

Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy

Discussion Paper Series

#D-96, July 2015

“They Don’t Give a Damn about Governing”

Conservative Media’s Influence on the Republican Party

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on Media, Politics and Public Policy

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Overview

Republicans should still have been celebrating in late January 2015. Only weeks earlier they had opened the 114th Congress with a Senate majority for the first time in eight years, as well as a fattened majority in the House, where they had ruled since 2011 – full control of the legislative branch for the first time in Barack Obama’s presidency. Yet in reality, Republicans were out of control. They only had themselves to blame, and many did. So unhappy was Representative Charlie Dent, a six-term Pennsylvanian and one of the few surviving Republican moderates, he emerged from a private party caucus in January to share with reporters waiting outside the complaint he had made to colleagues behind closed doors: “Week one, we had a speaker election that did not go as well as a lot of us would have liked. Week two, we got into a big fight over deporting children, something that a lot of us didn’t want to have a discussion about. Week three, we are now talking about rape and incest and reportable rapes and incest for minors,” Dent said. “I just can’t wait for week four.”¹

Indeed, the coming weeks only got worse. That owed to a February showdown with President Obama over immigration policy that Republican leaders had teed up back in December, during a lame-duck Congress, when their immediate concern was getting their militant members out of town for the holidays without provoking another government shutdown. But they knew then that they were merely postponing the inevitable, a battle doomed to fail at the opening of the new, Republican-led Congress. Much like Republicans’ politically disastrous ploy in the fall of 2013, when they shuttered the government to try to force Obama to support repeal of his signature domestic achievement, the Affordable Care Act, this early 2015 clash with the president also turned on an empty threat – Republicans implausibly vowed to withhold money for homeland security programs, even as terrorist acts filled the news, unless Obama agreed to reverse his recent executive actions on immigration and deport millions of young people brought to the country illegally as children, and their parents, too.

Come January 2015, House Speaker John A. Boehner and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell gamely led the charge. It predictably backfired and by March the unhappy duo engineered the retreat they had known would have to come. Congress approved a “clean” bill funding homeland security, without any language restricting the administration on immigration.

It was a humiliating debut for a party that had promised in the 2014 midterm elections that Republicans would show the nation how well they could govern, if only voters would put them completely in charge of Congress. Considering that the humiliation was self-inflicted (Did anyone really believe McConnell, one of Congress’s wiliest players, would have scripted this chaotic curtain-raiser?), no drama could have better demonstrated that the leaders of the Republican Party do not fully control its agenda. By spring, Congress did pass a series of significant measures – addressing terrorism insurance, human trafficking and veterans’ suicides, for instance, and fixing a longtime policy headache involving Medicare reimbursements to doctors. But Democrats’ cooperation had helped, and no one interpreted those achievements as a sign that Republicans would be able to perform the bigger, essential governing tasks that loomed, of passing annual appropriations bills and raising the nation’s debt limit, without the messy intraparty ruptures and brinkmanship of recent years.²

That other forces were shaping Republicans’ agenda was likewise evident on a parallel track, as their party began the long process of picking a 2016 presidential nominee. Here, too, the immigration issue was front-and-center, and not in the way that the Republican leadership had called for in its unsparing autopsy of the party’s 2012 election losses. That earlier analysis, commissioned by the chairman of the Republican National Committee, Reince Priebus, had called for “positive solutions on immigration” and less divisive rhetoric; nominee Mitt Romney, who had called on undocumented immigrants to “self-deport,” had received just 27 percent of the votes from an expanding Latino electorate, when at least 40

percent was considered essential for victory – a threshold that will rise as the Latino voting population does. “If Hispanic Americans hear that the GOP doesn’t want them in the United States, they won’t pay attention to our next sentence,” the party study said. “It doesn’t matter what we say about education, jobs or the economy.”³

Two years later, Republicans’ positions and rhetoric on immigration could not be more contrary to that advice. While Jeb Bush, the Republican establishment’s favorite for 2016 and a Spanish-speaking former governor of Florida, has just the sort of record that party elders had in mind – long favoring a legal path to citizenship for an estimated 11 million undocumented residents – he is widely perceived as a weakened, even fatally flawed candidate for the nomination because of it. Similarly, another contender who had been hailed as a new-generation star, Florida’s Senator Marco Rubio, by 2015 was being all but written off by many conservative media figures and activists for having been part of a bipartisan “Gang of Eight” in the Senate that in 2013 won overwhelming passage of a comprehensive immigration bill, which then died in the Republican-led House of willful neglect.

Worse for Bush, he also is on the wrong side of what has become another litmus test in Republicans’ presidential race: the so-called Common Core education standards. Conceived some years ago as a bipartisan initiative of the nation’s governors, Common Core by 2013 had been redefined by hardline conservatives in media and activist groups as an attempted federal takeover of public school classrooms. So when the 2016 field began taking shape, once-supportive Republicans including Bobby Jindal, Mike Huckabee and Chris Christie reversed themselves. Bush did not, but by this year he was neither advertising his support nor using the words “Common Core.”

If leaders of the Republican Party are not setting its agenda, who is?

As many of them concede, it is conservative media – not just talk-show celebrities Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Mark Levin and Laura

Ingraham, but also lesser-known talkers like Steve Deace, and an expanding web of “news” sites and social media outlets with financial and ideological alliances with far-right anti-government, anti-establishment groups like Heritage Action, Americans for Prosperity, Club for Growth and FreedomWorks. Once allied with but now increasingly hostile to the Republican hierarchy, conservative media is shaping the party’s agenda in ways that are impeding Republicans’ ability to govern and to win presidential elections. “These people, practically speaking, are preventing the Republican Party from governing, which means they’re really preventing it from becoming a presidential party as well,” said Geoffrey Kabaservice, author of *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party*, and himself a Republican.⁴

And who is Steve Deace? The baby-faced 41-year-old Deace (pronounced Dace) is a college dropout, self-described one-time loser, former part-time sports writer and born-again Christian who one day unexpectedly found himself with a radio show in Iowa, home of the first-in-the-nation contest for aspiring presidential nominees. Nine years later, he is nationally syndicated from Des Moines and a prolific columnist and social media presence with tens of thousands of followers. As such, the entrepreneurial Deace exemplifies the otherwise obscure and deeply conservative new-media figures who, collectively, often call the shots in the Republican Party, by both provoking and amplifying the party’s conservative activists and their hardline positions. His motto is “Fear God. Tell the Truth. Make Money.”

Twenty years ago, former radio shock-jock Rush Limbaugh was mostly alone, though soon to be joined by Roger Ailes and Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News Channel in playing to conservative audiences and validating their biases. Since then – to an extent unimagined as recently as Barack Obama’s election – the combination of the Internet and social media, broadcast deregulation and technological advances like live-

streaming and on-demand audio and video “products” have allowed these new voices and scribblers to proliferate, empowering figures who boast of being more conservative than Fox and “El Rushbo” to shape Republican politics.

“It’s not just talk radio, but the blogosphere, the Internet – they’re all intertwined now. You’ve got this constant chorus of skepticism about anything the quote-unquote establishment does,” said a longtime former top aide to House Republican leaders, Dave Schnittger. And, he said, the chorus is loudest in opposition to those actions that are fundamental to governing: meeting basic fiscal deadlines for funding the government and allowing it to borrow. “Those are the things that leaders have to get done as part of governing,” the Republican said, “as much as conservative media may hate it.”⁵

Said another Republican, who has worked in the top ranks of congressional and presidential politics, but, like some others, asked to remain unidentified lest he provoke the far-right messengers against his current boss: “It’s so easy these days to go out there and become an Internet celebrity by saying some things, and who cares if it’s true or makes any sense. It’s a new frontier: How far to the right can you get? And there’s no incentive to ever really bother with reality.” Or to compromise: “There’s no money, ratings or clicks in everyone going along to get along.”

Asked whether he could offer examples of legislative outcomes affected by conservative media, this Republican all but snapped, “Sure. All of ‘em.” Does he worry more broadly then about the small-d democratic process? “Yeah, absolutely. Because the loudest voices drown out the sensible ones and there’s no real space to have serious discussions.”⁶

“One of the realities here is that these people have always existed,” said Norman J. Ornstein, a political scientist at the center-right American Enterprise Institute and co-author with Thomas E. Mann of the book *It’s Even Worse Than It Looks*, about what the authors see as the radicalization of the Republican Party. “But they were at the fringes, the John Birch

Society types. Now, because of social media and because you have a culture of extremism that is not culled out more generally, they can move into the mainstream and actually hijack a major party. And that's what's going on here.”⁷

Those in the maligned Republican Party establishment – including many who not so long ago were themselves proud troublemakers for the conservative cause, and who are conservative still by any rational measure – are left to wonder whether the Republican Party is capable of governing. “I would say there is a serious question of whether or not it's a governing party,” said Vin Weber, a Republican strategist and former congressman from Minnesota, who in the 1980s was, along with Newt Gingrich, a leader of right-wing, anti-establishment rebels in the House.⁸ As he and congressional leaders fear, this winter's intraparty collision over homeland-security spending and immigration will look trifling compared to likely fights ahead in 2015 over must-pass spending bills and increasing the debt limit again to avert default.

Establishment Republicans say they aspire to push their party closer to society's political center – on immigration, gay rights, climate change and more – much as Democrats slowly moderated from a leftist party in the 1970s to a left-of-center one by the Clinton era, or as Britain's Labor Party similarly shifted under Tony Blair in the late 1990s. In that, these Republicans agree with Mann and Ornstein, who wrote in a 2013 afterword to their book: “After losing five of six presidential elections between 1968 and 1988, Democrats (thanks in large part to the Democratic Leadership Council and Bill Clinton) made a striking adjustment that put them in a position to nominate credible presidential candidates, develop center-left policies responsive to the interests of a majority of voters, and govern in a less ideological, more pragmatic, problem-solving mode. Nothing would contribute more to strengthening American democracy than Republicans going through that same experience.”⁹

Yet even though it is now Republicans who have lost the popular vote for president in five of the last six elections, party leaders lament that Democrats' late 20th century model for moderating is inoperative for Republicans in this 21st century Internet age. The problem, as they see it: Conservative media, having helped push the party so far to the anti-government, anti-compromise ideological right, attacks Republican leaders for taking the smallest step toward the moderate middle. "In the late '80s and early '90s, Democrats weren't dealing with a media that has become the way the conservative media has become," which is "much more powerful than John Boehner and Mitch McConnell," said Matthew Dowd, a strategist in George W. Bush's campaigns. Democratic leaders "didn't have to deal with a quote-unquote liberal media out there that was going to confront them every time they took a turn."¹⁰

"If you stray the slightest from the far right," said former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, who continues to advise Republican congressional leaders, "you get hit by the conservative media."¹¹ David Price, a longtime Democratic congressman from North Carolina and a former political science professor, said, "One of the generalizations we all grew up with in political science is how candidates have to tend to the middle – that's where the votes are. Republicans have changed that."¹² Weber, the former Republican congressman, complained that while elected representatives should reflect the views of their constituents, "the problem you have in the Republican Party is that people are adjusting farther than they really need to" – to avoid a primary challenge.¹³

Conservative media indeed draws much of its power, Republicans say, from incumbents' fear of a primary challenge. Not surprisingly, talk-show hosts and conservative pundits stoke that fear by inviting challengers to run against incumbents deemed too quick to compromise, and then encourage support for them, including financially. Some Republicans say that dynamic – incumbents' fear, media's threat – was intensified in last year's midterm elections despite the party's overall triumphs. Among the

few Republican losers was a big one: Eric Cantor, the House majority leader. He had been widely seen as heir apparent to Boehner, and conservatives' choice – until he began arguing that Republicans should support legal status for so-called Dreamers, young people brought to this country illegally as children. Cantor thereby revived many conservatives' suspicions about whether he really was one of them.

