Encoding the paranoid style in American politics: "Anti-establishment" discourse and power in contemporary spin

Author: Michael Serazio

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Abstract

The term "anti-establishment" has witnessed a revealing rise in recent American political discourse. Combining textual analysis of news coverage and speeches with in-depth interviews with dozens of consultants involved in the encoding of mediated political communication, this research analyzes and critiques its deployment and significance in Republican campaign messaging. Mapping the contours of this rhetorical strategy, a typology of four dimensions of tension emerges: insurrection-versus-order; populism-versus-insider power; real America-versus-elitism; and purity-versus-compromise. As an exercise in critical political communication, the argument concludes that "anti-establishment" rhetoric seeks to stoke and co-opt resentment while effacing powerful, privileged economic interests.

Keywords: Political Communication, Anti-establishment, Republican Party, Textual Analysis, Interviews

"This campaign is a mortal threat to their grip on the establishment… We need to teach the Republican establishment a lesson" (Shear, 2012b). Coming from Newt Gingrich, amidst a surge in the 2012 U.S. presidential primaries, the statement was incongruous, though, it turns out, not unusual. Gingrich's boast became an oft-repeated campaign theme, "thundering" to crowds on the stump, "The Republican establishment is… determined to stop us" (Gabriel, 2012). The "establishment" press largely bought into the frame, evinced by *New York Times*' headlines like, "G.O.P. Establishment Tries to Exert What Influence It Has Against Gingrich" (Stevenson, 2012).

Although Gingrich was far from alone in adopting this political communication affectation, the irony remains that he would reimagine himself as an "anti-establishment" figure, having served as the Speaker of the House of Representatives and profited extensively in the years since from that position of privilege and influence. The term "anti-establishment" therefore signifies an act of co-optation: It appropriates an outsider image on behalf of insiders and inveighs against power concentrated in the Capitol while eliding any response to power that might be concentrated in capital. Posing as populism, it represents a means of redirecting resentment toward vague socio-cultural specters by appropriating the language of leftist critiques of old and offers a case study in rhetorical manipulations by hegemonic forces. By examining how it is deployed in contemporary American political discourse, revealing anxieties emerge about authority and governance at a time of institutional failure, democratic malaise, and increasing inequality.

The term surged to the forefront in the 2012 Republican primaries, pitting eventual nominee Mitt Romney – and a "shadowy establishment" that supposedly favored him – against a Tea Party "mutiny" in the form of Michelle Bachmann's and

Herman Cain's candidacies (Bai, 2011; Lizza, 2012). Four years later, the frame was arguably even more ubiquitous as outsiders like Ben Carson, Carly Fiorina, and, above all, Donald Trump trounced "establishment" alternatives like Jeb Bush, Scott Walker, and Chris Christie, with Trump becoming the presumptive GOP nominee by early spring (the time of this writing). Concurrently, Europe has seen a rise in anti-establishment parties across the political spectrum: from the right-wing National Front in France to the left-wing Syriza in Greece.

Notably, the term seems to have greater resonance than ever in U.S. politics: A LexisNexis scan of (at least two) mentions of "establishment" and "politic*" in *The New York Times* finds 400 article occurrences during President Barack Obama's first term – twice as many as any comparable four-year-period since 1980. Quantitative word counts alone, however, tell us little about the ways that this frame tries to mobilize audiences, nor do they signal its importance to the current political, social, and cultural era. Thus, combining a textual analysis of news coverage and speeches with in-depth interviews with those who craft political communication, this research charts "anti-establishment" discourse across a typology of four dimensions of tension. Through this exercise in critical political communication, we can discover how the "anti-establishment" appeal tries to position candidates against an ambiguous-yet-menacing power structure, encoding "rhetoric suggesting their independence from the political status quo… [which] may not accurately reflect a politician's actual association with the political establishment" (Barr, 2009, p. 33). In so doing, power effaces itself, "guerrilla-style" – rhetorically seeking to blend in with grassroots authenticity, while actually often working on behalf of elite institutional and economic interests (Serazio, 2013).

