into new donors and its persuasion of existing donors to support to the movement, we separately estimate regressions based on equation 4 for new itemized donors (i.e., those who made zero itemized contributions prior to 2009) versus existing ones in Table 6. The point estimates for FNC’s cable channel position are larger for existing itemized donors, possibly due to existing donors’ higher levels of wealth and hence lower barriers to participating in campaign finance (Brady et al. 1995; Li 2023), although the differences in estimates are not precise. Both persuasion of existing donors and mobilization of new donors may account for FNC’s overall fundraising effect for Tea Party candidates.

Second, we investigate heterogeneity by donor ideology. To infer ideology independently of campaign contributions to Tea Party candidates, we focus on existing itemized donors’ pre-2009

and Sahn (2020)’s finding that the presence of a black candidate raises black donors’ share of individual campaign contributions given to Democrats in a congressional race by 3.8%.

Table 6: Zip-Code Itemized Contributions (In Dollars) to Tea Party Candidates Among Existing vs. New Contributors

	Existing Contributors			New Contributors		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
FNC Channel Pos.	-24.0** (9.61)	-20.0** (9.90)	-24.3*** (8.65)	-6.64*** (2.49)	-5.84** (2.40)	-6.47*** (2.11)
MSNBC Channel Pos.	3.94 (7.78)	12.5 (8.05)	6.66 (7.72)	-2.01 (1.82)	0.089 (1.71)	-0.671 (1.78)
Cable system controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic controls		✓	✓		✓	✓
State FEs			✓			✓
Observations	24,360	23,299	23,299	24,360	23,299	23,299
R ²	0.007	0.05	0.07	0.02	0.08	0.12
Mean of DV	2774.429	2879.354	2879.354	811.555	844.396	844.396

campaign giving histories, and we adopt Hall and M. (2013)’s approach to proxy for the ideology of donor i , $Ideology_i = \frac{\sum_j NOMINATE_j \times Contribution_{ij}}{\sum_j Contribution_{ij}}$. Here, j denotes a Member of Congress to whom donor i contributed before 2009. $NOMINATE_j$ is j ’s DW-NOMINATE score (Poole and Rosenthal 2000). $Contribution_{ij}$ is the sum of pre-2009 itemized contributions from donor i to candidate j . This approach lets us infer the ideologies of 75.6% of existing itemized donors, whose ideologies we classify in two ways: 1) binning all existing donors by their 33th and 67th percentiles (the cut points are $-1, -0.342, 0.289, 1$); and 2) binning existing donors that had given to Republican candidates before 2009 by their terciles (the cut points are $-0.691, 0.367, 0.456, 0.965$).

Table 7 estimates treatment effects by donor ideology based on terciles derived from *all* existing donors; the difference in estimates between the first and second terciles is precise. Table 7 suggests that FNC primarily influenced moderate right-leaning donors’ contributions to Tea Party candidates while left-leaning donors remained unpersuaded. Similarly, Tables 8 estimates treatment effects by ideology tercile among donors who *previously gave to Republican candidates*. Although differences in estimates are not precise, FNC appeared especially effective in shifting moderate Republican donors’ ideologies rightward, although it may also reflect the under-representation of staunch conservatives among marginal FNC viewers (see Online Appendix Table C.2.1).

Table 7: Zip-Code Itemized Contributions (In Dollars) to Tea Party Candidates Across Existing Contributors

	Donor Ideology (-1, -0.342) (1)	Donor Ideology (-1, -0.342) (2)	Donor Ideology (-0.342, 0.289) (3)	Donor Ideology (-0.342, 0.289) (4)	Donor Ideology (-0.342, 0.289) (5)	Donor Ideology (-0.342, 0.289) (6)	Donor Ideology (0.289, 1) (7)	Donor Ideology (0.289, 1) (8)	Donor Ideology (0.289, 1) (9)
FNC Channel Pos.	-0.443* (0.267)	-0.357 (0.224)	-0.395** (0.169)	-7.14** (2.98)	-6.80** (3.08)	-7.92** (3.44)	-14.4** (7.02)	-11.2 (7.14)	-13.6** (6.25)
MSNBC Channel Pos.	-0.251 (0.184)	-0.067 (0.158)	-0.010 (0.113)	-0.580 (2.52)	1.03 (2.52)	1.01 (2.62)	5.49 (6.00)	11.4* (6.47)	5.78 (6.04)
Cable system controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic controls		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
State FEs			✓			✓			✓
Observations	24,360	23,299	23,299	24,360	23,299	23,299	24,360	23,299	23,299
R ²	0.006	0.04	0.06	0.003	0.02	0.03	0.004	0.03	0.05
Mean of DV	36.919	38.272	38.272	501.960	520.813	520.813	1848.710	1917.340	1917.340

Table 8: Zip-Code Itemized Contributions (In Dollars) to Tea Party Candidates Across Existing Republican Contributors