Laura Ingraham, the nationally syndicated talk-show host and a vehement foe of immigration reforms, decided to promote Cantor's dark-horse rival in Virginia's Republican primary, Dave Brat, and then was called a giant-killer when Brat unexpectedly won. While Republicans quibble over how much Ingraham actually had to do with the result – Cantor had, they agree, neglected his Richmond-area district as his national prominence grew – his defeat left many congressional incumbents further cowed by the power of conservative media, and hardened against immigration. “Immigration reform, any hope of it, just basically died,” said a senior Senate aide.¹⁴ That solidifying of opposition contributed to Republicans' miscalculations in December's lame-duck session, when they made funding for homeland security contingent on Obama repealing his immigration policies. As further evidence of the Cantor fallout, one House Republican leader recalled in an interview how many Virginia Republicans had defied Boehner in March when he put to a vote a bill to fund homeland security programs for three more weeks to buy time for negotiations with Democrats on immigration. And not just Virginians, the leader said: “Guys that you would normally expect to be okay you could see responding to the political pressure. They saw the immigration issue as a major issue in Eric's defeat.”¹⁵ Not for the first or last time, the speaker lost due to party defections.

As for those in the widening world of conservative media, for all of their complaints about the establishment, they are only too happy to acknowledge their influence in shaping the political agenda. “I don't think conservative media is shaping it as much as it would like to, but it's shaping

it more than Washington would like it to,” said Deace. “I don’t think it’s moving fast enough for conservatives like myself, but it is clearly dragging the Republicans along, kicking and screaming.”¹⁶

Setting the agenda, however, is not the same as winning, whether in the congressional or presidential arenas. Conservative media, and the conservative activists the media gives voice to, often do not win: Witness the retreat on the homeland security and immigration fight this year, the failed 2013 government shutdown, or Romney’s nomination over more conservative rivals in 2012. Or consider House Republicans’ futile 50-plus attempts to repeal all or part of Obama’s health-insurance law, and without offering any alternative plan, given the opposition among conservative media and activists to any role for the federal government.

Yet those in conservative media, whether in print, online, or radio and TV broadcasting, invariably see these fights as a win-win: They and their audiences repeatedly get to set the agenda, to provoke a confrontation in defense of what they see as conservative principles. And when the fight fails – well, that is Republican leaders’ fault for not fighting hard enough. Conservative media can always find a like-minded politician – say, senator and presidential candidate Ted Cruz – to say so. And with each loss or retreat, conservative media and its readers, viewers and listeners are only further enraged at the Republican establishment. That anger was behind the divisive first act of the new Republican Congress: House conservatives’ attempt to oust Boehner as speaker.

Similarly, conservative media figures see the process of picking presidential nominees as a win-win. Establishment Republicans are quick to point out, as two did in interviews in identical terms, “Their track record is not very good.”¹⁷ But while those in conservative media generally have not picked recent Republican nominees, they have defined the terms of debate. By backing the most conservative contenders and enforcing litmus tests, they have forced the ultimate nominee further right – weakening Romney and, before him, Senator John McCain among swing voters in the

general election. Yet when the nominee loses, that is the fault of his campaign and the national party, in conservative media's telling.

In 2008 and 2012, conservative media did not coalesce around a single candidate. In 2008, many in the media ultimately supported Romney in an unsuccessful bid to block McCain after their first choices, like former minister and Arkansas governor Huckabee, foundered. But four years later, with several ideological conservatives in the running, most in conservative media opposed Romney as a flip-flopping moderate-in-disguise – a dread RINO, Republican In Name Only. Romney's call for illegal immigrants to "self-deport," so damaging in the end, was his way of getting to the right of rivals, chiefly Texas Governor Rick Perry, and playing to conservative media – and through them to conservative voters during the primaries.

Weber, the former insurgent congressman turned establishment leader, said of conservative media, "What's bad from the 2012 campaign is not that they won, but that they set the agenda. What difference did it make to the Republican Party to have Romney defeat Rick Santorum if Romney's going to embrace an agenda to the right of Rick Santorum?"¹⁸ More generally, said a Republican who asked to remain unidentified, "There's not a platform in the Laura Ingraham-Sean Hannity wing of conservatism. There's nothing that you can take to the country and hope to win the presidency on that they believe in. I mean, anti-immigration, don't hesitate to shut down the government, repeal Obamacare, no new taxes – that's not a governing platform. That will rally 40 percent of the population."¹⁹

That is not, of course, how those in conservative media see it. Especially in talk radio, they argue – as their media predecessors did in the first decades after World War II – that Republicans win the White House when their message and their messenger are truly conservative, "a choice, not an echo" of Democrats, as Phyllis Schlafly famously wrote in 1964. To this day, conservatives' certainty of that is undimmed by the fact that in the

year of Schlafly's book, right wing media and activists finally had prevailed in seeing their choice, Barry Goldwater, nominated, only to have him lose in a landslide and drag other Republicans with him. That defeat, conservative media insisted at the time, was the failure of the party establishment, which did not rally behind Goldwater and in some cases joined the liberal media and Democrats in labeling him an extremist. Looking toward 2016, once again the search for a true conservative animates the Republican right, but with an increased intensity that reflects the proliferation and combativeness of conservative media. As in recent quadrennials, conservative media is not united behind a candidate to favor, only the one to oppose: Jeb Bush. In February *The Washington Post* had a story headlined "Jeb Bush has a serious talk radio problem,"²⁰ followed in March by a *Politico* story entitled "Jeb's Talk Radio Problem."²¹ By all accounts, and as Bush himself has suggested, his candidacy will test whether a Republican can run without pandering to conservative media, and with mainly the November electorate in mind.

Media Pioneers of the Right: The "Responsible" and the "Kooks"

Conservative media as we know it evolved after World War II, though partisan newspapers were the norm from the dawn of the Republic through much of the 19th century. By the 20th century, however, journalism had evolved into an independent "fourth estate," its practitioners aspiring generally to more objective standards in news coverage, even if most publishers were Republicans and reflected that bias in their political endorsements. When radio emerged in the 1920s, it was widely seen as a medium that could serve as a national town hall, airing programs exposing Americans to diverse points of view – a public service the government would try to enforce as part of its responsibility to regulate the limited airwaves. Stations had to meet a "public interest" standard and provide equal time for candidates and policy debates.²² "One of radio's democratic promises was that it might help solve the problem of political ignorance

and disengagement and consequent low voter turnout,” David Goodman wrote in his book “Radio’s Civic Ambition.” “Roosevelt’s fireside chats,” he added, “were exemplars of the new form of intimate, calm public address that radio had made possible.”²³

Fewer than half of Americans had radios when Franklin D. Roosevelt took office, but his rural electrification program spurred ownership. Eleanor Roosevelt also took early to radio. So did some of the Roosevelts’ political enemies, including populist Senator Huey P. Long of Louisiana and the reactionary “radio priest” Father Charles E. Coughlin, who was something of a precursor of today’s conservative talkers.²⁴ Still, educators and reformers clung to hopes that broadcasting would widely promote civic responsibility. Philosopher S.E. Frost, in a 1937 book *Is American Radio Democratic?* warned that if radio encouraged Americans to hold prejudices “not open to question or evaluation,” it would have failed to promote “intelligent action” in a democratic society. By the mid-1930s, each network had what were known as radio forums.²⁵

Many conservatives, however, saw radio programming, as well as newspapers and magazines, as uniformly left leaning, sympathetic to Roosevelt’s New Deal at home and interventionism abroad. After World War II, what media historian Nicole Hemmer calls the first generation of conservative media began taking shape to provide alternative views. These early magazines, book publishers, talk radio and TV programs were rarely financially stable. Because established publishers, broadcasting networks and big advertisers largely avoided conservative voices as too controversial, the media figures on the right depended on the patronage of rich oilmen and industrialists, including Fred Koch, the founder of Koch Industries whose sons Charles and David H. Koch decades later would be bankrolling the conservative movement to an extent the father could not have imagined. Through the 1970s, conservative media mainly operated on the periphery of a more moderate Republican Party, seeing its goal as

educating and inspiring a conservative movement that would goad the party, and the country, rightward.

Hemmer, author of a book, *Messengers of the Right: The Origins of Conservative Media*, to be published in 2016, writes that in those pre-Reagan decades, “conservative media became the institutional and organizational nexus of the movement, transforming audiences into activists and activists into a reliable voting base.” These media “activists,” she adds, “established the idea of liberal media bias as a constitutive element of modern conservatism,” and turned like-minded Americans into consumers of such fare as William F. Buckley and William Rusher’s *National Review* magazine, rival *Human Events*, the books of Henry Regnery’s publishing house, and the weekly *Manion Forum* on radio and, for a time, TV.²⁶

Early conservative media figures included former New Deal Democrats and even former communists who were repelled by the size and power of the federal government that emerged from the Depression and war years. They were against international communism, America’s interventions abroad and the United Nations, and at home, against labor unions – all targets still, generally. Opposition to unions helped draw money from industry benefactors for the new media. (Yet then, as now, conservative media styled its anti-unionism not as a boon for big business but as a bid to free workers from labor bosses.)²⁷

The rhetoric of first-generation conservative media likewise echoes among the second generation and its audience, with alarms about lost freedoms, threats to liberty, betrayals of the Constitution and the Founders, and impending socialism. In 1961, both John F. Kennedy and Dwight D. Eisenhower were moved to condemn what they saw as the divisive, extremist talk of self-styled super-patriots. The liberal magazine *The Nation* in 1964 drew wide notice for an article on conservative radio entitled “Hate Clubs of the Air.” And with the civil rights era, liberal and mainstream media pointed out the overtly racist programming of some conservative

broadcasters, mainly in the South. But it was the extremism of the conspiracy-minded John Birch Society that by 1965 provoked even some within conservative media to speak out in a bit of self-policing. Buckley and National Review led a break from the Birchites, despite the predictable loss of conservative subscribers and advertisers, for fear that well-educated, “responsible” intellectuals like themselves would be tarred by association with “kooks.”²⁸ Buckley was “the face of respectable hard-right conservatism,” said historian Heather Hendershot, who is writing a book on his long-lived “Firing Line” television show. Syndicators of Buckley’s show promoted it in publicity material as “a bare-knuckled intellectual brawl” with liberals, Hendershot said, “but when you watch, you’re like, ‘This is very civil compared to a lot of the Bill O’Reilly, Rush Limbaugh kind of thing.’” Buckley wanted his show to be broadly appealing, “a gateway drug to conservatism,” Hendershot added, and he “showed a humor that’s often missing today.”²⁹

Making such distinctions between responsible and irresponsible in conservative media is all but unknown these days.³⁰ In 2012, Limbaugh railed against law student Sandra Fluke after she complained when House Republicans in a congressional hearing barred her from testifying in favor of a mandate that insurance plans cover contraceptives. Limbaugh called Fluke a “slut” and “a prostitute,” adding, “She’s having so much sex, it’s amazing she can still walk.” Amid the ensuing national furor, few conservatives and no Republicans seeking the 2012 presidential nomination criticized the talk-show king. Three years earlier, Michael Steele, then the Republican Party’s chairman, had been forced to apologize after characterizing Limbaugh’s rhetoric as “ugly” and “incendiary.” Hemmer writes: “Limbaugh, both in good times and bad, illustrated just how different the second generation of conservative media activists were from the first: they were profitable, popular, and powerful, wielding influence that reached far beyond the conservative movement.”³¹

But another similarity unites the two media generations. From the 1950s on, media figures generally did not see the grassroots conservative movement, which they sought to tutor and lead, as synonymous with the Republican Party establishment. Then as now, there was tension. Early media leaders even threatened third-party campaigns against Eisenhower and Richard M. Nixon – only not so insistently and with 24-7 immediacy as today’s voices sometimes do. “For most media activists” in the first generation, Hemmer writes, “the pragmatism of party politics was a force against which to struggle rather than a reality to accept. With the second generation of media activists this preference for purity became more pronounced, especially as Republican politicians began to attune themselves to right-wing media as proxies for the party’s base.”³²

By the time Ronald Reagan won office, the first generation activists had “lost their primacy,” she says, as they were “short on both cash and credibility” after Watergate.³³ Most who remained active did come to support Reagan. But as much as current conservative media deifies him, its nostalgia is at odds with the first generation’s often critical contemporaneous accounts of the Gipper’s political career: From the late sixties to the 1980 Republican nomination race that Reagan won, many in conservative media were troubled by his age and liberal parts of his California record. Once Reagan was president, many railed at his perceived transgressions. “And there were an awful lot of indiscretions that could be laid at Reagan’s door,” author Kabaservice said in an interview. “But because they believed he was one of them, that he basically had the interests of the conservative movement at heart, and because he was so telegenic and charismatic, they were willing to give him a pass. And nowadays they won’t give anybody a pass. They’re certainly not going to give Jeb Bush a pass.”³⁴