Channeling Economic Angst

That anti-establishment fervor was born, at least partly, of frustration and anxiety in the aftermath of the global financial crisis and Great Recession – calamities triggered by widespread deregulation and reckless Wall Street risk-taking (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012; Zernike, 2010a). The subsequent U.S. bank bailout – and festering issues of pronounced wealth disparity, stagnant wages, and diminishing social mobility – could have theoretically tendered fertile territory for a populist, even revolutionary economic uprising (Frank, 2012). And yet, that rebellion was shepherded away from such potential conclusions and outcomes. Rather, an "anti-establishment" frame offered a means of stoking resentment without explicitly talking about the advantages afforded to the economic upper class – a mediated performance of cultural politics meant to channel that feeling of disenfranchisement. (As Jill Lepore and others have noted, it was a CNBC pundit on the trading floor who kick-started the Tea Party with a rant against his "loser" neighbors facing foreclosure – rather than the speculators who profited off them.)

To be sure, economic conditions are not the exclusive motivating factor behind anti-establishment appeals. Anxiety about increasingly non-white populations can be observed in Europe's ethno-nationalist parties and signified in the US by the first biracial president as well as Trump's persistent immigration fear-mongering. Inchoate "nostalgia for an imagined time – the 1950s, maybe," surely fuel the fire (Lepore, 2010, p. 97). But it must be noted that yearning for the "good old days" is typically evoked without acknowledging the post-war welfare state conditions that afforded shared middle-class prosperity (e.g., progressive taxation, robust union membership, etc.). Rather, those

aforementioned "anti-establishment" candidacies – and, more importantly, their financiers – seek most to unravel the safety net.

Thus channeling an undercurrent of simmering rage, "anti-establishment" discourse putatively addresses the anxieties of those feeling marginalized without actually redressing the policies and patterns that gave rise to many of their concerns. At a moment in U.S. history when the economic establishment retains more power than ever (i.e., the "one percent" castigated by the left but largely unnamed on the right), using the trope of "anti-establishment" helps to rhetorically finance right-wing extremism in its service. While campaigning against "business as usual" in Washington (via conspicuous attacks on the "establishment"), the GOP does little to counter "business as usual" on Wall Street, redirecting pitchforks away from those with monetary capital and toward those with political and cultural capital and obfuscating neoliberal economics with a performance of "plutocratic populism" (Frank, 2012). That pretense of populism ostensibly crusades against power and privilege while actually fortifying it economically by pushing for budget austerity, free market deregulation, and the rollback of labor rights, among other priorities. In short, framing the approach as an attack against "establishment" interests helps mobilize the non-elite against their own financial interests (Frank, 2005).

Constructing Anti-Establishment Populism

In politics, "anti-establishment-ism," with its outsider posturing, often implies a "collu[sion]" among the "closed cartel" of professionals that make up the "political class" (Schedler, 1996, p. 295), many of whom were interviewed here. Moreover, anti-establishment appeals seem to flourish in times of rising discontent and flagging party

allegiances of the kind we see in the current U.S. era. Political actors "attempt to gain support through an 'us versus them' discourse, opposed to the entire class of individuals wielding power" (Barr, 2009, p. 30). Historically, this populism found its base of support among blue-collar workers, but today it is less an explicit economic class project as much as a "political project of building and maintaining power" – a savvy decoupling that, I argue here, an elite has managed to exploit within GOP politics (p. 40).

Richard Hofstadter's (1965) landmark essay also offers necessary historical backdrop to understanding resentment as a productive political resource. Hofstadter illustrates how the "paranoid style" represents a "way of seeing the world," fearful of "the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character" (p. 4, 14). Such conspiracy mongering becomes acute in moments of economic downturn and crisis. In a passage that could fittingly describe contemporary Tea Party sentiment and Trump's campaign narrative – and has obvious racial undertones – Hofstadter concludes that his era's right-wing "feels disposed: America has been largely taken away from them and their kind" (p. 23). The villains appear, to borrow another venerable term, as a "power elite" that occupies positions of misbegotten influence and looks down upon the lives of everyday Americans, even as "men of power tend, by convention, to deny that they are powerful" (Mills, 1956, p. 17). Such self-effacement becomes especially apparent in the "anti-establishment" appeals examined here, for it represents a clever Gramscian turn of hegemonic logic: in place of naming the plutocratic perpetrators impacting the fate of the "working class," alternative political specters are substituted. Thus, from this review of the literature, we can see that those economic conditions were ripe in recent years for the

re-ascendance of anti-establishment fervor; the question for this research endeavor is how that opportunity was discursively strategized and enacted.