	Donor Ideology (-0.691, 0.367) (1)	Donor Ideology (-0.691, 0.367) (2)	Donor Ideology (0.367, 0.456) (3)	Donor Ideology (0.367, 0.456) (4)	Donor Ideology (0.367, 0.456) (5)	Donor Ideology (0.367, 0.456) (6)	Donor Ideology (0.456, 0.965) (7)	Donor Ideology (0.456, 0.965) (8)	Donor Ideology (0.456, 0.965) (9)
FNC Channel Pos.	-9.66** (4.31)	-9.07** (4.53)	-11.4*** (4.19)	-6.08* (3.29)	-5.11 (3.35)	-5.77* (3.06)	-6.15* (3.64)	-4.04 (3.53)	-4.71 (3.51)
MSNBC Channel Pos.	0.579 (3.24)	3.24 (3.24)	3.17 (3.22)	1.09 (3.06)	3.01 (3.10)	0.534 (3.38)	2.97 (3.42)	6.10 (4.15)	3.06 (3.29)
Cable system controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic controls		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
State FEs			✓			✓			✓
Observations	24,360	23,299	23,299	24,360	23,299	23,299	24,360	23,299	23,299
R ²	0.006	0.04	0.06	0.003	0.02	0.03	0.001	0.01	0.02
Mean of DV	838.426	870.438	870.438	753.155	777.031	777.031	797.211	830.215	830.215

Primary Voting

Finally, to test whether incidental exposure to FNC increased voting for Tea Party candidates vis-a-vis other Congressional Republican candidates in primary contests in 2010, we focus on those primary elections that involved Tea Party candidates and estimate the following regression:

$$PrimaryVoteShare_z^{TeaParty} = \beta_{FNC} p_z^{FNC} + \beta_{MSNBC} p_z^{MSNBC} + \eta_d + \mathbf{X}_z \Gamma + \epsilon_z \quad (5)$$

$PrimaryVoteShare_z^{TeaParty}$ is the vote share received by the Tea Party candidate on the ballot in zip code z in the 2010 primary election for the House of Representatives. While we collect primary vote shares by precinct, we aggregate them to the zip code level based on precinct-zip code geographic overlaps so as to match our zip code-level measure of cable channel positions, p_z^{FNC} and p_z^{MSNBC} respectively for FNC and MSNBC. Once again, since higher channel positions reduce viewership, we expect $\beta_{FNC} < 0$ insofar as exogenous exposure to FNC enhanced Tea Party candidates' electoral performance in House Republican primaries in 2010. We control for η_d , a fixed effect for each congressional district d , to ensure that β_{FNC} is identified from within-district FNC channel position variation. Consequently, our estimated treatment effect $\hat{\beta}_{FNC}$ is unaffected by any potential endogenous entry of Tea Party candidates across congressional districts.¹⁸ \mathbf{X}_z captures zip code-level cable system characteristics and demographic controls.

Table 9 reports estimation results.¹⁹ ²⁰ We cluster standard errors by cable systems—the level at which channel positions vary—and weight observations based on total votes cast to account for heteroscedasticity. Tea Party candidates received significantly lower vote shares in the 2010 House primary elections in zip codes with higher FNC cable channel positions, implying that voters with

¹⁸Online Appendix E finds no systematic evidence of such endogenous entry and contextualizes this finding with Arceneaux et al. (2020, 2025).

¹⁹In column 2, 8 zip codes are dropped due to missing Census demographic data.

²⁰Online Appendix H demonstrates coefficient stability and robustness to outliers.

greater FNC exposure supported Tea Party candidates at higher rates in these primaries. Since we include congressional district fixed effects, these findings are driven by within-district exogenous variation in FNC viewership rather than differences in candidate pools across races.

Table 9: Exposure to Fox News Increased Precinct Primary Vote Shares for Tea Party Candidates

	Tea Party Cand. Vote Share	
	(1)	(2)
FNC Channel Pos.	-0.002** (0.0007)	-0.002*** (0.0007)
MSNBC Channel Pos.	0.0004 (0.0004)	0.0003 (0.0004)
Cable system controls	✓	✓
Demographic controls		✓
District FEs	✓	✓
Observations	3,071	3,063
R ²	0.76	0.77
Mean of DV	0.536	0.536

These effects are not only precise but also sizable. Based on column 2 of Table 9, increasing FNC’s cable channel position by one standard deviation (residualized by congressional district) would reduce Tea Party candidates’ primary vote shares by 2.03 percentage points. This reduced-form effect in Congressional primaries is comparable, but larger, than FNC’s impact on House, Senate and Presidential general elections (Ash et al. 2024)—a one-standard deviation reduced form effect of 0.5 points in the 2012 presidential election and between .6 to 1.6 points in Congressional elections. Hence, the intraparty impact of Fox News is at least at large, if not larger, than its interparty effect at the Congressional level.²¹