In fact, opposition to Bush – despite a record as Florida governor more conservative than Reagan’s in California – is one thing that most conservative media agree on, even as they differ on their favorites in a

uniformly conservative Republican field for 2016. On just about any talk show, online site or social media venue, conservatives can see or hear Bush derided as the pick of the Republican establishment or, worse, of mainstream media. Limbaugh calls Bush and Hillary Clinton “two peas in a pod,” a perfect ticket. Levin has faux-praised Bush as “a good moderate Democrat.” From Iowa, radio host Deace disdainfully tweeted after Bush was interviewed by Hannity in February at the Conservative Political Action Conference, known as CPAC: “I will now begin re-tweeting the liberal media’s Bush-gasm.” Later on Twitter, Deace promoted a link to his column on a popular conservative website: “Why @JebBush isn’t a corporatist RINO. He is a full-fledged traitor. My latest for @townhall.com.”³⁵

The Second Generation: Listeners, Clicks, Dollars...and Blood

The second generation of conservative media took root late in Reagan’s presidency, helped by the government’s repeal of the Fairness Doctrine governing broadcasters in 1987 and by technological advances predating the Internet’s emergence, including toll-free national phone service allowing listeners nationwide to call in. Limbaugh, the former D.J. and college dropout, began airing his caustic conservatism nationally in 1988. Six years later, he would get some credit for Republicans’ takeover of Congress – the House for the first time in 40 years. Its grateful new majority made him an honorary member. Two years after that, Fox News debuted on Oct. 7, 1996. In 1998 came National Review Online, as a first-generation publication adapted to the Internet, and, in Hemmer’s words, “heralded a new era for conservative media activism, when the barriers to entry plummeted and innovation flourished.”³⁶

Erick Erickson, who from his home office in Macon, Ga., has come to be one of the leading conservative voices on air and online – and lately the bane of Republican leaders – perhaps captured best the contrast between the old and new generations by the mission statement for his

RedState.com. In a twist of Buckley's famous Eisenhower-era motto for *National Review*, the site declares, "RedState does not stand athwart history yelling stop. We yell 'ready,' 'aim,' and 'fire,' too."³⁷

Representative Tom Cole, an Oklahoman in the House Republican leadership and a former politics professor, said, "There's a big difference between intellectual conservatism and what exists out there now. It's much more populist in its orientation and much wider in its reach. This is not an elite opinion, a Bill Buckley sort of thing." And in a nod to the new media's greater profitability, Cole added, "While it's conservative in its orientation, it's a financially driven enterprise and market share matters. And playing to the prejudice of their audiences or reinforcing them – as opposed to engaging in enlightened and intellectual debate – is pretty widespread." The best example, he said, is immigration reform: "Here's an area we have to deal with, we've got to come to an accommodation. But the opposition, especially of talk radio, makes that almost impossible. Who in the conservative media is arguing for some kind of comprehensive immigration reform? Almost nobody."³⁸

Actually, Sean Hannity did so for a brief time several years ago, but quickly reverted to the "amnesty" opposition by popular demand – his listeners' – thereby underscoring just how responsive media figures are to their audiences, as well as the other way around. In 2007 Hannity had "helped kill" George W. Bush's immigration overhaul, according to a study that year by the nonpartisan Project for Excellence in Journalism, now part of Pew Research Center.³⁹ But five years later, a day after the 2012 election, when exit polls showed Latinos' rejection of Romney had contributed to the Republican's loss, Hannity told his audience that he had "evolved" and now would support a "pathway to citizenship" for illegal immigrants "to get rid of the immigration issue altogether."⁴⁰ Senator Rubio, whose bipartisan Senate group was promoting just such a bill, seized on the post-election epiphany of Hannity and some others in conservative media to

enlist their help. In May 2013, Hannity hosted a televised town hall on the topic with Rubio on Fox News.⁴¹

“Conservative media was a huge priority,” said Alex Conant, a Rubio adviser. In particular, Rubio “went on Sean’s shows a lot.”⁴² But newly elected Senator Ted Cruz of Texas and other foes of immigration reform similarly worked conservative media. And the media, as in 2007, gave widespread coverage to a report from Heritage Foundation claiming that immigration changes would mean big costs for taxpayers – a study that Rubio and others disputed, and which contradicted projections from the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office of a net gain for the economy and the federal budget. Conservative activists rallied against the bipartisan bill; by the time the Senate approved it that June, Hannity had rejoined the opposition. “It’s a marketplace, he’s battling to keep his audience,” said a prominent Republican strategist who would not be named. “As much as they want to enforce purity, they themselves are not pure at all. They are wherever the crowd is.”⁴³ The bill died in the Republican-controlled House.

On other issues as well – gay rights, insurance for contraceptives, climate change and budget policy, for examples – many Republican insiders say conservative media is on the wrong side of history, working with activist groups to hold the party to positions at odds with changing attitudes in society and, polls show, among a significant share of Republicans. “National trends mean little to the majority of House Republicans, who represent constituents whose attitudes are shaped by the likes of Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck, not by Lindsey Graham, Speaker John Boehner, or former Florida governor Jeb Bush. Understandably, they worry more about primary challenges than the opinions of the House Republican leaders, much less national Republican icons,” Mann and Ornstein wrote in *It’s Even Worse Than It Looks*. The authors added, “The old conservative GOP has been transformed into a party beholden to ideological zealots.”⁴⁴

Whether conservative media is reflecting or driving opinion among hard-right Republicans comprising the party base, it has become increasingly antagonistic toward the Republican Party establishment in the 20 years since Limbaugh was made an honorary House Republican for his close party ties. Together, media figures and their audiences became disillusioned and angry in the Bush era, when Republicans controlled both the White House and Congress for six years and presided over record spending and deficits, ineptitude from Iraq to the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast, corruption, recession and financial collapse and, in turn, federal bailouts of banks and big business. But Obama's election gave all factions on the right a new foe to unite against. His policies, in turn, gave rise in 2009 to the Tea Party, a development that conservative media "helped to orchestrate" by advertising and attending party rallies, and trumpeting its message. "The challenge of spreading and germinating the Tea Party idea was surmounted with impressive ease because a major sector of the U.S. media today is openly partisan – including Fox News Channel, the right-wing 'blogosphere,' and a nationwide network of right-wing talk radio programs," Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson wrote in their 2012 book, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*.⁴⁵

Tea Party voters in the midterm elections of 2010 made House Republicans a majority again. But the rapprochement between the Republican establishment on the one hand and conservative media and activists on the other was quickly strained. Congressional Republicans were repeatedly unable to fulfill their promises – over-promises, many concede – to stop Obama on health care, immigration and federal spending. Republicans were stymied not only by Obama's veto and congressional Democrats' united opposition, but by their own divisions, now exacerbated by the influx of uncompromising Tea Party lawmakers allied with conservative media and well-heeled activist groups who loathed establishment Republicans. "The Republicans who were running in 2010 and '12 were running as much against us as they were against the

Democrats. We're the ones who 'messed everything up,'" said Cole. Several years and more conservative newcomers later, does Cole worry whether Republicans can even govern? "I do some days."

"This is by any measure the most conservative Republican caucus in my lifetime," said Cole. But for most in conservative media, "The idea of getting half of a loaf and moving down the road is just anathema to them. It's got to be good guys and bad guys, and if our side doesn't win it's got to be because there's something wrong with our side," he said, not the Democrats. "They're looking for fights to pick with, quote, establishment Republicans, unquote."⁴⁶

Chicago-area talk show host Joe Walsh, who got his radio job when he lost reelection after a single term as a Tea Party congressman, tweeted after one late April broadcast, "I'm done ragging on the Republican Party today. Gonna go to the range & shoot."⁴⁷ At CPAC's close in February, radio firebrand Mark Levin delivered a crowd-pleasing rant, starting with a paean to the Founding Fathers and moving to the predictable jeremiad against Obama. Then Levin stopped, saying he needed plenty of time to turn his fire on Republicans – a segue that drew appreciative applause. Establishment Republicans, he said, "claim to believe in smaller, limited government. Yet they vote repeatedly for omnibus spending bills, for continuing resolutions and debt ceiling increases." He nearly shouted in anger: "The Republicans said that if we gave them the Senate along with the House, they'll do great things. They've done nothing!"⁴⁸

One Republican, who would not be identified as criticizing the powerful media figures, recalled that during his election to Congress in 1995 as part of the Republican revolution led by soon-to-be Speaker Gingrich, Limbaugh's radio punditry helpfully complemented his own campaign. But 20 years later, this Republican had a different view, reflecting the expansion of conservative media and its changed relationship with the party. "Conservative media is playing a larger and larger role, just by the mere fact that Fox is the number-one cable network

and there are no liberal folks that appear on the channel for the most part. That tells you that it is driving a lot of folks to the right and it's keeping them there," he said. "What's happened over the years is that you've seen guys like Limbaugh and Hannity and others get away from really espousing a philosophy to being salespeople. And they're trying to generate enough revenue to justify the big salaries they're making, in my mind," and along the way, "making things up."⁴⁹

The problem that this media pressure creates for governance has been most evident among House Republicans, but it vexes those in the Senate, too – the Republican quoted above has served in both chambers – especially as the Senate has come to include more Tea Party members and former House militants. "More people on our side are playing to the conservative media," said a Senate aide who has worked for several Republican senators, each of them conservative yet pragmatic, who declined to be named in deference to them. "Before it used to be more playing to – I hate the term – the mainstream media, or what these people would term the mainstream media, and trying to reach a larger audience through that," the aide said. "Now it seems that so many people are going for the niche, for the red meat, and there are all these outlets where you can do that. It's playing to the base, but the base doesn't live in reality. And that's the problem: It's taken the party in a really self-destructive direction."

Conservative media's impact used to be relatively slow to gel, and limited. But now constituents' reactions are often immediate, and media-generated backlashes are commonplace. As the Senate aide said, "The people in our office with the hardest jobs are the people who answer the phones. You can time it sometimes to certain things when the phones start to ring." For example, back when Glenn Beck was on Fox in the afternoon, "about 15 minutes into his show the phones would start ringing in the front office, and ring through the entire show and into the next show."

This aide and other Republicans describe a recurring chicken-and-egg question: Who came first to these hardline, no-compromise stands – conservative media or their audiences? Are media celebrities and outlets simply reflecting their audiences, or shaping the views of readers, listeners and viewers? “I think they just feed off each other” in “a pact from hell,” the Senate aide said. “In a way we’re our own worst enemies, not the Democrats. It’s the conservative media pushing us to take these positions, these extremist positions. And of course there are those who are more than willing to take them because it gets them press. It’s a vicious cycle: The shows want ratings – they’re a business. The members want publicity. So it’s just this unholy alliance.” (As the aide speaks in a Senate cafeteria, a man in the telltale colonial garb of a Tea Party adherent – long coat and tri-corn hat – strides by on his rounds of lawmakers’ offices.)⁵⁰

“It’s a synergistic relationship,” said Cole, the congressman.⁵¹ Many Republicans despair of countering the impact of the constant red-meat diet on conservative voters. Said a Republican strategist who has worked for congressional leaders and in presidential politics, but declined to be named criticizing conservative media or the party base, “Just like when you feed a tiger blood all day, it thirsts for more blood.”⁵²

“Conservative-Industrial Complex” – Might on the Right

Plenty of media outlets and pundits are supplying the blood, and across multiple platforms. And just as their parents and grandparents were in the Cold War decades, “many Republican voters have always been engaged with conservative media,” the Republican strategist said. From the mid-1980s to the turn of this century, “talk radio was the way to get these people.” But as typical radio audiences are aging, new technology “has lessened the impact of talk radio and increased the impact of digital.”⁵³ Yet conservative radio stars from Limbaugh to Deace – local, regional and national broadcasters – have gone digital as well, offering live-streaming

and on-demand options, and websites of their own competing against, or contributing to, a raft of new conservative “news” sites. *[Appendix A]*

“It’s become more of a conservative media syndicate where the properties are integrated across all the different mediums,” said Kevin Madden, former press secretary to Romney and Boehner. “You have bloggers that have become talk radio stars, and talk radio folks who now fuel a lot of the political discussion in the Republican Party on the right through social media and Twitter and things like that. Also, you have many more digital properties on the conservative side. It’s more than just RedState now. You have Daily Signal, you have Townhall, there’s HotAir – a whole host of digital properties where these conversations are had.”