Method

This project relied upon three primary techniques in studying "anti-establishment" frames in mediated political communication and drew upon a grounded approach of thematic analysis in attempting to inductively generate theoretical categories. Using the LexisNexis database, I performed a textual analysis of the 50 most relevant stories in *The New York Times* that had at least two mentions of "politic*" and "establishment." The time period for analysis was January 1, 2009 through December 31, 2012; "relevance" was defined by LexisNexis as frequency of "politic*" and "establishment" appearing. Given Donald Trump's meteoric rise in the 2016 Republican primaries – and his conspicuous position as perhaps the most "anti-establishment" figure to have ever led the polls – I updated and augmented this with a review of half-a-dozen speeches and debate performances that he delivered.

These articles and speeches were coupled with 38 one-on-one, open-ended interviews with a variety of political communication professionals conducted between June and December 2012 that lasted between 25 and 55 minutes. The group included an even mix of Republicans and Democrats, mostly based in Washington D.C., who held a variety of professional roles at the presidential and congressional level and in state and national races (e.g., general consultants, digital specialists, press secretaries, advertising producers, etc.). Interviews were guided by a semi-structured schedule and covered a wide range of topics as part of a larger research project on political communication, technological change, and cultural production (see also Serazio, 2014, 2015,

forthcoming). Relevant to this paper were questions asked of interviewees about the prominence, significance, and meaning of the term "anti-establishment" in recent election cycles and by GOP candidates, in particular.

The influence of these kinds of professional operatives on mediated political discourse has not often been studied. These encoding-oriented interviews complimented the discursive patterns ascertained in the textual analysis (Hall, 1980). In other words, through the news coverage, I discovered the four categories that will be identified here; by talking to those who create and shape political communication, I could get "behind" that discourse and discover the perceptions and tactics involved in such "anti-establishment" phrasing. Furthermore, much of the focus in the framing literature is on how elite frames influence citizens (i.e., effects); I therefore seek here to answer Dennis Chong and James Druckman's (2007) call "to deal with the production side of the equation by developing a model of elite strategies of framing" (p. 117). Admittedly, getting interviewees to talk "tactically" about the motivations behind such framing was complicated at times (namely, for those who hadn't used the term much themselves); in some cases, participants simply explained what "anti-establishment" meant to them and, in others, *why* it was deployed to mean those things for audiences (and the reader will notice examples of both woven throughout). The overarching research question asked: In what frames of U.S. political discourse is "anti-establishment" utilized and how do those attempt to mobilize audiences rhetorically?

Between the *Times'* reporting and the interviewees consulted, this is, by and large, the "establishment" talking about itself. Moreover, despite the countless references to and characterizations of Trump being "anti-establishment," I could not find the candidate

himself employing the phrase with any frequency whatsoever prior to the Iowa caucus in January 2016.[1] CNN's coverage of a Trump appearance in Dallas in September 2015 is emblematic of this: The first mention of "establishment" comes not during his speech, but almost immediately after – when two (establishment) pundits quickly use it to characterize how "he's tapped into real anxiety in America" and how he serves as "a giant red-headed middle finger to the GOP establishment" ("Donald Trump gives a speech in Dallas," 2015).

This, in fact, further supports the notion that "anti-establishment" messaging is as much an act of institutional co-optation as it is an expression of grassroots authenticity – whether it be an "establishment" outlet like *The New York Times* in the "lamestream media" (to borrow a Sarah Palin-ism) using it as a stock news frame or the kind of insiders, party leaders, and elites that I interviewed attempting to harness voter discontent by invoking the claim (with much of that scorn, in fact, directed precisely at professionals like them). Gingrich is probably the most paradigmatic example of this evasion: an establishment figure appropriating an "anti-establishment" image and an example of how power seeks to efface itself in the cloak of outsider revolution. But other powerful figures within the party similarly attempted to strike the same underdog pose: Three-term Texas governor Rick Perry announced to crowds, "I am not the candidate of the establishment," and 20-year veteran radio host Rush Limbaugh criticized the "Republican establishment media," of which he was apparently not a part (Hemmer, 2012; Nagourney, 2011). But the contradictory usage was perhaps best embodied in an article on welcome sessions for Tea Party freshman lawmakers: "Each orientation is pitching itself as the least Establishment of them all, even as they all rely on big establishment names to train

the new lawmakers" (Zernike, 2010c). This is, then, a story of powerful – and often prosperous – interests stoking and appropriating resentment by feigning solidarity with the disenfranchisement of the base.