In Online Appendix H, we examine FNC’s effect on primary turnout. Lacking precinct- or zip code- level data on the numbers of eligible primary voters, we proxy for actual zip-code turnout

²¹Also, while a standardized effect of 2.03-point in primary vote shares is meaningful, it is modest compared to salient candidate traits such as relevant prior experience (13-point advantage) or incumbency (29-point advantage) (Hirano and Snyder 2019).

rates by dividing total primary-election votes cast by the number of adult residents in the 2010 Census. Table H.3 reports estimates using the same control variables as in equation 5; we cluster standard error by cable system and weight observations by the number of age-eligible residents to account for heteroscedasticity. The estimated effects of FNC's cable channel positions on (proxied) turnout are indistinguishable from zero, suggesting FNC primarily converted existing Republican primary voters into Tea Party supporters rather than mobilizing new voters. However, we hesitate to draw firm conclusions as our proxies for turnout rates likely have significant noise, which can mask any underlying turnout effects due to FNC exposure.

Discussion

Despite extensive research on media bias and partisan polarization (Ash et al. 2024; Chiang and Knight 2011; DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007; Gentzkow et al. 2011; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017), little is known about how media slant shapes intraparty ideological movements in the United States. This paper examines the role of the Fox News Channel (FNC), a prominent conservative news outlet, in the rise of the Tea Party movement within the Republican Party over the past decade (Blum 2020; Gervais and Morris 2018; Kabaservice 2012; Parker and Barreto 2013; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Our content analysis reveals that, beyond its baseline pro-Republican slant, FNC provided extensive and favorable coverage of the Tea Party during 2009-2010 compared to MSNBC and CNN. We find no firm evidence that FNC mobilized Tea Party rallies in early 2009, which may be due partly to the high resource barriers that protesting commands (Brady et al. 1995). However, exposure to FNC significantly rallied both campaign donors and primary voters for Tea Party candidates relative to other Congressional Republican candidates in the 2010 midterm elections. In short, while FNC did not initiate the Tea Party movement, it galvanized electoral support for Tea Party candidates and helped them secure party nominations at a critical juncture of the movement's development.

We examine the political power of media within a context where political messaging holds higher marginal influence (Broockman and Kalla 2025; Hill 2017). The Tea Party movement during the 2009-10 election cycle, as an emerging GOP faction vying for party nominations (Blum 2020; Skocpol and Williamson 2012), provided an intraparty competition setting where the public possessed relatively less prior knowledge and fewer heuristics for candidate evaluation (Parker and Barreto 2013; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Our findings show that this relatively low-information setting provided significant room for persuasion and mobilization through FNC's pro-Tea Party coverage. Intraparty ideological movements in the United States may thus represent a particularly prominent domain of media influence in mass politics.

This paper also underscores that the media's political reach extends beyond influencing general elections. While prior research on Extended Party Networks has predominantly focused on other prominent sources of outside influences in party nominations in the United States, such as activists and campaign donors, our study reveals that media outlets may strategically promote specific intraparty ideological movements, influencing the future trajectory of established political parties. Unlike past research on media influence over party vote shares, this paper shows that media slant can fundamentally transform party platforms by helping to determine winners and losers among competing intraparty movements. Although our data ends prior to the rise of Trump-aligned MAGA candidates in Republican primaries, it is not a stretch to extrapolate our results to that more-recent example of intra-party ideological contests. We expect that media support (both from FNC and from newer outlets like OANN, Newsmax, and right-wing YouTube creators) was decisive in that contest as well.

We close by noting the illustrative contrast provided by Occupy Wall Street (OWS), another political movement that emerged around the same time as the Tea Party. Though OWS' ideological goals were quite different from those of the Tea Party, it shared an anti-establishment bent, a genesis outside of existing party structures, and a strategy of coordinated protest to grab national media attention. In contrast to the Tea Party, however, OWS did not benefit from sustained support by television media. An analysis of mentions of the movement in Online Appendix I

— analogous to Figure D.1.1 for the Tea Party in the Online Appendix — reveals that OWS did succeed in generating coverage of protest events on cable news. But that coverage was similar in volume across all three cable channels; OWS was not adopted by MSNBC or CNN in anything close to the degree that the Tea Party was adopted by Fox News. Furthermore, the coverage did not extend beyond the protest events themselves, quickly evaporating after the dramatic removal of OWS protesters from Zucotti Park. Our database of cable transcripts contains exactly zero airtime given to leaders or representatives of the OWS movement, in stark contrast to the platform granted to Tea Party leaders to articulate their ideological vision to the public. While a full understanding of the reasons for this difference in media support is beyond the scope of this paper, the stark contrast in the two movements’ impact on the American political landscape illustrates the critical role of mass media in shaping party brands and enabling the realignment of party priorities by extra-party forces.

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