As a result, Madden said, “Increasingly, the shape of the party’s platforms and priorities comes from outside of Washington and is no longer delivered as a prescription from the top down, but instead created from the bottom up.” Yet for candidates, Madden said, “It’s important to resist the allure that conservative media provides – where the rhetoric of your campaign is centered upon this clash of civilizations, like ‘Us-versus-them’ – and instead make a case for how you represent your party, and also represent your party’s ability to win over independents and some Democrats.”⁵⁴

But that balance between courting the base and maintaining broader appeal is a hard one to pull off, as Madden’s former bosses Romney and Boehner have found – especially as an expanded conservative media has become ideologically and financially entwined with the network of no-compromise advocacy groups financed by the Kochs and other right-wing patrons. Together, media and activist groups are part of “this conservative-industrial complex that has risen up. And they have a vested interest in failure, not in success,” said John Feehery,⁵⁵ an adviser to past and current Republican congressional leaders, who often lambastes conservative media celebrities – he calls Limbaugh a bully and more – on his own website, “The Feehery Theory.”⁵⁶

Financial ties to conservative groups and investors have become significant for some media, though the arrangements remain largely opaque to outsiders. Deace, for example, said in interviews that he was enticed by conservative Christian investors to leave Iowa's influential WHO Radio and start a nationally syndicated show, though he refused to identify the backers, citing non-disclosure agreements. While conservative broadcasting in the age of Limbaugh and Fox New has been far more profitable than the first-generation pioneers ever dreamed of, radio revenues and ratings have dipped considerably in recent years. Industry sources cite changing demographics and new technology as factors, as well as fallout from controversies that otherwise are the talkers' stock in trade.

"The audience is slowly declining" for broadcasters, said an executive at The Nielsen Company, who declined to be identified, citing company policy. "That's never been a gigantic problem for talk radio because a lot of talk radio doesn't really sell on ratings. They sell on audience engagement, and in local markets it's a big deal." But, he added, "Smart phones have literally changed the game. People can now get access to whatever they want whenever they want it." While that has allowed broadcasters to expand their reach through so-called audio products, "radio as a whole has still not really figured out how to monetize the off-air stuff, the streaming and the podcasting."⁵⁷

Holland Cooke, an industry consultant and former broadcaster, said in an interview, "The big national, topical talk hosts – Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck, Mark Levin – their ratings are all terrible in the big markets." In the smaller markets and mostly rural states that are home to mostly older and white populations – that is, the Republican Party's base – radio is still popular and talk-show hosts, both local and nationally syndicated, are ubiquitous. But national advertisers are less interested in those locales, industry watchers say, leaving stations to rely more on local advertising.⁵⁸

Advertising dollars are down for another, self-inflicted reason, according to industry analysts: Limbaugh as well as his imitators continue to suffer from an erosion of advertising revenues since the Sandra Fluke furor of early 2012, especially from national brands but also from local sources. “That was sort of a turning point,” the Nielsen executive said. “It fundamentally changed how advertisers look at the format. No one wants to upset anybody.” Even so, he added, “Talk radio is always going to be around in some form or fashion because it works and it still makes money. It may not make as much money as it used to, but radio as a business is still a really, really good business.”⁵⁹

Even before the Fluke storm, some syndicated radio hosts were taking sponsorship dollars from Tea Party-affiliated groups, including FreedomWorks, Heritage Action, Koch-backed Americans for Prosperity, Tea Party Patriots and the Senate Conservatives Fund. That cemented the collaboration of media and advocacy groups in opposing the Republican leadership, and in demanding an ideologically pure agenda and discouraging compromise. Politico reported in April 2014 that, based on its review of federal tax filings and other information, several of the well-known groups had spent almost \$22 million between 2008 and 2012 to sponsor programs including those of Limbaugh, Levin, Ingraham, Hannity and Beck, as well as lesser-known hosts. FreedomWorks, Politico reported, had given \$6 million in that time to Beck, while Heritage sponsored Hannity for several years and spent \$9.5 million over five years to back Limbaugh’s program.⁶⁰ The talkers in turn promote the groups, their positions on issues and their favored candidates – candidates who often have been Tea Party challengers to Republican incumbents or, in open-seat races, to the establishment’s preferred candidates.

Such financial deals apparently continue, to the chagrin of establishment Republicans. Levin, for one, “was at the forefront of the effort to make demands of Republican leaders that are unaccomplish-able, and he works in concert with Heritage Action and the Club for Growth,”

said a congressional leadership aide who would not be named. “And they like to put down markers – that House Republican leaders should demand ‘X’ and they should stand firm, they should demand repeal of Obamacare. And if you notice, every time they do that, they send out an email to their list and they’ve got a big ‘donate’ button. They have found that they can stir up the grassroots and, most importantly, raise money off the idea that if only Republican leaders stood firm and chose to fight, they could win.” The aide added, “That’s all well and good, but when you’re setting down a marker and you know that your ask is un-accomplishable, that it’s not a goal that’s achievable, then it’s just about ratings and money.”⁶¹

Political scientists also have noticed this alliance of media and advocacy groups. Richard Meagher of Randolph-Macon College wrote in an article in *New Political Science* in December 2012, “The ‘Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy’: Media and Conservative Networks,” that his research demonstrated “how media organizations work within these networks to revive and promise ideas and action on the Right.” Meagher wrote, “The American Right’s speedy political recovery after the historic 2008 election was driven in part by Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, and Glenn Beck. Yet conservative media are just one key component in the broad political networks built over the past few decades. Conservative talk radio, print publications, television networks, and internet sites have numerous connections, both direct and indirect, with the think tanks, advocacy organizations, academic research centers, and foundations that develop and promote the Right’s policy agenda.”⁶²

However frustrated Republican leaders are by this piling on from the far right, they have little choice but to pay heed: Media and advocacy groups together reach what political scientists like to call “attentive voters” – the ones who actually vote, as well as volunteer, donate and influence others. Representatives are “not equally responsive to all constituents, giving more attention to politically active and attentive voters,” write Kevin Arceneaux, Martin Johnson, Rene Lindstadt and Ryan J. Vander Wielen in a

forthcoming article in the *American Journal of Political Science* entitled, “The Influence of News Media on Political Elites: Investigating Strategic Responsiveness in Congress.” They add, “Attentive voters tend to have strong opinions, are more likely to contact elected officials about pending legislation, and are more willing to withdraw their support for legislators who deviate from their preferences.”

The scholars focused on Fox News and the voting records of members of Congress as the network came to their districts. They concluded, “Fox News shapes members’ beliefs about constituent preferences, whether by merely altering the media landscape that members rely upon to assess voter sentiments or by actually motivating attentive constituents.”⁶³

So much for the impact on rank-and-file lawmakers – what about the effect of conservative media on the decision-making of the leaders who try to set the agenda? Arceneaux, a professor at Temple University, said in an interview, “I think it’s made it very difficult for them to make the compromises that are necessary in the American system of government, where you’ve got institutions that have a lot of veto players.”⁶⁴ Feehery, the longtime Republican strategist, put it simply: “They intimidate members of Congress.”⁶⁵

Messengers of the Left: Liberal Media Doesn’t Compare

Nielsen puts America’s news/talk radio audience in 2015 at 50 million. As for the programming, “The vast majority of it is conservative,” said the Nielsen executive. And, he added, “The more inflammatory things are, that’s good for ratings.”⁶⁶ A 2007 study from the left-leaning Center for American Progress found that of 257 news/talk stations, 91 percent were conservative.⁶⁷ Our analysis of the top 100 talk radio programs – the “Heavy Hundred,” as designated annually by trade publication *Talkers* magazine from among “thousands” of local, regional and national programs on the air – showed that of those for which a political slant was

evident, 84 percent were conservative and just over 10 percent were progressive. [*Appendix B*] (Given that most popular radio hosts are conservatives, and conservative hosts are mostly white males, it follows that just a dozen of the Top 100 talk shows have female hosts or co-hosts and six have black hosts or co-hosts.) Leading the pack, as usual, were Limbaugh and Hannity, in first and second place, respectively, and not far behind were Beck (No. 5) and Levin (No. 6). Ingraham was the top-ranked woman, in 20th place. Deace was No. 63.⁶⁸

Operatives in both parties and independent observers generally agree that left-wing media do not come near conservative media in terms of the number of outlets, size of audience and political influence, despite the frequent parallels drawn between Fox and MSNBC, for example, or RedState and DailyKos, Hannity and Rachel Maddow. “It’s my conviction that there’s no comparison,” said Price, the Democratic congressman and political scientist. Pressure on Democratic politicians like him, Price said, comes less from left-leaning media than from liberal advocacy organizations like labor unions, environmental groups and women’s and minority rights organizations.⁶⁹

The explanation for conservative media’s relative success comes down to audience: The right has one, and the left not so much, partly owing to the news-consuming habits of conservative Americans that formed over decades. MSNBC’s audience is a fraction of Fox’s. Feehery, the Republican communications strategist, said that talk radio, in particular, “doesn’t work as well on the left. There’s a wider, more accessible audience for the right wing.”⁷⁰

“Conservative talk radio just reaches so many more people,” said Brian Tashman, who monitors conservative programs for the Right Wing Watch project of the liberal group People For the American Way. “The hosts are very good at rallying the base and fomenting feelings of antipathy toward government, and not just when Obama’s been president. Sometimes we even see Republican presidential candidates repeat their

lines verbatim.”⁷¹ David A. Yepsen, formerly a politics writer at the *Des Moines Register* and now director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University, said, “The right always owned talk radio. The left failed at that.” His explanation: “The demographics of who listens to talk radio and what times of day—you know, blue-collar people, people at home, less well-educated, lower income. You can go into an auto shop and hear Rush or the local guy on the radio. You don’t hear that at a Starbucks.”⁷²

Arceneaux, the political scientist whose focus is partisan media, said politically engaged Americans on the right and the left “just consume news in a different way.” Liberals favor comedy satire shows like Jon Stewart’s, for example. Leftwing pundits initially had a bigger presence than conservatives among bloggers when the Internet first took hold, though no longer. As for radio and TV talk shows, Arceneaux said, “For whatever reason, liberal ideologues aren’t drawn to that.”⁷³ One reason is suggested by Hemmer, who in her coming book *Messengers of the Right* also writes of less successful messengers of the left. “MSNBC, and earlier, Air America” – a short-lived network for liberal talk-radio shows – “were trying to replicate what they saw as the political influence of conservative media and they were unsuccessful at it,” Hemmer said in an interview. “Conservative media – and the habit of consuming conservative media that is so central to conservative political identity – have been something that has a half-century of history. And liberals don’t have that same history. To the extent that liberalism has a base, it doesn’t come out of media, it comes out of organizations – like labor unions, or groups like MoveOn.”⁷⁴ Some Republicans, however, insist that there is a parallel between conservative and liberal media. Liberals “have got their MSNBC and liberal blogs,” said Cole, the Oklahoma congressman. “Whether it’s the Huffington Post or some of these other publications, they spend time bashing Democrats for giving in to Republicans,” he said, much as conservative media trashes Republicans who favor compromise with Democrats.⁷⁵

Whatever the relative balance of partisan media, Americans in the Internet age can choose from more sources than ever before for their news and analysis, and from across the political spectrum. Scholars are left to puzzle over what those choices mean for the nation's political agenda, partisanship and election outcomes. "When it comes to getting news about politics and government, liberals and conservatives inhabit different worlds. There is little overlap in the news sources they turn to and trust," Pew Research Center reported in October 2014, in an installment of its yearlong look at Americans' media habits and the nation's polarization.

More than any other group, Pew found, many "consistent conservatives" cited a single source for their information about government and politics: 47 percent named Fox News. These consistent conservatives, so-designated based on answers to questions on issues, said they distrusted 24 of the 36 sources on Pew's media list. But 88 percent of them expressed trust in Fox. "When they turn to other sources," Pew said, "they opt for those not consumed by many others" – like Limbaugh, Hannity, Beck and conservative news sites The Blaze, Breitbart and Drudge Report. "Consistent liberals," by contrast, consume a varied mix of media and trust more sources, Pew reported. But 81 percent said they distrust Fox News – nearly the mirror image of conservatives who said the opposite.