Findings and Analysis

Insurrection Versus Order

The first category in which "anti-establishment" discourse frames American politics can be understood in terms of insurrection versus order. Here the phrase is used to signify a threat to the status quo: all those trappings, for better or worse, which accompany incumbency, experience, and an insider background. This "anti-establishment" fervor meant that lawmakers avoided using the term "Congress" in their ads and adapted, however illogically, to an "incumbent-as-outsider strategy" (Helderman, 2012). Although incumbency is traditionally assumed to have its benefits – stature that accompanies the office, a bully pulpit with more control to steer the political agenda – that same experience also apparently betrays "establishment" credentials to disaffected voters (which elected leaders took awkward pains to sidestep). Avoiding those implicit affiliations meant those up for re-election had to craft some vague and contorted claims and one political advertising agency president explains the way that leaders seek to retain power by pretending to be separate from it:

> When you're operating in a time where Congressional job approval ratings are so low and you're [an incumbent] running for office and you realize that's where the public's head is at, one way to get around that is… to talk about the 'establishment' or institutions. Because people want to change and if people really are thinking about change, the first thing they think is, 'Well, I should

> throw these people out,' but you don't want that to happen, so the way to get around that is to talk in terms of the 'establishment.'

"Anti-establishment" attacks are thus a way of channeling revolutionary undercurrents – many derived from economic dissatisfaction – into safer ideological and political harbors. Intertwined with that disaffection with the status quo is a concurrent aversion to "insiders" – those who profit from the proximity to power. An e-mail from the Tea Party group organizing the aforementioned orientation sessions ominously announced in its title, "D.C. Insiders Indoctrinating OUR Freshman," and continued on, "Don't let them steal OUR new members of Congress… Let's show them you won't tolerate politics as usual" (Zernike, 2010c). One former press secretary for a senate leader and House speaker adds:

> ['Establishment'] means 'gone Washington;' it means 'inside the Beltway;' but it's just the latest phrase of being out of touch. So if you're part of the establishment, then you don't know what's going on out there in the real world – therefore, you're making insider decisions that usually are disconnected from people that are struggling.

That struggle is significantly, albeit not exclusively, about economic fortunes: Talking about the financial crisis and its aftermath, the press secretary for a U.S. senator explains that "anti-establishment" is meant to signify the difference between (and mobilize resentment against) "the Washington elite that screwed things up" on behalf of "mainstream America that's been a victim to those mistakes." That anti-establishment appeal is also surely related to widespread erosion in confidence in politicians and government among Republicans and Democrats alike – a means of marshaling angst that

electorally boosted both Obama and the Tea Party in successive elections, though toward different ends, as the vice president of a digital strategy firm suggests. And it leads to those same delusions of self-effacing power that the House communications director mocks:

> Newt Gingrich is the most insider-y insider there ever was – like, a Newt Gingrich administration would be an administration filled with lobbyists who have been in DC for 40 years and yet somehow through his use of rhetoric and through his appeals to the right wing of our base, people perceived Newt Gingrich to be the anti-establishment for a degree, for a bit.

Populism Versus Insider Power

The second trope of anti-establishment discourse revolves around the populist parallels introduced earlier. Here the "establishment" is deployed as code for power brokers in the clichéd smoke-filled backrooms – where party leaders and elite pundits with special access coalesce around favored candidates to the chagrin of real voters. It "redefine[s] existing democratic polities as authoritarian" (Schedler, 1996, p. 297). The chief Internet strategist at a digital firm frames this by implicating the way in which such cushy connections enrich insiders:

> The 'establishment' has this aura about it that it's a bunch of old white guys in suits that are sitting around making lots of money and they're not doing what they were sent to Washington to do and that they go to cocktail parties and they, you know, hob-nob and they cut backroom deals.

The corrupting influence of money in politics is central to this critique: "The insider establishment is symbolized by the lobbyist culture, the fundraising circuit

culture, because all politicians do is they're pretty much constantly raising money," explains the president of a digital strategy and online advertising firm. The billionaire "outsider" Trump targeted his opponents on this front repeatedly in his campaign messaging: "They're controlled fully by the lobbyists, by the donors, and by the special interests" ("Donald Trump transcript: 'Our country needs a truly great leader,'" 2015).

Yet some of the wealthiest donors have backed the most "anti-establishment," radical right-wing candidacies: "Renegade billionaires" like Sheldon Adelson (Gingrich's patron) and Foster Friess (Rick Santorum's patron), empowered by *Citizens United*, the Supreme Court case that unrestricted campaign financing, openly assaulting "traditional… power brokers" in the "establishment" (Edsall, 2012). That traditional power of political parties has been in decline for several decades; with new fundraising opportunities from lucrative individuals, "anti-establishment" is perhaps a way of deploying diversionary rhetorical cover for those strategic, well-heeled lobbying interests. Take, for example, Jim DeMint, whose top supporters include the Koch brothers, joking at a fundraising dinner about being "anti-establishment" to attendees like the lobbyist (and IRS abolitionist) Grover Norquist (Zernike, 2010b).

Simultaneously, the term "establishment" also "became code for inauthentic; [it] became code for party machines thwarting the will of the people," adds one consultant at a strategic communications firm. It recalls a (perhaps bygone) era of power brokers "quietly showing a candidate the door," "before 'super PACs,' the Tea Party and politics by Twitter diminished [that] influence" – a time "when party bosses really controlled the access to money and to the media… [and] could tell people [what] to do" (Shear, 2012c). It is precisely those "backroom decisions that so ignites the contempt of Tea Party

activists," as establishment and outsider politicians alike have attempted to harness that rhetorical energy – from, again, Newt Gingrich (who vowed to run "not an establishment campaign… [but] a people's campaign") to U.S. senate hopeful Linda McMahon ("This campaign has never been about the political pundits or the establishment. This campaign is about you!") (Bai, 2010a; Shear, 2012a).

McMahon's yoking together of media pundits and the "establishment" here is emblematic, as the chattering class frequently symbolized the undemocratic ways by which such unelected elites would bless candidates with their endorsements and bestow campaign momentum upon them. What made 2012 unique for the GOP was the divergence between official endorsements (e.g., *The Weekly Standard*, *The Wall Street Journal*) and national polling support among actual voters (Silver, 2011a). "Pundits and the establishment, they may think they choose, or it's their responsibility, or their right, to choose our next president," Perry lamented on the stump – curiously given that his gubernatorial power and experience would seem to give him similar advantage (Nagourney, 2011). Presidential hopeful – and U.S. senate veteran – Santorum likewise castigated a "Republican establishment [that] was living in a bubble," on behalf of voters who didn't want "the same old tired establishment person that's going to be shoved down our throat" (Seelye, 2012). Such (performed) obsession over backroom power – even by those, like Perry and Santorum, probably actually wielding it in backrooms – is intended to align with base-level conspiracy theories. Summarizing it as their "Ron Paul problem," one GOP lobbyist remarked upon the "element of paranoia" by which "Establishment Republicans" look upon such "anti-Washington rhetoric" (Bai, 2011). *Times'* columnist David Brooks (2010) – himself a thoroughly "establishment" figure –

charted the "anti-establishment" similarities between the 1960s New Left and the Tea Party:

> The '60s left developed elaborate theories of how world history was being manipulated by shadowy corporatist/imperial networks – theories that live on in the works of Noam Chomsky. In its short life, the Tea Party movement has developed a dizzying array of conspiracy theories involving the Fed, the F.B.I., the big banks and corporations and black helicopters.

That "fringe" paranoia (indexed here by these oft-cited villainous institutions) is nonetheless fertile in pandering to wider anxieties: "In research and in trends, there's this notion where people feel like they've lost control of stuff… That meetings are being held and certain people are getting benefits and, as a result, there's a lot of anger and frustration," says one partner at a social and digital media agency. "And people point at the status quo and the establishment and those people who do benefit and the desire to really push off against them… [The establishment] is a boogeyman for people to push against." The senior speechwriter for a presidential campaign adds, "It just feeds into this notion that there are people – that there's like a magician behind the curtain pulling the strings or something. Like there's a secret cabal that's out to get you." Such "anti-establishment" invocations are meant to strategically harness resentment against the unfair conditions of contemporary privilege and power: stoking "people who are just really upset with everybody and they think the whole thing is a crock and the deck is stacked against them," notes the vice president of a digital strategy firm. But within "anti-establishment" GOP discourse, the villainous "one percent" (of Occupy Wall Street fame) is never explicitly identified as "boogeyman" or party to that "secret cabal" –

populist rhetoric financed by plutocrats would, of course, naturally stop shy of such an outright confrontation.