Pew argued that the findings are significant, and troublesome, despite the fact that consistently conservative and liberal Americans together account for only about 20 percent of the public. The ideologues, Pew said, "have a greater impact on the political process than do those with more mixed ideological views. They are the most likely to vote, donate to campaigns and participate directly in politics."⁷⁶

Setting the Agenda: “Ugly” Debut of the Republican Congress

In years past when a party captured control of Congress – Republicans in 1994, say, or Democrats in 2006 – its majorities arrived for the January opening with an immediate agenda of at least a few popular legislative items that could be enacted quickly, demonstrating the party’s unity and governing acumen. In 2015, Republicans broke with that practice, and demonstrated the opposite. And the talkers and scribblers in conservative media, local and national, were central players in the drama – not at Republican leaders’ invitation, as Limbaugh had been in 1995, but instead arrayed against them, egging on the hardliners among both lawmakers and their constituents, and in turn forcing less militant Republicans to fall in line as the safest course.

House and Senate Republicans did unite to pass promised legislation to build the Keystone XL pipeline through the nation’s center (though they could not override Obama’s veto). Its bipartisan passage was overshadowed, however, by intraparty fights that began on Congress’s first day, with the attempted coup against Boehner. Then the futile showdown with the White House over immigration and homeland security dragged on for weeks. In the same period, House leaders had to shelve three other bills due to party divisions, involving abortion, education and immigration issues.⁷⁷

The near-upset of what should have been Boehner’s easy, ceremonial reelection on Jan. 6 had its roots in the legislative compromise that closed the lame-duck Congress. In December, militants had pressed to shut down the government to block the immigration actions Obama had taken in November. To avoid a shutdown – in keeping with McConnell’s vow that there would never be another – and simply to get home for the holidays, Republicans and Democrats agreed to fund all government programs except for homeland security. Money for homeland security, including for agencies responsible for immigration, was provided only through February; Republican leaders told their troops that in the next Congress

they could better wage war against Obama on the issue because they would have reinforcements from November's election winners.

Almost everyone knew, however, that the compromise only delayed a showdown that Republicans could not win. "Everybody who knew what was happening knew that," said a Republican senator, speaking on condition of anonymity.⁷⁸ But even before then, conservative activists and media unhappy with the lame-duck compromise began, over the holidays, to muster opposition to Boehner's reelection. Conservative media's complicity was something of an ironic turn for Boehner. Twenty years earlier, as chairman of the House Republican Conference after the party took control of Congress in 1995, he had been the leader who opened the Capitol to the new medium of conservative talk radio and to its megastar, Limbaugh, creating "Radio Row" in Capitol corridors so the talkers could cover the proceedings and interview a stream of star-struck Republican legislators.

Before Congress assembled in January, Representative Louie Gohmert, a combatively conservative backbencher from Texas, announced his candidacy for speaker on "Fox and Friends," a mid-day program whose regulars are often critics of – and headaches for – Republican leaders. Glenn Beck's The Blaze website headlined its story on Gohmert "A Heavy Hitter Just Announced He's Challenging John Boehner for Speaker."⁷⁹ (This supposed heavy-hitter would get three votes, one or two more than several other conservative gadflies who also were nominated for speaker since the insurgents failed to unite around a single alternative.) Representative Steve King, the Iowa Republican who is a leader among anti-immigrant Republicans, got Breitbart.com to publish his column calling for Boehner's defeat as speaker. In an interview, King described how he had been stranded in Des Moines' Marriott Hotel when his flight to Washington was cancelled, and decided to use the time to write his anti-Boehner appeal. "I forced myself to sit down and write it in a coherent and cogent way,

hopefully, and put the marker down.” Then he sent it to Breitbart, confident it would be published.

“If I could command presence on the front page of *The New York Times*, I’d certainly be happy about that and embrace it,” King said. “But from a practical perspective, if we want to get a message out, we would be talking to Breitbart, we would be talking to *The Washington Times*, we’d be – aside from immigration – going to *The Wall Street Journal*.” (The *Journal’s* editorial policy has long favored immigration.)⁸⁰

In Breitbart, King wrote, “Our Speaker has placed Obama’s executive amnesty on the path to permanent full funding.” And that was only the latest example of a failed promise, King continued. He quoted Boehner’s feisty words to Fox News’ Bret Baier in November 2010, after Republicans had recaptured a House majority, on how they would repeal the new “Obamacare” law. “Well,” Boehner had told Baier, “there’s a lot of tricks up our sleeves in terms of how we can dent this, kick it, slow it down to make sure it never happens. And trust me, I’m going to make sure this health care bill never ever, ever is implemented.”⁸¹

Even Boehner allies say that repeated vows like that one, while intended to reassure conservative media and Tea Party activists in the moment, have amounted to overpromises that end up repeatedly angering those audiences when the (unattainable) promises are not kept. And the anger has built with each disappointment. “Of course” the Republican leaders over-promised on immigration, just as on Obamacare, said Douglas Holtz-Eakin, a former Congressional Budget Office director who advises the party on policies. “I always felt that the major goal the day after the election last November should have been to lower expectations because, really, there was this sort of notion that somehow they were running Washington, which is nuts. It’s not true.”⁸²

A longtime aide to congressional Republican leaders, who would not be identified on this subject, said, “You cave at the last minute, everyone gets upset. And then you cave again and everyone gets more upset and

more upset. Four years into this thing, and people are angry as heck.” As the aide’s quote suggests, the cycle of promises made and broken began as soon as House Republicans took power after 2010. He recalled that year’s campaign platform, “Pledge for America,” which was designed to appeal to the newly emergent Tea Party voters; in it, House Republicans promised that if they won a majority, they would immediately cut \$100 billion from the federal budget. That was, as senior lawmakers knew, a fiscal and political impossibility given the scale of cuts required, including to many popular programs. But conservative media and activists tried to hold Republican leaders to their promise, nearly provoking a government shutdown.⁸³

While most Republicans supported Boehner, the 25 naysayers were almost enough, together with Democrats’ opposition, to force an election for a new speaker. Back in Des Moines, Deace fielded calls from disappointed listeners urging the radio host to get explanations from some Republicans who had voted for Boehner after promising not to. Deace said he was trying. In an interview two months later, Deace proudly said the coup attempt “wouldn’t have happened without” the pressure from conservative media, but it failed because the effort “came together haphazardly” and during the holidays. “With a little bit better organization ahead of time, I think we’ll be more successful,” Deace added, though he acknowledged that he did not know whom conservatives could nominate as an electable alternative to Boehner.⁸⁴ WND, a rightwing news network, wrote in February that dozens in Congress “are being forced into explanations, excuses and apologies by their constituents for voting for Boehner.”⁸⁵

Only a concerted effort by Boehner allies to lean on wavering Republicans had defeated the putsch. Boehner supporters recounted, not for attribution, that the speaker fretted to the end, knowing that national and local talk-radio hosts, online columnists and Tea Party groups were all urging conservatives to contact their Republican representatives to

demand a vote to “fire Boehner.” A Mississippi Republican who spoke with third-term Rep. Steven Palazzo said the Gulf Coast congressman complained he had gotten more than 400 letters, calls and emails demanding that he vote against Boehner. After the November 2014 midterm elections, second-term Rep. Jim Bridenstine of Tulsa had written in his hometown newspaper that he would vote for Boehner, but he flipped in the wake of the conservative backlash against the lame-duck Congress’s appropriations compromise – the so-called “cromnibus” (omnibus Continuing Resolution) that had prevented a government shutdown.⁸⁶

In Iowa as in other places where conservative talk shows thrive, most voices were anti-Boehner and anti-“cromnibus” – including Deace, who dubbed the spending compromise “crap-in-the-bus,” and two well-known figures at his former station, Des Moines’ WHO, Simon Conway and Jan Mickelson. (All three men are in *Talkers* magazine’s “Heavy Hundred” ranking of top radio hosts for 2015, though Deace at No. 63 is well ahead of Conway and Mickelson, Nos. 92 and 97, respectively.)⁸⁷ Two of Iowa’s three Republican congressmen, King and newcomer Rod Blum, voted against Boehner. “There’s an echo chamber and they live in it, so for someone like Rod, I think it was a no-brainer” to oppose Boehner, said Craig Robinson, a former state party official who edits *The Iowa Republican*, a website that is widely followed given the state’s political influence. For talk radio especially, Robinson said, “All that matters to them is the fight, not achieving something. It’s, ‘Did you fight hard enough?’ Or, ‘Debt ceiling? Yes or no?’ You can’t reason with people. And so you get politicians and candidates who know what the radio host wants to hear and they give it to him. It’s that simple.”⁸⁸

Boehner resisted allies’ goading to punish his party opponents, arguing that conservative media would turn them into martyr figures. As Robert Draper wrote in *When the Tea Party Came to Town*, his book on House Republicans’ tumultuous first year in the majority in 2011, “The Speaker was mindful of the reality they lived in – one of unprecedented

transparency, in which the slightest retribution would instantly be tweeted or become a banner headline on the Drudge Report.”⁸⁹

With Boehner safely back in his grand office, the next act was the weeks-long standoff over immigration and homeland security. House and Senate Republicans from the leaders on down publicly sniped at each other when the 54 Senate Republicans predictably could not muster the 60 votes needed to end Democrats’ filibuster. When the Republicans’ retreat finally came in early March, Boehner was not alone in incurring the wrath of conservative media. McConnell, who had initiated the move, came in for plenty.

Georgia-based Erick Erickson, with the kind of coarse locker-room talk so common in male-dominated talk radio, even from evangelical Christians like himself, suggested both on air and online that McConnell had been politically sodomized by the White House: “If they ever remake Deliverance, Mitch McConnell could be Ned Beatty’s character after the last few days,” he tweeted. His companion column on RedState.com was headlined “Eunuch Mitch McConnell Squeals like a Pig.”⁹⁰ (Similarly, Deace, also an evangelical Christian, broadcast on air and to more than 20,000 Twitter followers his disdain when Indiana’s Governor Mike Pence in early April agreed to alter a religious rights law he had signed, bowing to the backlash from both gay-rights supporters who said the law would invite anti-gay discrimination, and business groups that feared boycotts. “These manginas are killing us. Get a brain and a set,” Deace wrote. Later he added this: “Two-thirds of Americans agrees with GOP base on protecting religious liberty, but @GOP caves anyway to shill for corporatist pimps. #Whores.”)⁹¹

Conservative media figures frequently call for ousting McConnell and Boehner, and for Boehner the pressure did not abate after the amateurish coup attempt in January. In March, Erickson challenged Representative Mick Mulvaney, a Tea Party Republican from South Carolina, to “redeem” himself for his vote for Boehner by making a rarely

used parliamentary motion to force a new election for Speaker. Erickson, on his website and broadcast, gave his audience Mulvaney's phone number and Twitter account and urged conservatives to post on the congressman's Facebook page, which many did.⁹²

Facebook has evolved into a significant conduit for conservative media figures to communicate with their audiences and to spur them to actions like contacting their representatives in Congress. The messages that riled-up constituents then send to Capitol Hill have become a source of daily dread in Republicans' offices, but one that they cannot ignore. "It's all the base and they're all angry. To go on your member's Facebook page is just frightening. It's horrible. It's really depressing," said a senior aide with experience working for three Senate Republicans.⁹³ Price, the Democratic congressman, got a taste of what his Republican colleagues complain of when Fox News broadcast live a press conference that he and several other House Democrats held after Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressed a joint session of Congress in early March 2015, at Boehner's invitation. Netanyahu – cheered on by commentators on Fox and throughout the ardently pro-Israel conservative media – condemned negotiations with Iran by six nations, including the United States, that were intended to prevent it from making nuclear arms. The Israeli prime minister argued that Iran would violate any deal once international sanctions were lifted, leaving Israel at risk. Price and the other Democrats objected that Netanyahu and Boehner were politicizing the issue and undercutting the ongoing talks. Even as their press conference was underway, Price aide Lawrence Kluttz said, "We had more comments on his Facebook page than we've ever had, and some really fiery, awful stuff. There were a couple posts that were almost threatening" from the Fox viewers.⁹⁴

Tom Latham, a longtime House Republican who retired in January, said, "All the social media, Facebook, all this stuff has had a huge impact, in that there's a group of people out there for whom everything is immediate.