Real America Versus Elitism

A third context in which "anti-establishment" discourse emerges has socio-cultural overtones. Here, however, "class" is invoked more in terms of expertise and taste (e.g., education, lifestyle) as opposed to a "ruling class" based purely on financial power. On the campaign trail, class as an explicit economic category was, in fact, overtly censored, as when Santorum disavowed the use of the term "middle class" as "Marxism talk" that buys into progressives' "rhetoric of dividing America" – a place where "there's no class" (Reilly, 2013). This means that resentment at economic conditions has to be stoked without implying redistributionist cures; for instance, a Tea Party umbrella group rails against "members of The Ruling Class," while being financed by FreedomWorks, which lobbies for the kind of regressive taxation policies that stand to further enrich members of the (economic) "Ruling Class" (Zernike, 2010c). Similarly, to conjure and channel anti-Wall Street sentiment, Newt Gingrich angrily and ominously invoked "Goldman Sachs" on the stump, while also campaigning to slash corporate tax rates (Gabriel, 2012). Four years later, Trump did much the same: goading "hedge funders" while proposing to slash the top marginal tax rate for the nations' highest earners (Lee & Murray, 2015). In sum, the "elite" has to be constructed "not primarily as an economic category but as a cultural stratum" (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012, p. 137).

This means defining the "establishment" in roundabout ways – linked to, but not specifically articulated about pure wealth: "The word 'establishment' in conservative circles is code for 'old white men,'" the analyst at a media buying firm intimates. "And

they're communicating to old white men and old white men get what they're saying." Sarah Palin echoed this in her own insurgent stance: "Some within the establishment don't like the fact that I won't back down to a good-old-boys' club" (Draper, 2010). These demographic implications are accompanied by an assumption of geographic bias – that the "establishment" traces a waning northeast U.S. lineage that has since evolved:

> The pragmatic 'white shoe' lawyers of the Nixon-Rockefeller era were largely stamped out… by more conservative Reaganites from the West Coast and Bush backers from Texas, by… evangelicals and libertarians and neoconservative defense hawks. They don't all belong to the same country clubs, but they have retained a remarkable ability to mobilize. (Bai, 2011)

The use of "country clubs" is important and revealing here as the way in which "anti-establishment" messaging mobilizes "real America's" seething toward elites through their capacity to signal the cultural capital of expertise and taste. As Skocpol and Williamson (2012) uncovered in their research, "like the New Leftists of the 1960s… Tea Party participants are intensely suspicious of higher authority," "do not defer to experts, and we heard many expressions of scorn about educated people who try to devise plans for regular citizens" (p. 53, 99). The "establishment," then, according to the chief creative officer at a media-consulting firm, "means a group of people who think they know better than you do and they are going to tell you what you need to do." Despite Obama's race and economic upbringing as otherwise potentially indicative of marginalization, his "Ivy League background," "urban sensibility," and intellectual temperament apparently smacked of cosmopolitan privilege – an "establishment

pedigree" of "the new elite" (Tanenhaus, 2010). Gingrich similarly tried to make hay of this in his primary run – despite, as we see below, earning "elite-level" income:

> Mr. Gingrich's battle with Mr. Romney and the 'establishment' is more than ideological; it is cultural and also personal. Mr. Gingrich rarely misses a chance to contrast his early years teaching at unpretentious West Georgia College with Mr. Romney's and Mr. Obama's Harvard graduate-school educations. Despite earning $3.1 million last year, Mr. Gingrich, friends and close associates said, still identifies with his roots as an Army brat from Hummelstown, Pa., whose family once lived over a gas station. He sees Mr. Romney as born with a silver spoon in his mouth. To Mr. Gingrich, both Wall Streeters and complacent party elders are part of the 'elites' he wants to vanquish. (Gabriel, 2012)

Another response from a leading GOP fundraiser (who runs a private-equity firm) illustrates the means by which political figures hope to stave off any haughtier pretensions that might be accorded to them: "My dad drove a beer truck delivering beer to taverns in Cicero and Chicago, Ill… I'm the first in my family to go to college. No, I don't consider myself part of the establishment" (Bai, 2011). Here, then, socio-cultural parallels between the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street can be further identified: "both movements are doggedly anti-establishment – distrusting politically powerful and privileged elites and the institutions those elites inhabit," with "little difference… between the right's depiction of a 'Chablis-drinking, Brie-eating' establishment and the left's perception of a rich one percent who fly to the Hamptons in private jets" (Reich, 2011). But while both movements attempt to capitalize on financial discontent, the Tea Party converts that resentment into cultural terms, while Occupy is more comfortable

with targeting the actual economic policies that exacerbate it. (The media's glib analogies drawn between Donald Trump's and Bernie Sanders' 2016 candidacies as being similarly "anti-establishment" conflates the very different policy ambitions of each.) As the opposition research partner at a political consulting firm explains:

> There's been sort of a tarring of not just the establishment, but those people who aren't average workaday Americans. You have the Sarah Palin's of the world coming to Virginia, you know, rural Virginia, and saying, 'This is the real Virginia!' – and insisting that folks who live in Northern Virginia, they're not real Virginians and not the real Americans. They are the Huey Longs of our day.

It is perhaps for this reason – that politicians aren't "real Americans," as the communications director for a House representative points out – that many of the successful 2010 GOP freshmen hadn't ever run for political office before. They, however, *appeared* to share the economic anxiety felt by the marginalized populations that elected them:

> They were pizza shop owners; they were car salesmen; they were other things. And I think people think: 'Oh, I'm sending regular Joe to Congress – regular Joe understands my needs.' Especially in this economic climate and these politicians who screwed everything else up because they are so out-of-touch with America: 'These regular politicians don't understand what it's like to be a real person… what it's like to struggle every month to provide for my family – these politicians are so out-of-touch, so I want someone who is the anti-establishment candidate.'

The distance between voters' struggles and insiders' abilities to rig the system produces this perceived sense of being "out of touch," yet, as shown here, elites were not defined in terms of their economic privilege.

Purity Versus Compromise

The fourth and final category of "anti-establishment" discourse hinges on a declaration of principles: "Tea Party activists and their grassroots colleagues have grown frustrated by what they see as the eagerness of the establishment to compromise with Democrats and to shy away from a bold conservative approach" (Fernandez, 2012). The problem is not, however, merely a long-running political tension between conciliation and absolutism; after all, as the deputy chief of staff for a U.S. representative points out, "I can't recall any candidate – Republican or Democrat – ever running to say, 'I'm going to go to Washington to compromise for you.'"

Rather, it bespeaks (and attempts to evade or self-efface) a suspicion of the scheming influence of the consultant class *itself* – those "Lee Atwater-types" that reportedly "bled the party of its conservative convictions" and gave rise to "establishment politicians… more interested in numbers than in principle" (Bai, 2012). In 2012, Romney's supposedly "synthetic and calculating persona" represented this perceived phoniness – a cynical "caution" emblematic of the "party establishment" that Gingrich sought to contrast with his "unscripted and blunt" attacks (Bai, 2012; Gabriel, 2012). Four years later, Trump's similarly boorish style was often packaged as an assault on the good taste of traditional (read: establishment) politics: stridently reveling in being "politically incorrect" and delivering off-the-cuff insults far removed from the safe, focus group-tested platitudes that voters usually encounter. That apparent disregard for

decorum, in a sense, legitimized his pursuit of power: It appeared that Trump *wouldn't* just say anything to win office.

Within "anti-establishment" fervor (particularly in primary season), "electability" is as much a liability as a benefit – at least, relative to the purity of purpose in which attaining power is not seen as the end in and of itself. And by taking a stand against compromise, this particular strain of "anti-establishment" demagoguery aids the most radical elements of right-wing economics: Note, for instance, how (eventual GOP primary candidate) Ted Cruz's U.S. senate campaign, boosted by the anti-tax Club for Growth, ginned up "faux animosity, a faux outrage, that [competitor] David Dewhurst is an 'establishment' candidate" and not conservative enough, despite "cut[ting] taxes 51 times" (Fernandez, 2012).

To any political base, of course, centrism and moderation represents an enduring boogeyman of "selling out"; the "establishment," therefore represents another way to code those fears about a professional political class (and to feign distance from it, even if inaccurate). Curiously, as seen here, such fears – of incumbents, insiders, elites, and dealmakers – are exploited without really tackling the underlying material conditions that produced them; the power and practices of a political (and social and cultural) establishment is castigated, while the underlying economic establishment is unnamed and therefore unchecked.

Conclusions

"It's a good talking point and it's almost like an empty phrase at this point," the managing director of a targeted digital advertising firm acknowledges of "anti-establishment" appeals. "It's a really cynical way that everyone [uses to] fight." Indeed,

the phrase has become both politically useful and empirically unverifiable (the latter probably affording the former): "a sloppy shorthand for an entire system of beliefs" (Hemmer, 2012). Its ascendance in mediated political discourse – appearing twice as often during Obama's first term as in any other recent president's – suggests, however, that it holds real currency for audiences (or, at least, is perceived as such by those who script and cover campaign communication for them).