It isn't necessarily verified as being true; there's a lot of opinion stated as fact. And they [conservative media] can arouse a lot of people just instantaneously." When Latham came to Congress with the big Republican class elected in 1994, "We didn't have Internet, didn't have that type of instantaneous communication," he said. Twenty years later, constituent contacts to his office "went from maybe 7,000 a year up to, when I left, to 35,000 to 40,000 contacts a year, just because of the ease of communication and people popping off the emails every day. A lot of that is generated by the conservative talk show people and media people."

And, Latham and other Republicans complain, many in that media – in their zeal for audience share – willfully ignore the realities of a legislative process designed by the Founders to require deliberation, checks and balances, and compromise. "They will not take 80 percent – it's got to be 100 percent or you're not pure," Latham said. "They don't give a damn about governing, or about anything than being pure themselves. And it's causing more people to be concerned about primaries than ever before. I just don't see – with continual pounding of the drums in the media and these outside groups – I don't know how you function, I really don't. I don't know how you pass appropriation bills this year."

Does he sometimes feel like Republicans helped create a monster?

"Oh, yeah. Are you kidding?"⁹⁵

Setting the Agenda: Common Core, from Bipartisan to Litmus Test

Public education, from elementary school through college, has long been a priority issue for conservatives and conservative media, begging as it does the fundamental question of how big a role government – and in particular the federal government – should have in Americans' lives. The first big sales for conservative publisher Henry Regnery were in 1949 for a book, *And Madly Teach*, denouncing modern education philosophy for emphasizing "collective virtues and collective ideals." Two years later

Regnery published *God and Man at Yale*, the book that was a young William F. Buckley's debut in postwar conservative media.

“This idea of liberal control of education, whether it's at the primary school level or the university level, has always been one of those central hot-button issues” for conservative media and the conservative movement more broadly, said Hemmer, the historian, in an interview. “It's about control of family, control of home, local control, brain-washing. It hits all of the right buttons.”⁹⁶

That certainly describes the conservative uproar over the Common Core education standards. Among the earliest media foes was Glenn Beck, who warned apocalyptically in March 2013, “If you don't stop it, American history is over as you know it.”⁹⁷ As is often true with such political controversies, even those caught in the middle are hard-pressed to discern which came first – opposition from conservative media or agitation from grassroots groups in the states, like home-schoolers in this case. But the two, media and activists, seemed to go hand-in-hand judging by an analysis of the coverage using Media Cloud, an open-data platform developed by Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet & Society and M.I.T.'s Center for Civic Media.

Critical accounts about Common Core first spiked in 2013, mostly in conservative media, the Media Cloud “map” shows. *[Appendix C]* As it happens, EducationNext, a non-ideological source of education news, separately reported that based on its polling, “The share of the public that says it favors the Common Core State Standards slipped noticeably between 2013 and 2014.”⁹⁸ That was four years after the bipartisan initiative for K-12 state education standards for math and English literacy was announced by the National Governors Association, backed by associations of state education officials, major philanthropies like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and corporate leaders worried about the skills of future American workers. Forty-four states had joined the initiative.

Yet the Media Cloud map of news coverage shows that criticism had begun building earlier among conservatives, by 2010, as they came to associate Common Core with the new president. Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, had offered extra funds from the administration's Race to the Top program to states that adopted the standards or something similar. Most did; a few, including Virginia and Texas, wrote their own standards. However controversial Common Core might have become on its own among conservatives and conservative media, the linkage with Obama by all accounts was decisive, Republicans say. Conservative media spread the word: It was "Obamacore," an epithet that conveniently echoed "Obamacare."

The Media Cloud analysis suggests that most coverage of Common Core was in the conservative media and blogosphere. As mainstream media weighed in, much of its coverage was about the controversy among conservatives, not the merits of the standards. Liberal media has not been active in the debate. Hal Roberts, a Harvard researcher who is a leader of the Media Cloud project, said of the coverage findings, "There's a core debate that's going on within, among and between conservatives and mainstream news on the standards. That's quite strong and it's quite prevalent. And there's a small number of liberals who also are in on the conversation, but they have little influence and they're off having their own conversations off to the sides" and "not getting a lot of links" from others.⁹⁹

Besides Glenn Beck, conservative blogger Michelle Malkin, a Fox contributor who founded the conservative website Twitchy and the Hot Air online broadcast network, was an early and especially hostile critic. The issue is more prominent in Republicans' presidential vetting than in congressional debates. Senator Ted Cruz routinely wins conservatives' applause when he says, as he did in April while campaigning in Iowa, "We need to stand up and repeal every word of Common Core!" (There is no federal law or regulation to repeal; the initiative remains optional).¹⁰⁰ But

before Cruz, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal was among the first prominent elected officials to raise the anti-Common Core cry. Jindal has made opposition central to his presidential bid, particularly to draw a contrast with Bush, who has not abandoned his early support. In a February session with Washington reporters hosted by the *Christian Science Monitor*, Jindal said all Republicans seeking the presidential nomination would have to state their position “not only on Common Core, but the role of the federal government in education.”¹⁰¹

But for Jindal as well as Huckabee, Christie and some others in the 2016 field, opposition is a reversal from their earlier support, and the switches followed anti-Common Core campaigns by conservative parents’ groups supported by conservative media. In 2012 Jindal approvingly told business leaders that Common Core “will raise expectations for every child.”¹⁰² But by last year, he was comparing it to Soviet central planning.¹⁰³ In February, he tried to explain his shift to conservative reporters by calling the initiative “a bait-and-switch,” adding, “It wasn’t what we had been promised.”¹⁰⁴

In Iowa, where presidential contests begin and conservative media and activists are therefore especially energetic, radio talker Deace often mocks Common Core. In a March broadcast, he hosted the leader of an anti-Common Core group, who at Deace’s prompting assessed each of a dozen Republican presidential contenders on the subject. Jindal and Cruz got the highest praise.¹⁰⁵ In April, Deace, whose wife Amy homeschools their three children, moderated a forum with four presidential contenders – Jindal, Cruz, Huckabee and Santorum – for the annual conference of the Network of Iowa Christian Home Educators, which drew an estimated 1,000 conservatives. The next day on his program, Deace and producer Rebecca Maxwell discussed the impressions the candidates had made. Common Core, along with “religious liberty,” “captures so much of people’s passion level on the ground here in Iowa,” Maxwell said. “And Bobby Jindal is great on both of those issues.”¹⁰⁶

Craig Robinson, the Iowa Republican operative, did not need a Media Cloud mapping to conclude that the debate over Common Core “has been a one-way war for three years,” with only opponents talking. “The thing that baffles me is that we don’t even have a discussion about Common Core, which is what I think we would want,” Robinson said. Instead, he added, “Basically candidates now know if Common Core comes up to just say ‘no.’”¹⁰⁷

Nationally syndicated talk-radio host Hugh Hewitt wrote in the conservative *Washington Examiner* in late December that his New Year’s Day broadcast would be devoted to “the issue that will drive much of the campaign agenda in 2015 and which will define many of the candidates as contenders or pretenders: Common Core, or ‘Obamacore’ as it is increasingly known in center-right circles.” Hewitt said he had already interviewed Bush, Jindal, Perry and Rubio, and that Bush plainly was “the most credentialed of all the GOP candidates” on education policy. But, he added disapprovingly, Bush “was also central to the launch” of Common Core and, on Hewitt’s program, had rejected “the idea that Common Core meant in practice a one-size-fits-all curriculum.”¹⁰⁸ While Bush has indeed maintained his support for Common Core, he has all but abandoned its name. In a 35-minute speech on education in February, for example, he never said “Common Core,” only that he is for “higher standards” with limited federal input.¹⁰⁹

And now there is actual evidence of the phrase’s toxicity in the face of the repeated criticism in conservative media. In its Winter 2015 issue, *EducationNext* said of its annual poll for 2014, “When the Common Core label is dropped from the question, support for the concept among the general public leaps from 53% to 68%. Significantly, the pronounced partisan polarization evoked by the phrase Common Core disappears when the question does not include those seemingly toxic words. The level of support among Republicans is 68%, virtually identical to the Democratic level of support. In other words, a broad consensus remains with respect to

national standards, despite the fact that public debate over the Common Core has begun to polarize the public along partisan lines.”¹¹⁰

Agenda Setter – Steve Deace: Fear God. Tell the Truth. Make Money.

Kevin Madden, the former Romney adviser, was quick to answer when asked if there are conservative media figures with whom any Republican presidential aspirant must touch base: “In radio there are. Most of our efforts were concentrated in a lot of these early primary states that are quite rural. So, you know, Steve Deace in Iowa....”¹¹¹

In the year before the January 2008 Iowa caucuses, Deace was WHO’s afternoon radio host and his favorite Republican was Huckabee. It definitely was not Romney, the preferred candidate of many establishment Republicans. “You turned on the radio and you thought you were either listening to a 3-hour paid advertisement in support of Mike Huckabee in 2007 or a 3-hour attack job on Mitt Romney,” said Craig Robinson, who was then political director of the Iowa Republican Party.¹¹² In an interview, Deace recalled that time as if he were still pinching himself at his newfound influence: “When I could see how angry the Mitt Romney campaign was getting at me, that was the first hint that what we were doing on the radio was having an impact.” Indeed. Huckabee won the caucuses and on the morning after, Deace’s radio colleague Jan Mickelson greeted him, “Hey! Congratulations on your big win last night!” Mickelson showed Deace a map of WHO’s coverage area alongside one showing the counties Huckabee won – they matched but for one county.¹¹³ Others in Iowa, in interviews, attested to Deace’s supporting role in the outcome.

Four years later, just ahead of the 2012 caucuses, Deace had left WHO to start his nationally syndicated show. Romney was again seeking the Republican nomination, and again Deace was unsupportive. Yet Romney sought him out. “It’s important that you go and engage these audiences,” Madden said, “even when you know they’re skeptical, because it’s part of the ritual and process of an early primary state that you put

yourself to the test with those voters. Because if you can address the skepticism head-on, then you can begin to minimize that story line as part of promoting your candidacy.” Deace, Madden added, “tends to make news, and he tends to create narratives that campaigns are ultimately asked to respond to.”¹¹⁴

Candidates also know that Deace is allied with Bob Vander Plaats, head of the conservative evangelical group The Family Leader, who is said among Republicans to be worth 10 percentage points in Iowa’s caucuses. Vander Plaats is a weekly guest on Deace’s show, but also in such demand from other conservative media outlets that his group is building a studio with a satellite uplink. “Fox and others say, ‘We’ll use you all the time,’ and so we’re putting one in, to help get the message out,” Vander Plaats said in an interview at his suburban Des Moines office. Like Deace, he is contemptuous of the party establishment for its complaints about conservative media. “I can see where the establishment wing would be like, ‘Oh, that conservative media!’ because they’re holding the establishment accountable,” he said. “We elected these guys in ’14 and they’ve already caved on amnesty and it looks like they’re going to cave on Obamacare. No one ran ads saying, ‘We’re going to repeal just part of Obamacare.’ And yet that’s what they’re doing. And so the conservative media is fed up, but I think they’re also representing their listeners. As Steve has mentioned to me, he says, ‘You know, we’re at a point today where my listeners are more upset than I am.’”¹¹⁵

Unsurprisingly, Deace did not endorse Romney, the ultimate nominee, for the 2012 caucuses. He chose Newt Gingrich very late, while Vander Plaats’ group endorsed Santorum, who narrowly edged Romney to win Iowa. Deace had been torn between Santorum and Gingrich, but Gingrich shared Deace’s belief in defying judicial rulings they believe to be unconstitutional. Deace also considered Gingrich a more viable candidate because he was better than Santorum at raising money. Gingrich, with an eye on the 2012 race, in 2010 had helped Deace, Vander Plaats and other

Iowa foes of same-sex marriage defeat three Iowa Supreme Court justices who had ruled in favor of it. Gingrich then made judicial defiance a big part of his 2012 platform – to appeal to Deace and Vander Plaats, some said – and sparked a national debate for a short time. Other Republicans supported judicial defiance. But, Deace said, “Newt was the candidate that did the best job of embracing my passion for this issue.”¹¹⁶

As the 2016 contest got underway, some Republicans in Iowa and Washington questioned whether Deace’s departure from WHO reduced his influence. (*Talkers* magazine apparently didn’t think so; Deace’s ranking as 63rd among its top 100 talk-radio hosts for 2015 vaulted him from 99th last year.) But Deace has expanded beyond his daily radio gig, becoming an exemplar of the modern multi-media conservative. Besides his show, which is carried in more than 50 markets, including in Iowa and other early-primary states, Deace by 2015 was a regular columnist for the *Washington Times*, a prolific contributor to Breitbart, BarbWire, Townhall, Conservative Review and other online sites followed by those on the right, a social media presence with more than 20,000 followers on Twitter and more than 74,000 on Facebook, and author of the book, *Rules for Patriots: How Conservatives Can Win Again*, which he has updated for re-release in paperback by 2016. He increasingly appears on television, not only on conservative outlets like Newsmax TV but also on CNN and MSNBC. (He delights in re-tweeting insults he receives from liberal MSNBC viewers. “Saw you on MSNBC. You’re an idiot,” said a printable one. Of one unprintable email, he tweeted, “Comedy gold. I just peed.”¹¹⁷)

By early 2015, nearly everyone coveting the Republican nomination had been in Deace’s studio at least once – except Bush and Rubio, who, like Bush, is suspect mainly because of his immigration stance. In an early March interview, Deace gave an accounting: “Huckabee’s been on a ton. Santorum has been on a ton, too – he’s even guest-hosted twice. Ben Carson has been on at least three times – have a pic from Carson of him reading my latest book on a plane. Bobby Jindal has been on numerous times.