Beyond economic conditions, a broader institutional malaise surely, too, plays a critical role in making "anti-establishment" an enticing semantic tactic: "As institutions become less and less popular, but no more or less relevant, there's sort of this finger-pointing and eying at and questioning them more than ever," says the president of one political advertising agency. "So 'establishment' embodies all these long-running bodies that suddenly people are much more skeptical of." In her reporting on the Tea Party, Kate Zernike (2010a) identifies not just government as the brunt of that mistrust but "all of the establishments Americans once trusted unquestionably: doctors, banks, schools, the media" (p. 6). This institutional wariness, according to Mark Lilla, has "coincided with a rise in the belief that individuals could do things better themselves. People didn't so much have a political grievance; they were simply tired of being told what to do" (p. 61).

That "do-it-yourself" ethos has deep roots in American lore (think here of the lone cowboy archetype on the Western range), is nurtured by libertarian techno-utopianism (the Internet helped the Tea Party grow, like the liberal "netroots" before it), and also, here again, simultaneously plays into the anti-tax, anti-collective spirit that economic elites peddle beneath the guise of "anti-establishment-ism" (Bai, 2010b). In other words,

"doing-it-yourself" is a canny way of selling the dismantling of the welfare (i.e., "nanny") state to audiences – especially when it helps contrast relying upon the assistance of "establishment" institutions. Such discourse that channels institutional misgivings might ostensibly attend to concerns about power within democracy and in society, but stays mute about its economic underpinnings – a cynical exploitation of angst and resentment by those who encode mediated political communication.

Finally, it is worth noting, as further irony, the New Left lineage and co-optation of "anti-establishment" discourse: "I grew up in the Civil Rights era and I grew up in the anti-Vietnam War era and the 'establishment' really came about in the '60s," explains the president of a direct mail political advertising agency. "It's an old term – a 1960s' term, you know: … 'We're fighting against the establishment!'… It was really hard-wired for everybody that's my age." That legacy of fighting "'the man'… has the same meaning now, but it's funny that it's been taken up by conservatives," adds the strategic media consultant at political advertising agency. Indeed, "The Man" is now a political and cultural specter that haunts audiences without explicitly referencing economic plight; it is why "Republican Revolutionary" Dick Armey can praise "the methods of Saul Alinsky, the leading tactician of the New Left" without ever embracing his anti-poverty radicalism (Brooks, 2010).

"Anti-establishment-ism" uses the language of hip rebellion to distract from the realities and policies that exacerbate inequality and immobility. As Hofstadter (1965) foreshadowed a half-century ago, such discourse – particularly in its "Manichean" invocations of purity against compromise – could ossify legislative gridlock. "Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, the quality

needed is not a willingness to compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish" (p. 31). Embracing an "anti-establishment" political posture does little to ameliorate the extremism already aggravated by Congressional redistricting and fragmented media partisanship.

These patterns of discourse are important to chart because they raise concerns about how power is conceptualized and wielded in democracy. As enormous sums of money flow into political coffers, everyday citizens lack the access and influence of major donors and special interests; simultaneously, economic gains are mostly accrued by those at the top and median incomes stagnate. "Anti-establishment" messaging speaks to these anxieties; it does not, however, offer a course of action to change those conditions. Political communication of this sort attempts to convince citizens to think about power not in terms of taxes, wages, and wealth, but rather experience, lifestyle, and opacity of political process. That is a baleful conceptual substitution, because it suggests populist performance matters more than actual populist policies.

This research has examined how "anti-establishment" discourse is encoded in mediated political communication. Future research might take up the reception-side counterpart to these questions and issues; how do audiences and citizens decode this rhetoric and these strategic appeals? For if, as one veteran GOP strategist argues – unknowingly echoing the essence of hegemony – "the secret to politics [is] trying to control a segment of people without those people recognizing that you're trying to control them," "anti-establishment" messaging offers a rather Machiavellian means.

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[1] The fate of Trump's candidacy – and supposedly parallel support for Bernie Sanders on the Democratic side – remained uncertain in late winter 2016; this article was being finalized and going to press as "anti-establishment" passions continued to roil U.S. politics.