Donald Trump – I know Donald Trump on a first-name basis, which is crazy for a kid from Iowa. He’s been on numerous times. Walker’s been on once; when he came to Iowa, I was the only one-on-one interview that he did. In fact, I was contacted today by one of the guys who’s going to run his presidential campaign – he wants to get together with me on Friday. I know Ted Cruz on a first-name basis; I’ve been around him and his team a ton. Rand Paul’s been on a ton, though not in the last year, because I started asking questions like, ‘How come you’re taking every conceivable position on every conceivable issue?’ Rather than explain that they just decided to ignore me.”

What about Rubio? “I’ve spoken with Rubio privately but he has not been on my show,” Deace said.¹¹⁸ In February, he tweeted, with a link to a Breitbart story, “Sadly, @marcorubio self-immolation on #amnesty isn’t over.”¹¹⁹ In another interview with the author in late March, Deace confirmed a Rubio adviser’s report that Rubio and Deace had recently had an email exchange. “We’ll go on” Deace’s show, said the adviser, Alex Conant. Despite Rubio’s differences with conservative media over immigration, Conant said that he – and Rubio – “view it as an important platform.”¹²⁰

Deace has never been in touch with Bush. “No,” he said. “My general rule is, I don’t chase candidates, ever. Every time I have to chase a candidate, they suck. It’s like my own vetting mechanism – I mean, if you’re not coming to me and bugging me to have access to the people that are going to decide this thing, that probably tells me all I need to know about you.”¹²¹ His punditry leaves no mystery as to his feelings about Bush, who was not the early frontrunner in Iowa, where about six out of 10 caucus-goers are Christian conservatives and mostly hostile to immigration reform and Common Core. Amid the CPAC presidential cattle call in late February, which Deace skipped to attend a Christian men’s retreat, he tweeted highlights of his radio commentary: “Here’s what @JebBush can

say to win over #CPAC2015 – ‘I’ve decided the country doesn’t need another Bush and I shouldn’t run for president.’”¹²²

Soon after that, Deace offered a window into why Bush and all the other Republican aspirants were so quick in the spring of 2015 to support the since-changed Indiana law for religious rights that was criticized as anti-gay. He had previously served notice that each presidential candidate who came to Iowa would have to answer to him for their views on religious liberty and what he calls “the Rainbow jihad” homosexual lobby. “Every Republican candidate for president should quickly make a household name of a Grimes, Iowa, business recently bullied into submission by the Rainbow Jihad,” he wrote on BarbWire.com on Feb. 2. As he recounted it, the Odgaard family that owned Gortz Haus Gallery in Grimes had rented it for weddings, but ended up selling after they became the subject of a civil rights complaint for refusing to rent to a gay couple. “The Iowa caucuses are one of the greatest grassroots civic megaphones this country has at its disposal. It just so happens that’s where I live and have unique access to the candidates and the process,” Deace wrote. “Therefore, I can promise you this: I will use that megaphone to make sure the Republican presidential field will be asked what they know about stories like the Odgaards’ and what they plan on doing about them if elected. Refusal to answer will be taken as surrender. Generic talking points answers will be taken as negotiating the terms of surrender. Only specifics will do when your very way of life is at stake.”¹²³

On a subsequent show that month, Deace rhetorically raised questions of whether “the sexual revolution trumps the American Revolution” and whether “someone’s erotic liberty trumps your religious liberty.” He played tapes of responses from six Republicans who’d been on his show in the past – Huckabee, Cruz, Carson, Walker, Trump and Santorum. They all gave Deace the “right” answers.¹²⁴

Diagnosis: “Epistemic Closure” – “Untethered from Reality”?

In her coming history of conservative media, Hemmer writes, “In the 1950s, conservative media outlets were neither numerous nor powerful enough to create an entirely alternate media ecosystem” for like-minded Americans.¹²⁵ Sixty years later, apparently they are. And the Republican Party is grappling with the implications.

In 2010, libertarian scholar Julian Sanchez at the Cato Institute provoked a lively debate among conservative intellectuals when he wrote that the expansion and success of conservative media had created a closed information circle harmful to conservatism. Conservatives, he said, could pick from so many sources to buttress their biases that they could dismiss as false any contrary information from outside that circle. He called this “epistemic closure,” borrowing from a term in philosophy (and perhaps ensuring that the highfalutin phrase did not catch on beyond the intelligentsia). For many conservatives, “Reality is defined by a multimedia array of interconnected and cross-promoting conservative blogs, radio programs, magazines and of course, Fox News,” Sanchez wrote in the first of several online essays. “Whatever conflicts with that reality can be dismissed out of hand because it comes from the liberal media, and is therefore ipso facto not to be trusted.”¹²⁶

The result, Sanchez said in another piece, was that conservative media’s logic had become “worryingly untethered from reality as the impetus to satisfy the demand for red meat overtakes any motivation to report accurately.”¹²⁷ His theory first got attention as the Tea Party was ascendant, and nonpartisan surveys provided evidence of many conservative voters’ mistaken beliefs in Obama’s foreign birth and Muslim faith, death panels, and climate change as a hoax, among others. But the debate revived after the 2012 election to explain how Republicans could have been so surprised by Romney’s defeat when mainstream media had widely reported on nonpartisan polls showing him behind.

“I actually do think there is something to it,” Hemmer said of Sanchez’ diagnosis of conservatives’ media cocoon and its attendant danger. “This closed media world is not allowing conservatives to see the world as it is.”¹²⁸ In her book, she writes, “Nowhere was this more on display than in the Fox News studios on Election Night 2012.”¹²⁹ David Frum, formerly a speechwriter for George W. Bush, also has written of conservatives’ “alternative knowledge system,” saying in one instance, “We used to say, ‘You’re entitled to your own opinion, but not to your own facts.’ Now we are all entitled to our own facts and conservative media use this right to immerse their audience in a total environment of pseudo-facts and pretend information.”¹³⁰ Even comedians have noted the phenomenon. Stephen Colbert coined the word “truthiness” – now blessed by Merriam-Webster – to describe gut-level, fact-free political statements of the sort he uttered as the conservative blowhard character he played on cable TV.¹³¹

Theories aside, as a matter of practical politics some establishment Republicans worry that the party is left talking to itself, in effect, and consequently failing to reach some independents and persuadable Democrats. Even when Boehner and McConnell write columns or do TV and radio interviews, generally it is for conservative media. When the conservative Club for Growth in February hosted a Florida summit that included speeches from presidential candidates, its spokesman rejected a request from a reporter for the *Miami Herald* for a credential, saying, “Media coverage is by invitation only.”¹³² As Pew has found, the most conservative Americans consume conservative media almost exclusively and distrust the rest, while other Americans generally trust and select a variety of sources.

One little-noted consequence of conservative media’s competition for right-wing viewers, listeners and readers is that some outlets and pundits now promote themselves as more conservative and less in thrall to the party establishment than Fox – a play for the highly engaged audience of

conservative hardliners. Suspicions that Fox is going soft are commonly heard on Deace's show. In February, for example, a caller asked why Fox seemed to have "a virtual blackout" of Cruz. "I have no idea," said Deace, who clearly seemed inclined toward Cruz himself. "But you are not the first person to notice it. Trust me. I'm just hearing about it from a ton of people."¹³³

The unanimity among establishment Republicans – many of them conservatives by the definition of anyone but purists – that rightwing media has become a big problem for the party, and their readiness to talk about it, was something of a surprise to this reporter of three decades' experience in Washington. Of the establishment Republicans among several dozen conservatives interviewed, nearly all were flummoxed about how to moderate the party. Most expressed despair. The common hope was that the ultimate 2016 nominee could and would speak truth to power – the power, that is, of conservative media and their allies in the well-heeled advocacy groups. "You have to have national leaders emerge that are willing to have a confrontation, a real confrontation," said Matthew Dowd, the former Bush strategist. He cited Bill Clinton's impact in helping push Democrats toward the center. "It took a national voice to do this," Dowd said. "That's what Republicans are going to need."¹³⁴

As one prominent Republican put it, on condition of anonymity: "2016 presents a possibility where if you have a strong leader that will stand up and instill some discipline down in the ranks, you could move the party center-right." But who is that leader? This Republican, like others, named Bush, citing the candidate's vow not to pander to the far right to get the nomination: "I think clearly Jeb is going into this fight with an eye on saying 'Enough of the nonsense. Stop it.'"¹³⁵ Said another well known Republican, "I'm not sure he can win, but I'm very sure someone has to carry that message."¹³⁶

Conservative media is poised to fight back. "We don't need a nominee who believes he can win by bypassing the people who listen to

this show or others in talk radio,” Ingraham said on her Feb. 2 broadcast, after reports of Bush’s no-pander vow. But she predicted he would be the nominee, and then lose.

Whomever Republicans nominate, would conservative media lighten up on the party if that person was elected president in 2016 and neither Obama nor a Clinton inhabited the White House any longer? Probably not, said many Republicans interviewed. Said Schnittger, the longtime House leadership aide, “Ronald Reagan would be subject to the same skepticism that you’re seeing today.”

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Appendix A: Conservative Internet Sites

While not an exhaustive list, the following includes some news-oriented websites started in recent years that are popular with conservatives, as of May 2015. Descriptions are based on the sites' mission statements and content, and on commentary from other sources.

Website	Founded	Mission
BarbWire	Spring 2014	Describes itself as a “motley mix” of news and cultural and political analysis – “all fueled by the Word of Life,” that is, from a biblical perspective.
The Blaze	September 2011	Says that it seek “answers of right and wrong rather than left and right,” and professes belief in capitalism, hard work and faith in God as American strengths.
Breitbart	2007	Publishes a variety of information, including news and analysis from a hardline conservative point of view, and says it is dedicated to “breaking the old media guard.”
The Conservative Review	2014	Claims to offer “best-in-class analysis and commentary on conservative political speech, votes, positions, and elections.”
The Daily Caller	2010	Founded by conservative journalist Tucker Carlson and former Dick Cheney adviser Neil Patel, to provide original reporting and investigatory journalism.
The Daily Signal (Heritage)	June 2014	Says it provides investigative and feature reporting, political news and commentary, with a team “committed to truth and unmatched in knowledge of Washington’s politics and policy debates.”
The Federalist	September 2013	Says it has “a viewpoint that rejects the assumptions of the media establishment” and explores “the philosophical underpinnings” of debates instead of “the horserace or the personalities.” Popular posts have included criticism of gay rights, global warming, Islam and Hillary Clinton.
The Free Republic	1996	Operates as an online message board for grassroots conservatives, and welcomes visitors with the message: “America's exclusive site for God, Family, Country, Life & Liberty constitutional conservative activists!”

Gateway Pundit	2004	The work of conservative blogger Jim Hoft, describes itself as a right-of-center news site, and boasts of its influence with Fox News, talk radio figures and other rightwing sites.
HotAir	2006	A conservative site founded by pundit Michelle Malkin whose political content is more libertarian and less religious than some others; self-described atheist Allapundit and Ed Morrissey are writers.*
Independent Review Journal	2013	Started by two Republican operatives, it says it provides both an “inside the beltway” and “outside” perspective. Mixes topics from pets to politics, a cross between RedState and BuzzFeed, said a Republican consultant who advises the site.
National Review Online (NRO)	1998	Dedicated – like the longstanding print journal it is based on – to opposing “big brother government,” communism and world government; to supporting a two-party system, and being to “non-conformist in a time of conformity.”
Pajama Media	2005	Provides pop-culture as well as politics from a conservative perspective, and claims to be an alternative to so-called mainstream media – “a multimedia digital presence” and “a voice for free America.”
RedState	2004	Run by Erick Erickson, widely read among those on Capitol Hill, and also influential with grassroots conservatives, the site is aggressively antagonistic to Republican leaders and has a voice that is both evangelical and occasionally crude-to-vulgar.
Right Wing News	2001	Run by conservative writer John Hawkins, aggregates the work of bloggers on the right from outlets such as Townhall and HotAir.
Spero News	2005	Says its goal is interaction between conservative media and readers, promoting “correctly informed and discerning opinion that reflects Christian values,” according to the Conservative Encyclopedia.

Townhall	1995 ¹³⁶	Calls itself “the #1 conservative website,” and offers political commentary and analysis from columnists, partner organizations, conservative talk-radio and grassroots conservatives
Twitchy	2012	Founded by Michelle Malkin and with what it calls “a kinetic staff of social media junkies,” the site claims to “mine” Twitter for “who said what” on American politics, news, sports, entertainment and media.
Washington Free Beacon	2012	Headed by longtime conservative writers, says it uncovers “the stories that the powers that be hope will never see the light of day” on public policy, government affairs, international security, and media.

Sources: Conservative Encyclopedia (<http://www.conservapedia.com/>); Wikipedia; individual websites.

*Corrected on July 30, 2015. The original description stated that Ed Morrissey identified as socially liberal.

Appendix B: Political Slant of Top Radio Talk-Show Hosts

[From *Talkers* magazine’s 2015 “Heavy Hundred” rankings]

Of 64 talk-radio shows with significant political content among the top-rated 100 programs, 54 were identifiably conservative (84%) and seven were progressive (nearly 10%).

Host	Political Slant
1. Rush Limbaugh, syndicated	Conservative
2. Sean Hannity, syndicated	Conservative
3. Dave Ramsey, syndicated	N/A, financial advice
4. Michael Savage, syndicated	Conservative
5. Glenn Beck, syndicated	Conservative
6. Mark Levin, syndicated	Conservative
7. Howard Stern, satellite	N/A
8. Joe Madison, satellite	Progressive
9. Thom Hartmann, syndicated	Progressive
10. Mike Gallagher, satellite	Conservative
11. Bill Handel, Los Angeles	N/A
12. Todd Schnitt, syndicated from New York	Conservative
13. John and Ken, Los Angeles	N/A
14. George Noory, syndicated	N/A
15. Howie Carr, syndicated from Boston	Conservative
16. Michael Berry, syndicated from Houston	Conservative
17. Doug Stephan, syndicated	N/A
18. Jim Bohannon, syndicated	Centrist
19. Lars Larson, syndicated from Portland	Conservative
20. Laura Ingraham, satellite & podcast	Conservative
21. Alan Colmes, Fox News Radio	Progressive
22. Michael Smerconish, satellite	Conservative
23. Bill Bennett, satellite	Conservative
24. Dana Loesch, syndicated & satellite	Conservative
25. Bubba the Love Sponge, syndicated from Tampa	N/A
26. Bill Cunningham, syndicated from Cincinnati	Conservative
27. Dr. Joy Browne, syndicated	N/A
28. Stephanie Miller, syndicated	Progressive

29. Ronn Owens, San Francisco	Independent
30. Michael Medved, satellite	Conservative
31. Kevin McCullough, syndicated	Conservative
32. Phil Valentine, syndicated	Conservative
33. Dennis Prager, satellite	Conservative
34. Don Imus, syndicated	N/A
35. Lincoln Ware, Cincinnati	N/A
36. Bob and Tom, syndicated	N/A
37. Joe Pagliarulo, syndicated from San Antonio	Conservative
38. Ian Freeman and Mark Edge, syndicated from NH	Libertarian
39. Kim Komando, syndicated	N/A, technology
40. Armstrong and Getty, syndicated from Sacramento	Conservative
41. Curtis & Kuby, New York	N/A
42. Brian Wilson and Larry O'Connor, Washington DC	Conservative
43. Tim Conway Jr., Los Angeles	N/A
44. Alex Jones, syndicated	Conservative
45. Doug McIntyre, Los Angeles & New York	N/A
46. Clark Howard, syndicated	N/A, financial advice
47. Bill Carroll, Los Angeles	N/A
48. Jim Gearhart, Trenton	N/A
49. Geraldo Rivera, New York	Conservative
50. Larry Young, Baltimore	Progressive
51. Terry Gross, NPR	N/A
52. Steve Cochran, Chicago	N/A
53. Dr. Laura Schlessinger, satellite	Conservative
54. Chris Stigall, Philadelphia	Conservative
55. Mark Reardon, St. Louis	Conservative
56. Dan Yorke, Providence	N/A
57. Steve Dahl, Chicago	N/A
58. The Monsters, Orlando	N/A
59. Ron and Don, Seattle	N/A
60. Mandy Connell, Denver	Conservative
61. Deminski and Doyle, Trenton	N/A
62. Hugh Hewitt, satellite	Conservative
63. Steve Deace	Conservative
64. Herman Cain, syndicated from Atlanta	Conservative
65. Tom Sullivan, Fox News Radio	Conservative

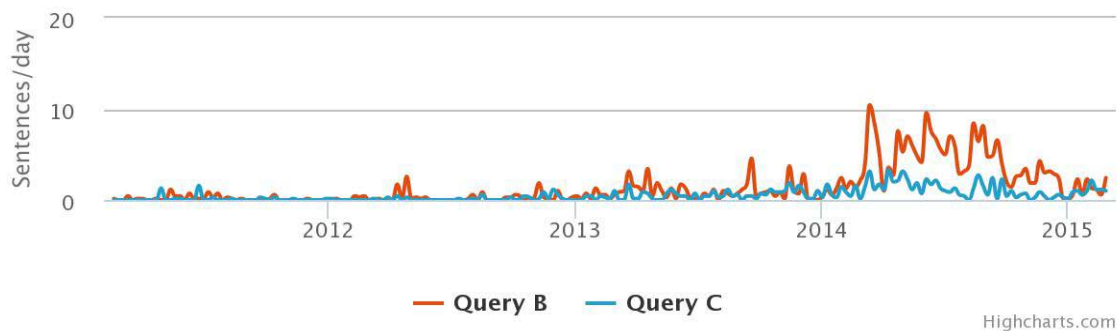
66. John DePetro, Providence	Conservative
67. Opie & Jim Norton, satellite	N/A
68. Chris Plante, Washington DC	Conservative
69. Tom Marr, Baltimore	Conservative
70. Jerry Doyle, syndicated	Conservative
71. Mark Davis, Dallas-Fort Worth	Conservative
72. Mike Trivisonno, Cleveland	N/A
73. Jeffrey Kuhner, Boston	Conservative
74. Roe Conn, Chicago	N/A
75. Tom Bauerle, Buffalo	Conservative
76. Charlie Brennan, St. Louis	N/A
77. Charlie Sykes, Milwaukee	Conservative
78. Chris Merrill, San Diego	N/A
79. McGraw Milhaven, St. Louis	N/A
80. Jim Villanucci, Las Vegas	Conservative/libertarian
81. Mark Belling, Milwaukee	Conservative
82. Brian Whitman, Ben Shapiro & Elisha Krauss, L.A.	Conservative
83. Leslie Marshall	Progressive
84. Alan Stock, Las Vegas	Conservative
85. Mac & Gaydos, Phoenix	N/A
86. Brian Sussman, San Francisco	Conservative
87. Joe Piscopo, New York	Conservative
88. Joyce Kaufman, Ft. Lauderdale	Conservative
89. John Hancock, Charlotte	N/A
90. Dr. Drew & Mike Catherwood, Los Angeles	N/A
91. Aaron Klein, New York and Philadelphia	Conservative
92. Simon Conway, Des Moines and Cedar Rapids	Conservative
93. Ric Edelman, syndicated	N/A, financial advice
94. David Webb, satellite	Conservative
95. Jeff Wagner, Milwaukee	Conservative
96. Ethan Bearman, syndicated from San Francisco	Conservative
97. Jan Mickelson, Des Moines	Conservative
98. John Carney, St. Louis	N/A
99. Karen Hunter, satellite	Progressive
100. Harry Hurley, Atlantic City	Conservative

Sources: *Talkers* magazine; author's research

Appendix C: The Common Core Standards Initiative: News Coverage and Commentary

This analysis, based on mapping by Media Cloud, a joint project of Harvard University and MIT, shows that most coverage and criticism appeared in conservative media, particularly in the 2014 election year and subsequently, as the Republican race for the party's 2016 presidential nomination began.

Query: [https://dashboard.mediameter.org/#query/\[\"common core standards\" \", \"common core standards\"\]/\[{\"sets\":\[8878292\]},{\"sets\":\[8878293\]}\]/\[\"2011-2-17\", \"2011-2-17\"\]/\[\"2015-3-3\", \"2015-3-3\"\]/\[{\"uid\":2},{\"uid\":3}\]](https://dashboard.mediameter.org/#query/[\)



Filtered by Partisan Media – 2012, Liberal and Conservative
Query B (orange) – Conservative
Query C (blue) – Liberal

Illustrative findings based on Media Cloud links and subsequent Google searches:

- Mike Huckabee was mentioned with high frequency by conservative media. Once a supporter of the standards, he more recently was quoted as calling them “toxic.” His initial position, for example, was documented by *The Washington Times* here: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/jun/5/huckabee-urges-states-back-common-core/>
- His change of position as he publicly considered running for president is seen in *The Washington Post* here: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer->

sheet/wp/2013/12/13/mike-huckabee-walks-back-his-support-for-common-core/

- Bobby Jindal was mentioned frequently in conservative and liberal media. Once quoted approvingly as saying that the “Common Core standards...will raise expectations for every child,” he is first documented as expressing concerns about the Common Core standards in September 2013 in a Louisiana publication:
<http://theadvocate.com/home/7135223-125/common-core-opponents-plan-saturday>
- In April 2014, in an op-ed column in *USA Today*, he denounced Common Core. In June 2014, he was reported as declaring “war on Common Core” standards. *EdWeek*, a publication on education issues, ran a timeline of the debate in Louisiana:
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/louisiana-common-core-debate.html>
- Chris Christie’s similar pattern of support for Common Core and then a switch to opposition amid early positioning for the 2016 Republican nomination ensued also was traceable in the Media Cloud mapping. Links found included this one:
<http://www.courierpostonline.com/story/news/local/new-jersey/2015/03/02/gov-chris-christies-shifting-position-common-core/24274921/>

Acknowledgements

Nearly four months of work on this paper, half of that time enduring the worst New England winter in decades, was greatly eased and even made pleasurable by the help and friendship of my colleagues at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School.

I enjoyed the comradeship, advice and occasional commiseration of my "fellow" fellows and new friends: Bill Buzenberg, Michele Norris, Nick Sinai and David Weinberger. We were all fortunate to be the last class of fellows at Shorenstein to be led by the wise Alex S. Jones, a fellow "Times-man" even though we did not overlap at that great newspaper. Nancy Palmer and Katie Miles smoothed my entry into academia and had answers every time I had questions. Brandon Ward and Kristina Mastropasqua helped on matters both trivial and technical. And I benefitted from the political wisdom and advice of Tom Patterson as well as Richard Parker, Michael Ignatieff, John Wihbey, Jeffrey Seglin and Steve Jarding.

Special thanks to Lucy Boyd, my reliable and unflappable research assistant, who has a wonderful career ahead of her, I'm sure.

I leave wiser for my time at Harvard, of course, but still puzzled as to how anyone could call the period that includes February into April a "spring" semester.